

Couples coming to counselling will usually describe communication problems as one of the main reasons for seeking outside help.

A magnetic twosome that starts in a glowing bubble of love, fuelled by a powerful cocktail of chemical reaction is likely to have some disappointing moments as realism and disappointments begin to sneak up on the happy couple.

Psychologists describe this first stage in the passage of a relationship as the **Romance Stage** which generally lasts around 18 months to 2 years before life cruelly pushes us into the **Power Struggle stage**.

Often, the higher the hope the deeper the disappointment when our 'other' transpires to be just that ... No longer our twin soul, but another who just doesn't see things the right way (that is, the way we see them)

This is where couples endeavour to point out to each other, often not with much gentleness, exactly where the other one is going so very wrong.

The partner who had seemed so kind and understanding can often become an enemy who just doesn't get us at all.

Now, when momentarily disenchanted with our beloved, all we see are the flaws and the differences instead of those glowing attributes and understandings that seemed to blind us at the start.

The power struggle is a hard system to shift, but when I ask in a first session how a couple argues, it's the answer " O, we never row" that makes me know the work will probably be long and hard.

It is often the ability to have a creative row that can lead a couple to some better understanding of each other and show there is passion in the dynamic between them.

There is, however, a big difference between abusive anger which is unsustainable and cruel, and a good barney which often leads to repair and an affectionate re-entry into the safety of the loving side of our partner.

Here are some tips for **A Good Row**.

### 1. Pick your battles

It's pointless to keep moaning about unloading the dishwasher (aka 'nagging') unless you can recognise what is really being said. Are you actually asking for more help around the house, or maybe it's about just feeling generally unheard and unimportant. Think it through and try to explain your feelings. Behind most power struggles is fear.

### 2. Avoid accusatory language

This one is easy. So when describing some issue of contentiousness, don't use the 'you' word, as in 'you always..' Or 'you never...' And instead, own the feeling that it evokes in you. 'When X happens, it can make me feel .....' *(Fill in your own reaction)*

### 3. The impact of childhood

Ingrained issues often come from past experiences. Think of where you may have felt this way before you ever met your partner. Ask how anger was dealt with in their family. Conflict averse families don't help kids to learn how to process difficult feelings. Critical parents can breed critical children – often they grow up to be hard on themselves and will dole it out because they can't bear their own feelings of not being right.

### 4. Try to listen

This one is tricky in the middle of heightened emotions. But do try to think about what is being said rather than just waiting to speak. If people feel heard, they are more likely to listen to your point.

### 5. Not in front of children

Sounds so obvious, but often doesn't happen. Children can be really scared by continual rows. Never include them or confide in them. Sometimes gripes are bound to become public, but make sure they also see you hugging and close so they grow up seeing that anger isn't a deal breaker, but can be successfully and lovingly negotiated.

### 6. Keep it clean

However bruised we feel it's important to keep to the relevant issue and not allow anger to take over and become a character assassin. Hurting because we feel hurt can only cause deeper pains that take a long time to heal.

### 7. Don't use sulking as a weapon

Sometimes confused feelings cause people to withdraw. It's ok to discuss this at a quiet moment and explain that we need a period of quiet time to regroup. This is so different to doling out The Silent Treatment, which is borne out of inability to express feelings and is tantamount to withholding and over-harshly punishing the other.

Now for the good news, overcoming the worst of the **Power Struggle Stage** can lead to a healthier **Commitment Stage** and a far stronger and successfully tested relationship.

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