

Gaining Perspective on an Argument (Greater Good Science Center)

[Link to Activity](#)

Time Required:

15 minutes, several times a year for the formal practice.

Why Try This Practice:

Fighting and arguing can introduce a lot of negativity into our friendships, as one person's criticisms and accusations may be met with defensiveness and angry retaliation. The quality of the relationship may decline, which can harm mental and physical health. During arguments, some of our emotional pain comes from the evaluations we make about our friend or partner's behaviors and intentions—but these evaluations aren't always correct. The technique of "emotional reappraisal" can help us reinterpret emotionally charged events in more accurate, positive, and constructive ways. For example, we might feel that a friend or partner who cancels plans repeatedly doesn't respect us, but remind ourselves that they're overburdened with other commitments now and shows care and respect in other ways. Of course, we don't want to use this practice to excuse or rationalize unacceptable behavior. But in the context of a generally healthy partnership or friendship, it can help lessen negative feelings, build connection and empathy, and ultimately improve the relationship.

How To Do This Activity:

It's easy to get wrapped up in our own heads when we argue with our partners or friends. This exercise will help you gain some perspective on your feelings during conflict. Think about a major disagreement you had with a friend or loved one in the past four months, and how much distress it's still causing you. Then, follow these steps:

1. Think about this disagreement from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved, a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How would they view your friend's behaviors and perspective? How might they find the good that could come from it? (5 minutes)
2. Some people find it helpful to take this third-party perspective during their interactions with their friend or loved one. However, almost everybody finds it challenging to take this third-party perspective at all times. In your relationship, what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-party perspective, especially when you're having a disagreement? What might help you overcome them? For example, if you find yourself getting caught up in the heat of the moment, it might help to pause and take a deep breath. (5 minutes)
3. Despite the obstacles to taking a third-party perspective, people can be successful in doing so. Over the next four months, try your best to take this third-party perspective during interactions with your friends and loved ones, especially during disagreements. How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your friends or loved ones over the next four months? How might taking this perspective help you make the best of disagreements in your relationships? (5 minutes)

Allow these reflections to inform your interactions with your partner over the coming months.

Why it Works:

When we experience conflict with others, we typically take a first-person perspective, concerned with our own thoughts, feelings, and values. This practice invites us to adopt a third-person perspective, the perspective of an observer who sees both partners' points of view and wants to achieve the best resolution for everyone.

When we do this, research suggests, we also reduce the anger and distress that we're feeling. Rather than responding out of indignation or pain, we can act from the desire to see our partners—and ourselves—be happy and connected. Reflecting in advance about how to implement these strategies, and what obstacles we might encounter, makes us more likely to succeed.