



How fights with our partner influence our health

I write a lot about how the mind and body are connected and that our emotions originate in our bodies. I also write about how change happens through learning to be aware of our emotions and being able to feel them without becoming overwhelmed or needing to suppress them.

Recently I came across a blog in the New York Times which considered a study conducted in the 1980s at the University of California, Berkeley, which aimed to show the impact that how we fight with our partners has on our health. It makes for interesting reading.

The researchers took a group of married heterosexual couples and asked them to first talk about their day together for 15 minutes (the control conversation) and then to shift to discussing a contentious issue between them. The study participants were filmed and their bodily cues were studied to establish the emotions they were feeling. As all emotions are embodied and many of us are unaware of what we are actually feeling moment to moment, this was a very accurate way of establishing what emotion the participants' bodies were experiencing. For example, anger is expressed in the body with a lowering of the eyebrows, a widening of the eyes, flushing of the skin and an increase in the pitch of the voice.

The researchers then focused on two defence strategies that participants seemed to adopt when they were fighting – anger and stonewalling. The latter would be termed suppression or repression in the language of psychotherapy.

The results showed that those who expressed their anger had a predisposition to developing cardiac problems, while those who stonewalled (repressed their feelings) were more likely to experience back and muscular problems. What's more, the study participants who reacted angrily seemed to never experience the muscular and back pains of the stone-wallers, and vice-versa.

The findings make sense in that uncontained anger will manifest in higher blood pressure, leading to possible cardiac problems, and what we repress is 'held' in the body.

The conclusion seems to be that poor relationships are literally bad for your health.

What the study and blog did not discuss is how to fight healthily, as all couples fight (and conflict can be healthy, not only in ensuring we are getting our needs met, but also in keeping the relationship alive). It also implies that anger is detrimental to our health, which it most definitely is not, provided we can experience and communicate it healthily.

Now, let's move on to discuss some tools for managing healthy conflict in relationships.



Managing conflict for emotional and physical health

We have discussed the correlation between expressed anger and cardiac problems and repressed emotion and back/muscle pain in warring couples.

The New York Times article gave some interesting insights into the correlation between couples who cannot fight healthily and the poor health they experience as a consequence. So should we avoid fighting? No, we need to be able to disagree with our partners and express our emotions. So how do we do this healthily?

Couples who manage conflict well are able to undertake four key tasks:

- Listen
- Accept difference
- Validate
- Repair

The idea of listening to our partner sounds like the easiest thing in the world. After all, we do it all the time. However, truly listening means hearing how they are feeling rather than focusing on the content or facts. The facts matter as context, but your partner's feelings are what is key.

Accepting difference in our partner can be really hard, especially when we have learnt that difference threatens a relationship. For example, we may have learned that we were not allowed to have our own subjective experience of the world when we were [growing up](#). Perhaps our parent(s) expected us to enjoy what they enjoyed or they simply told us we were wrong when we expressed a negative or strong emotion. If this is the case, then it is likely that we will experience a difference in opinion with a partner as threatening.

Validation is a behaviour and state of being requiring empathy. To validate our partner means seeing them as [separate](#) to us and letting them know that we can accept their experience. It does not mean making them right and us wrong. This is often where couples stumble as they subscribe to the idea that there can only be one correct perspective.

Lastly, healthy and happy couples are really good at repairing their [relationship](#) and nurturing themselves and their partner after a fight. The health of the couple unit can often be gauged by how soon a couple moves through the four tasks, ending in repair. Couples who do this within an hour or two of a fight generally have better communication and are emotionally healthier than those who take days or weeks to repair their relationship.

These four tasks may seem simple, but the reality is that many couples simply never master them without support and guidance.