

WELLBEING

# This is why you're really fighting with your partner, according to a psychotherapist

Posted by Anna Brech, Sept 2020.



Couples often say “we argue over stupid things”. But the reason for those petty disputes runs much deeper than we think, according to insight from a trio of [relationship](#) therapists.

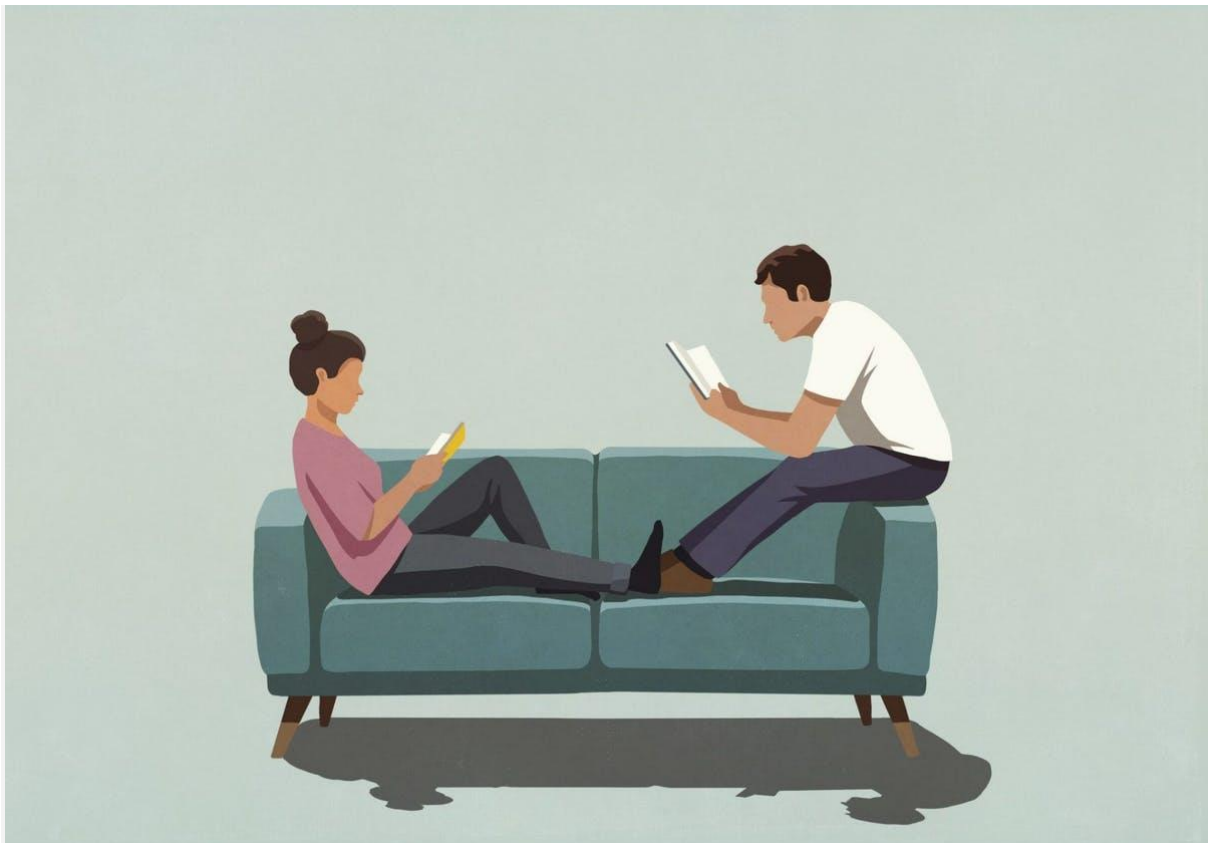
The events of this year have been the a flame to the match of existing relationship issues, with [lockdown](#) sparking a [40% rise in divorce enquiries](#).

But while the oppressive impact of being home together 24/7 has caused tensions to flare, arguments – in the healthier context of the word – are not always a bad thing.

In fact, a 2018 study found that couples who argue effectively are [10 times more likely](#) to have a happy relationship compared to those who sweep their problems under the carpet.

But problems surface when those in long-term relationships fail to understand the root cause of their rows. This means that resentment festers and couples get caught in a damaging loop that escalates over time.

To make matters more complex, the cause of everyday bickering between couples is actually quite hard to identify: it rarely happens for the reason that we think it does. Instead of a fallout being about, say, whose turn it is to load the dishwasher, or how much time to spend with the in-laws – in other words, the immediate reason for the argument – conflicts tend to stem from the entrenched [emotional needs](#) of both people involved.

