

5 ways to end an argument ASAP

Remember these tips in the heat of the moment. (Heat of the moment includes but is not limited to: yelling at spouse about dishes, yelling at kids to stop yelling at each other, yelling at everyone about politics.)

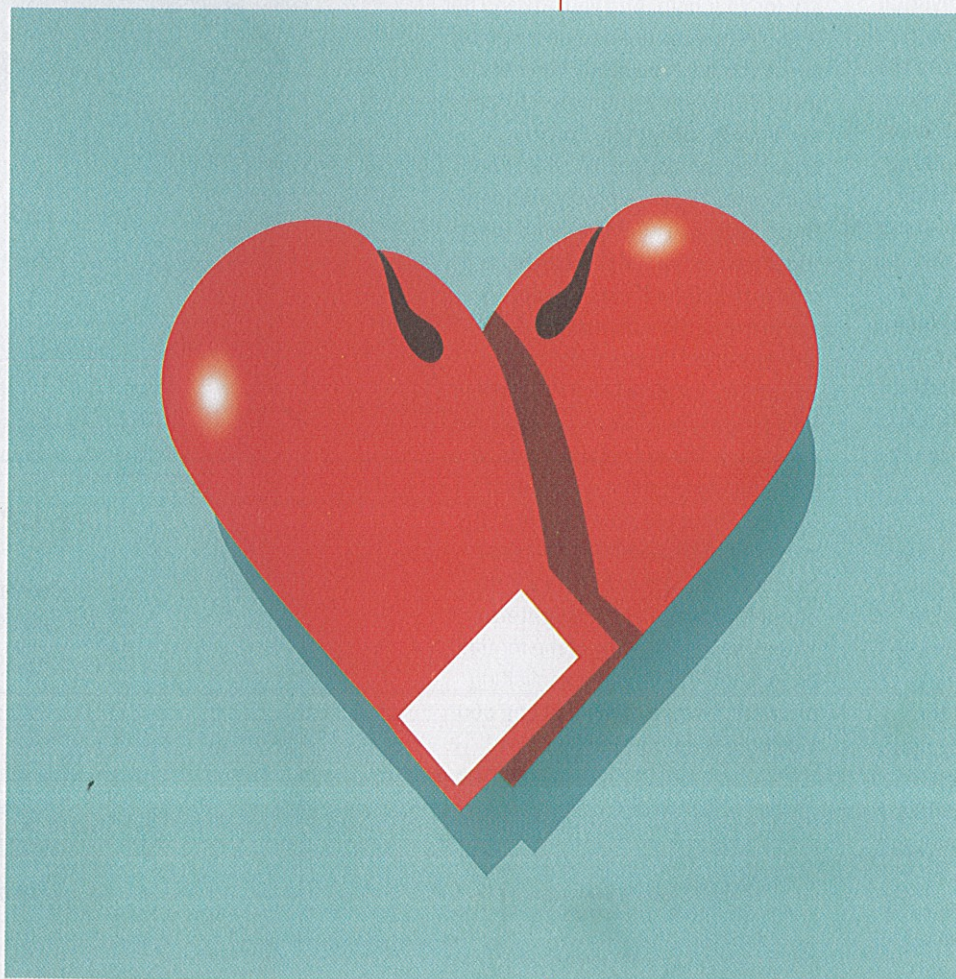
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EMILY BAZELON

Tell a personal story.

I was raised in a family that argued a lot about politics, and I still do, both on my podcast and in life. A personal story can take the hot

air out of the conversation. People start paying attention with their hearts as well as their minds. I was a guest recently on a conservative podcast, and we were going back and forth on whether it's wrong or not to prevent Muslims from entering the country in order to prevent terrorism. I finally said something like "I'm Jewish, and the idea of passing laws that treat people differently on the basis of religion makes me very, very nervous." When someone brings a personal narrative into the argument, it's harder for the other person to keep going—they feel like they are negating your personal experience. It's like a reset button. It helps everyone remember that they are talking to a fellow human being and to have a little compassion.



Written by Rebecca Webber.

Illustration by Ben Wiseman

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CRAIG BYSTRYNSKI
Get out your iPhone timer.

When you have a group that turns combative—like a PTO meeting at a school—you need an assertive leader who can set time limits for each speaker (a couple of minutes) and for the entire discussion (say, 30 minutes—then shelve it or take a vote). You can pass around a stress ball or a pen to designate who is speaking. People will, in trying to make their point, restate the same thing in different ways. That's not productive. Time limits help with that. But the leader needs to recognize when the argument is becoming redundant and cut it off. The fastest way is to state the problem in your own words—"OK, I understand your issue is this..."—then move on.

3

HEATHER HAVRILESKY

Imagine recapping it.

Sometimes I think how the fight will sound when I tell a girlfriend about it the next day. I'll have to say, "It was about how I unload the dishwasher, you know?" Or "It was about some raw chicken on a plate." Or "He bought the wrong bread for the third time. Then I started screaming." If you can flash-forward to the embarrassing moment when you recap the fight—and hear how you might sound like the aggressive or crazy one—it makes you slow your roll and reexamine what you're bringing to the table. You see how silly it all is. If you have kids around, you don't even need to imagine. You have witnesses right there—and that might keep you honorable.

4

ERICA REISCHER
Quick! Picture a soft underbelly.

Anger is often the hard shell covering the sadness or helplessness we're too vulnerable to show. If you're arguing with someone close to you—like your spouse or a good friend—read between the lines. Say to yourself, "Instead of responding to the anger, I'll look for the soft side. What's really going on?" That will help you respond in a kinder, more patient way. If you're the angry person, try hard to voice the feelings, rather than just your view of the facts. So: "I realize I'm just disappointed because you didn't run the errand I asked you to, and that makes me feel unimportant." Your spouse will probably say, "Of course you're important to me!" It quickly changes the conversation.

5

JOHN DONVAN

Get in the middle.

Sometimes when I'm moderating a debate on a controversial cultural issue, things can almost go off the rails. The debate becomes a nasty put-down exchange. In one extreme moment, two debaters with opposing views on Israel and Palestine got furious and started screaming incomprehensibly at each other. Nobody could hear anything. In that case, I left my podium, went over to them, and raised my hands like Moses parting the Red Sea, as if to say, "Stop." It was a little bit of a shaming moment, honestly. You can use it with people you know well, to get them to cut it out, calm down, and take turns listening to each other. Make it clear that nobody's getting anywhere, and call upon them to be their better selves.

THE EXPERTS

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