

How Men and Women Argue

Damian Whitworth investigates gender differences when couples argue.

In Gapun, a remote village in Papua New Guinea, the women take a very direct approach to arguing. Linguist Deborah Cameron tells of an argument between a husband and wife. It started after the woman fell through a hole in the rotten floor of their home and she **blamed** her husband. He hit her with a piece of sugar cane, so she **threatened** to attack him with a machete and burn the house to the ground. At this point the husband decided to leave and she launched into a *kros* - a traditional angry tirade of **insults and swear words** - directed at a husband with the intention of it being heard by everyone in the village.

"YOU ARE A ?!&#@!! YOU ARE A ?!&#@!! GARBAGE MAN, YOU HEAR? YOU BUILT ME A HOUSE THAT I JUST FELL DOWN IN, THEN YOU GET UP AND HIT ME WITH A PIECE OF SUGAR CANE, YOU ?!&#@!!"

The fury can last for up to 45 minutes, during which time the husband is expected to keep quiet. Such a domestic scene may be familiar to some readers, but, for most of us, arguing with our partners is not usually such an explosive business! Human beings argue about everything, but are there any differences between the sexes in the way that we argue?

In fact, according to John Gray, author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1990s best-seller) - men prefer not to argue at all, wherever possible. "To avoid confrontation men may retire into their caves and never come out. They refuse to talk and nothing gets resolved. Men would rather keep quiet and avoid talking about any topics that may cause an argument." Women, however, are happy to **bring up** relationship matters that they would like to change.

Edward, 37, a writer, says, "I'm useless at arguing. There are things that **bother me** about my partner, but when I finally say something, I am too slow to win the argument. I can only argue convincingly when I have all the evidence to **back up my argument** ready to use, but I'm too lazy to do that. I think women, on the whole, are more practiced at arguing, or more interested.

Christine Northam, a counselor with Relate, a marriage-counseling service, agrees with the view that men have a greater dependency to withdraw. "Women say: 'He won't respond to me, he won't listen, he thinks he's right all the time.' However, the younger men that I see tend to be much more willing to understand their own feelings and talk about them. Older men find it more difficult."

However, she adds that women are also capable of the withdrawal technique. "Oh, yes, women are very good at doing that, too. They **change the subject** or cry. Crying is a good tactic and then the poor man says: 'Oh my God, she's in tears.'

"I don't argue a lot, but I do cry a lot," says Sarah, 32, and advertising executive. "I'll say something **hurtful** to him and he'll say something equally hurtful back and then I'll be **in a flood of tears**. I call my friend and she says: 'Where are you?' 'In the bathroom,' I say. And then, when I finally come out after half an hour, he's just watching TV as if nothing happened."

Northam says, "Everything goes back to our upbringing, the stereotypical stuff we have all been fed. We are very influenced by the way our parents were, or even our grandparents. The way you deal with emotions is learned in your family. To understand this, and then make a conscious decision that you will do it differently, requires a lot of maturity."

Task 1 - Instructions: Discuss the following questions with your partners.

- 1) According to the article, what are some of the differences between the ways that men and women argue?
- 2) Why do you think that these differences exist?

Task 2 - Instructions: Read the following statements about the article and decide whether they are true or false. Write T or F in the space after each sentence.

- 1) The argument Deborah Cameron describes happened because a wife considered her husband responsible for an accident she had. _____T_____
- 2) In Papua New Guinea when a woman is arguing with her husband, he's supposed to reply to his wife's insults. _____T_____
- 3) John Gray says that men are more assertive in arguments than women. _____F_____
- 4) Edward thinks that he could win arguments more often if he were better prepared. _____T_____
- 5) Christine Northam says that older men are less able than younger men to talk about their feelings. _____T_____
- 6) She says that some women start crying during arguments only because they get truly upset. _____F_____
- 7) Sarah thinks that her boyfriend is insensitive to her crying. _____T_____
- 8) Christine Northam believes it is not difficult to learn new ways of dealing with arguments. _____T_____

Task 3 - Instructions: Look at the highlighted words and phrases in the text and restate them in your own words.

- 1) Blamed -
- 2) Threatened -
- 3) Insults and swear words -
- 4) The fury -
- 5) Bring up -
- 6) Bother me -
- 7) Back up my argument -
- 8) Change the subject -

9) Hurtful -

10) In a flood of tears -