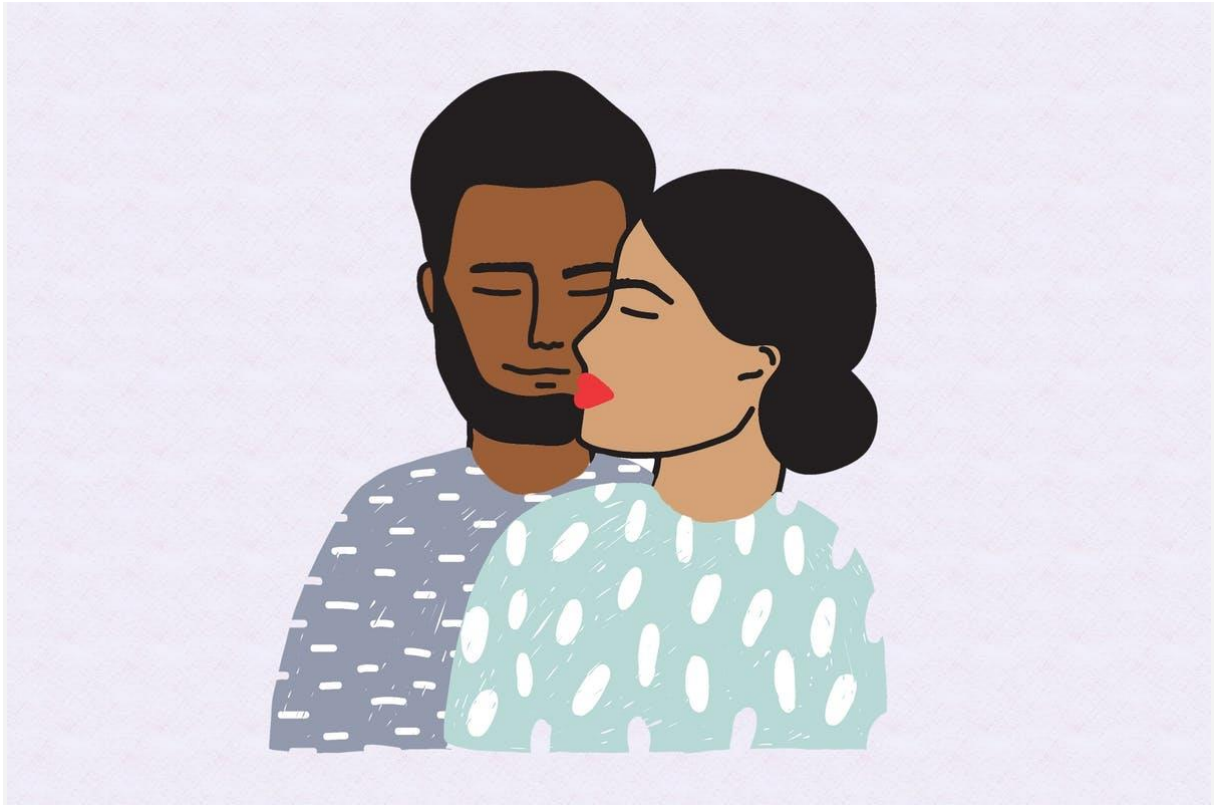


The relationships we have with our partners can trigger painful beliefs from the past

“Partners often say, ‘We argue over stupid things,’” writes relationship therapist Dr. Jason Linder in [Psychology Today](#). “This is somewhat true. That said, there are a lot more things partners are actually arguing about under the surface than what meets the eye, especially for the partners themselves.

“[...] Getting to what’s underneath leads us to the true cause of arguments and relationship distress... Partners need to learn to reach out to each other with those feelings such as sadness about the disconnection, feelings of failure or inadequacy, or fear of rejection.”

Here's how to work on your relationship so that you are both more emotionally in tune with one another:



The resurfacing of childhood wounds means that we tend to overreact in arguments

### **We often repeat past patterns in our choice of partner**

“Unconsciously we have the tendency to choose a partner who will trigger our hurt from the past,” Karin Peeters, coach and psychotherapist at [Vitalis Coaching](#) tells *Stylist*. “Somehow, deep inside, we hope ‘this time, may it be different’, but then we find ourselves in familiar and painful patterns.”

This unresolved trauma is known as a “primary wound” in psychological terms: it references a deep-rooted and painful area of our emotional world that can be resurfaced by our partner’s behaviour.

“That’s the reason why it can seem that we ‘overreact’ to a certain situation,” says Peeters. “It’s because under the surface, an avalanche of feelings was triggered. It’s never truly about who’s putting out the bins, it’s about the feeling underneath whereby one person thinks ‘I have to do everything alone’ and the other is thinking, ‘I am never good enough in your eyes’.

“For example, if you grew up around an unavailable father, you might choose partners who somehow cannot fully be there for you,” Peeters continues. “Due to their work, a dependency or because they are currently married to someone else, you feel a sense of ‘not being truly important’. And likewise, your partner might feel criticised when you express this hurt, bringing them back to their past growing up with a mother who they felt they could ‘never’ please.”



