

## How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable

"Wise men argue causes, fools decide them."

-- Anacharis

Controversy is an integral part of the human condition. It exists in every quarter of society, both private and public. The focus of this article will be on argumentation -- otherwise known as: polemics, debate, conflict resolution, managing misunderstandings, or repairing a breakdown in communication. Reference will not be made here to the doctor who practices alone, but rather to the group practice -- where doctors, nurses, and secretaries must get along if the practice is to run smoothly. Few things are more disturbing than having to run a practice with a knot in your stomach; or, having to leave your office at the end of a day with an unresolved argument on your mind.

The success or failure of any practice can usually be traced to how well its members communicate. A case in point is displaced hostility -- where the emotional side effects of personal, marital, or family problems are brought into the office and unloaded on a colleague or co-worker. This is one way in which arguments get started.

Have you noticed how people make the most outrageous statements and expect you to believe them without question? Pontifical pronouncements are issued on subjects ranging from craniotherapy to iridology, or transcendental meditation to cultural determinism. When you challenge their credibility, these same people are immediately offended.

One wonders how many people truly understand what it means to "prove" what they say. There is probably no greater obstacle to an intelligent and rational exchange of ideas than not having a sound foundation for one's beliefs. Test this technique for yourself. During your next argument, ask your opponent, "What is your point?" Even better, "What is your main point?" I am constantly amazed at how many people argue without actually having a point. They say things like, I guess what I'm trying to say is ... or, what I really mean is. ... Perhaps the world is filled with fuzzy thinkers -- people who have serious difficulty organizing their ideas and, even worse, expressing themselves in a clear-cut manner. They simply don't know how to disagree without being disagreeable.

A knowledge of how to argue effectively teaches you not only how to organize your thoughts, but also how to defend yourself from being manipulated (no pun intended) by others.

While growing up, most of us were discouraged from arguing. It didn't seem to matter whether we were right or wrong. Unfortunately, such conditioning often followed us into adult life. We never learned how to argue without getting emotional. Carl Jung captured the full impact of emotionality in argument when he wrote, "Rational argument can be conducted with some prospect of success, only so long as the emotionality of a given situation does not exceed a certain critical degree. If the affective temperature rises above this level, the possibility of reasoning having any effect ceases."

Why are so many people rejected because of what they say, rather than who they are? Is there some difficulty separating people from their ideas? If someone says something stupid, are we

inclined to think of that person as stupid; or, if they say something intelligent, do we regard them as being intelligent? Perhaps, it would be best if we dissected our opinion like this:

I like you, but I don't like your ideas. I don't like you, but I like your ideas. I like you and your ideas. I don't like you and I don't like your ideas.

An example of how civilized people should disagree occurs every day in our courts. Opposing attorneys at one another's throats in the courtroom may enjoy friendly dining together in the evening. Familiar television personalities, such as Perry Mason and Matlock, successfully illustrate the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

A rational argument that allows each person to express a point of view, calmly and without interruption, is good for what ails you. It is an excellent safeguard against developing such stress-related symptoms as cephalalgia, dyspepsia, hypertension, or insomnia. It is by expressing, not repressing your emotions that these symptoms can be avoided.

Only a small percentage of the general public knows how to argue correctly. While all of us can argue at some level, that level can definitely be elevated.

Here, now, are a few valuable tips you may want to incorporate in your next disagreement:

The more you use the words I, me, and my in an argument, the more emotional it is apt to get. Conversely, the less they are used, the calmer and more civilized the argument will be. Except when used by a highly experienced arguer, these pronouns generally behave as irritants. They pit people against people, rather than ideas against ideas. What I am suggesting is that most people argue from the heart and gut, not from the head.

In your next disagreement, instead of using these pronouns, begin your remarks with such impersonal phrases as: It would appear from the evidence, ... or, correct me if I'm wrong, but are you saying that? ... You will soon discover that the heat of the argument has lessened considerably.

In addition to keeping the emotional level of an argument down, there is the matter of arguing premises, not conclusions. Experts in the field of argumentation have repeatedly emphasized the importance of discovering how people reach their conclusions and not arguing the conclusions themselves. For instance, if someone were to say, "Most lawyers are crooks," how might you respond? You could accuse the person of being uninformed, misinformed, or simply narrow-minded. What you should do, instead, is find out how that conclusion was reached about lawyers; i.e., the kind of reasoning that was employed. Listen carefully for these unsupported conclusions. Bear in mind that a sure-fire method of shooting down your opponent's argument is to discredit its basis.

Arguing is like playing judo. In both, the objective is to overcome your opponent. A major difference is that in judo, the means is physical; whereas, in argumentation, it is rhetorical.

At first glance, the use of the word yielding in connection with an argument sounds like a contradiction in terms. Generally, yielding is associated with losing. According to Professor Jigoro Kano, founder of the art of judo, "Whatever the objective, the best way of achieving it is through the principle of maximum efficiency, minimum effort." He believed in using the other fellow's strength, rather than trying to resist it. For instance, in judo, if your opponent is coming at you, instead of trying to stop him, pull him in the direction he is already moving and, by so doing, use his forward momentum as an asset.

A widespread misconception about arguing is that the more you talk, the better your chances are of

winning. In most cases, this is not so. What you do when you talk too much is give your opponent more ammunition to use against you. Your strategy should be just the opposite, say less, not more. Get your opponent to talk more by asking questions, asking for examples and illustrations, asking for clarification, analogies, and restatement. Again, like the principle of judo (win by yielding), don't resist, pull -- pull out as much information as you can.

Learning how to disagree without being disagreeable cannot be learned overnight. Like so many other worthwhile pursuits, it requires time, patience, and practice. Hence, as mentioned at the outset, the success of any practice can usually be traced to how well its members communicate -- especially in conflict or controversy. Rational argument, if done properly, is an excellent means of maintaining equanimity among health care givers and their staff.

Finally, let me say that unvoiced and unresolved disagreements between professionals almost invariably percolates down to the patient. It therefore behooves each of us to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable.

*Abne M. Eisenberg, D.C., Ph.D.*  
*Croton On Hudson, New York*

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