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The Fight about Nothing: Three Ways Couples Can Get Out of Useless Battles

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Tyler left the office early feeling nauseated. He hit the bed, and a couple hours later his wife Bethany walked in, surprised to find him there. “What are you doing?” she blurted. Tyler grimaced. “I’m sick. Is that ok?”

“I didn’t expect to see you,” Bethany said, annoyed. “Why were you trying to hide under the covers?”

“I wasn’t *hiding*,” he responded, “I was trying to get comfortable.”

“I was just asking,” she said, “You don’t have to get upset.” Tyler rolled toward the wall. Bethany continued: “I just want to know what is going on, and I don’t like it when you won’t tell me.”

“I am not up for one of our talks.”

“I am not needing a *talk*,” Bethany said, “You are ignoring me when I am just asking a simple question!”

Tyler grunted.

“Besides, I thought you were going to pick up dinner.”

“I am sick and don’t want dinner!” Tyler growled. “I am not hungry. Do whatever you want.”

“You don’t have to get so mad!” Bethany said, “I am just trying to help, and you are being rude!”

Tyler pulled the pillow over his head, and Bethany stomped out, and both spent the evening sulking and frustrated.

When I talked with Bethany and Tyler about this, it became evident there was no actual disagreement at any point of this spat. It literally was, as Bethany realized, “A fight about nothing.”

How did they get pulled into a useless argument? As we broke it down, a few reasons jumped out. First, They were falling into a typical but unhealthy pattern, sometimes called *demand-withdraw*. It happens when one pushes to talk about an issue, which feels like a *demand* to the other, who is likely to *withdraw*. This pattern can escalate because the partner who wants to talk gets frustrated as the other clams up or turns away. The talker presses harder, which puts more pressure on the withdrawer to retreat. The problem now is the escalation of bad feelings, not the issue that ignited them.

When demand-withdraw fires up, it can lead to anger, defensiveness, and even abuse.^[i] Marital researcher John Gottman has suggested this pattern is common because of typical gender differences, where women are more likely to focus on relational issues and address them, and men are more easily flooded with emotion which can lead to shutting down.^[ii] Researcher Sue Johnson suggests that demand-withdraw occurs because of natural attachment needs, where the pursuing partner seeks connection and resolution, and the withdrawer avoids discomfort.^[iii]

There is another factor that traps couples in this deteriorating exchange. My research has focused on how escalation distorts perceptions. For instance, when you get frustrated, it is broadcast in your voice and face, which makes your partner tense up and react. As negative emotion begins to flow, it becomes more influential than the words, and acts as a blinder, coloring things in a sinister light.^[iv] Each feels justified in *their* behavior, but sees the other's actions as senseless and cruel.^[v] Tyler pointed this out: "We kept making assumptions about what the other was thinking. I felt like she was being ridiculously pushy, like a dog on a bone. I just wanted to rest." Bethany's version, was of course, different. "I was just surprised and wondering what was going on. I felt like he was being touchy and defensive."

They realized they had been upset over nothing, but their bad feelings were still real. How could they avoid getting caught in this vortex the next time someone got upset? We made a three-point plan:

First: Become Aware of Distorted Thinking.

Each person needs to realize and take responsibility for their exaggerated views. This is tricky because people are naturally blind to their blindness. For example, in our session Tyler at first tried to justify his reactions by claiming Bethany always set the tone in the relationship, and he just reacted to her. However, I asked him if it were possible that his "reaction" also contained a sharp tone, or maybe he heard something that wasn't

intended because he was feeling lousy. He agreed that this was possible, and realized that it wasn't fair to always claim that Bethany "started it." Both identified their own extreme thoughts and words. Bethany admitted that one of her thoughts was that Tyler was "being a baby," which influenced her annoyed tone. Tyler realized that his tone was sharper than intended, and they each discussed how in their tired state, they were too sensitive.



Second: Change the Cycle.

The partner who is prone to demanding needs to soften his or her approach, and the withdrawer needs to stay connected and not shut down. Bethany realized that her style might come across aggressively at times, so she practiced asking questions or bringing up concerns in a gentle and constructive way. Tyler practiced listening nondefensively when an issue was brought up. He tried to hear to understand rather than retort, and he requested a break if he wasn't up for a discussion. He tried not to make negative assumptions about Bethany's intentions.

Third: Take A Time Out.

Both learned to stop and separate when their conversations began to escalate and their thoughts became accusing and defensive. They did this with the commitment of getting back together later (important to Bethany) with a short and focused conversation (important to Tyler).

With practice, Bethany and Tyler got better at catching themselves when emotions revved up and thoughts became distorted. This kept them out of the useless escalations that had been costing them energy and closeness. "Now when we get frustrated, we at least have a good reason for it!" Tyler joked. They got annoyed less often, and handled it better by changing their thinking and giving each other space. The next time Tyler felt sick, he put a post-it on his door, requesting, "No fights about nothing."

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