Are you and your partner emotionally divorced?

### **The risk of emotional divorce**

Feelings rooted in childhood are particularly likely to show themselves if the same argument happens over and over again. It's typically an emotionally charged row, too.

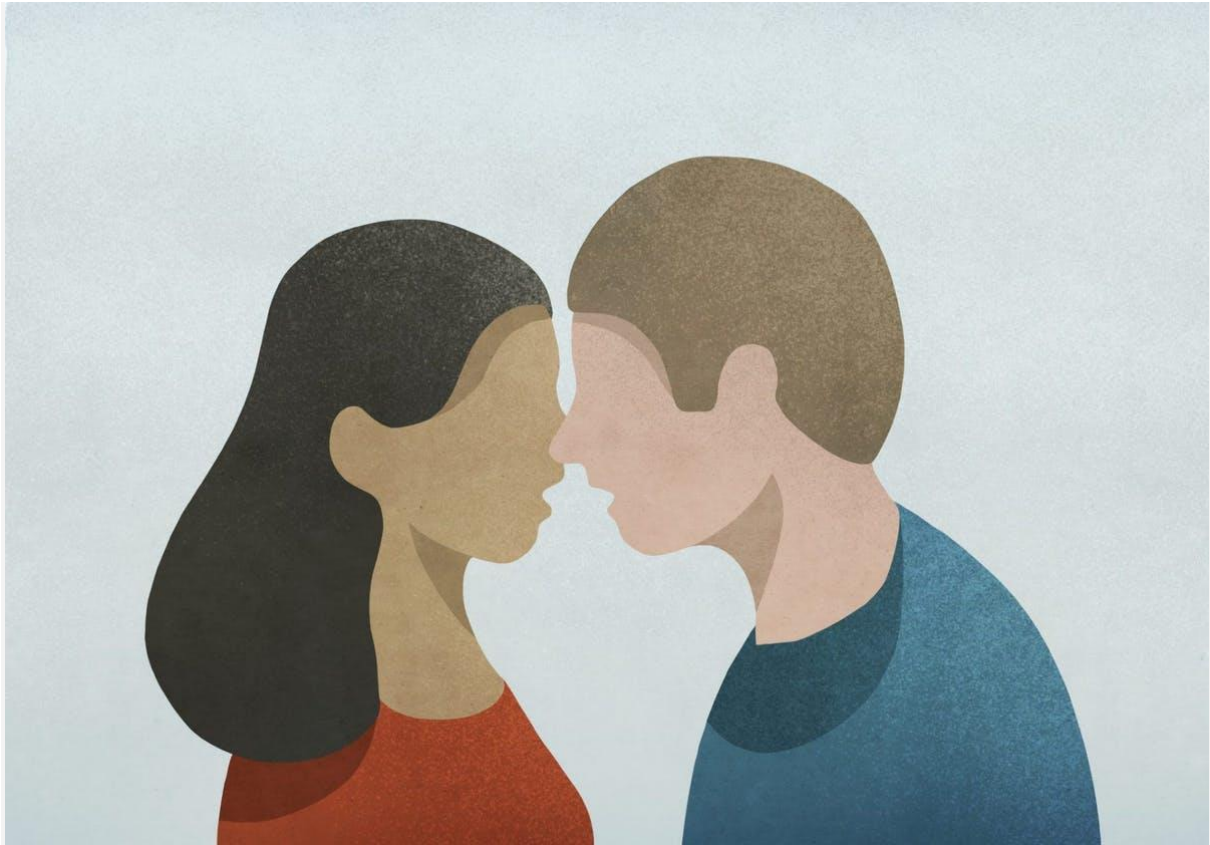
"For example, arguments about the washing up can be about the subtext of being taken for granted, not being heard, not being cared for, not being important or not being seen," explains couples and family therapist [Dr. Kalanit Ben-Ari](#). "Arguments about being late can trigger old wounds of feelings of loneliness."

While conflict can be "a growth trying to happen", according to Ben-Ari, it becomes divisive when couples get caught in a negative cycle of defensiveness.

"The more one will avoid, withdraw or shutdown, the more the partner's anxiety increases and therefore their defensive reaction to chase and pursue rises," she says. "So we end up with a relationship between two defensive mechanisms, rather than talking about the real issue."

When couples are caught in this "broken loop" of having the same arguments over and over again, "it can make us feel like not wanting to talk about it anymore at all, as it seems to go nowhere," says Peeters. "It can feel so hopeless and pointless: it only leads to a feeling of exhaustion."

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference,” she adds. “Arguments are far from ideal, but at least it’s a sign we still care.”



In order to break a cycle of negative blaming, couples need to consciously shift focus

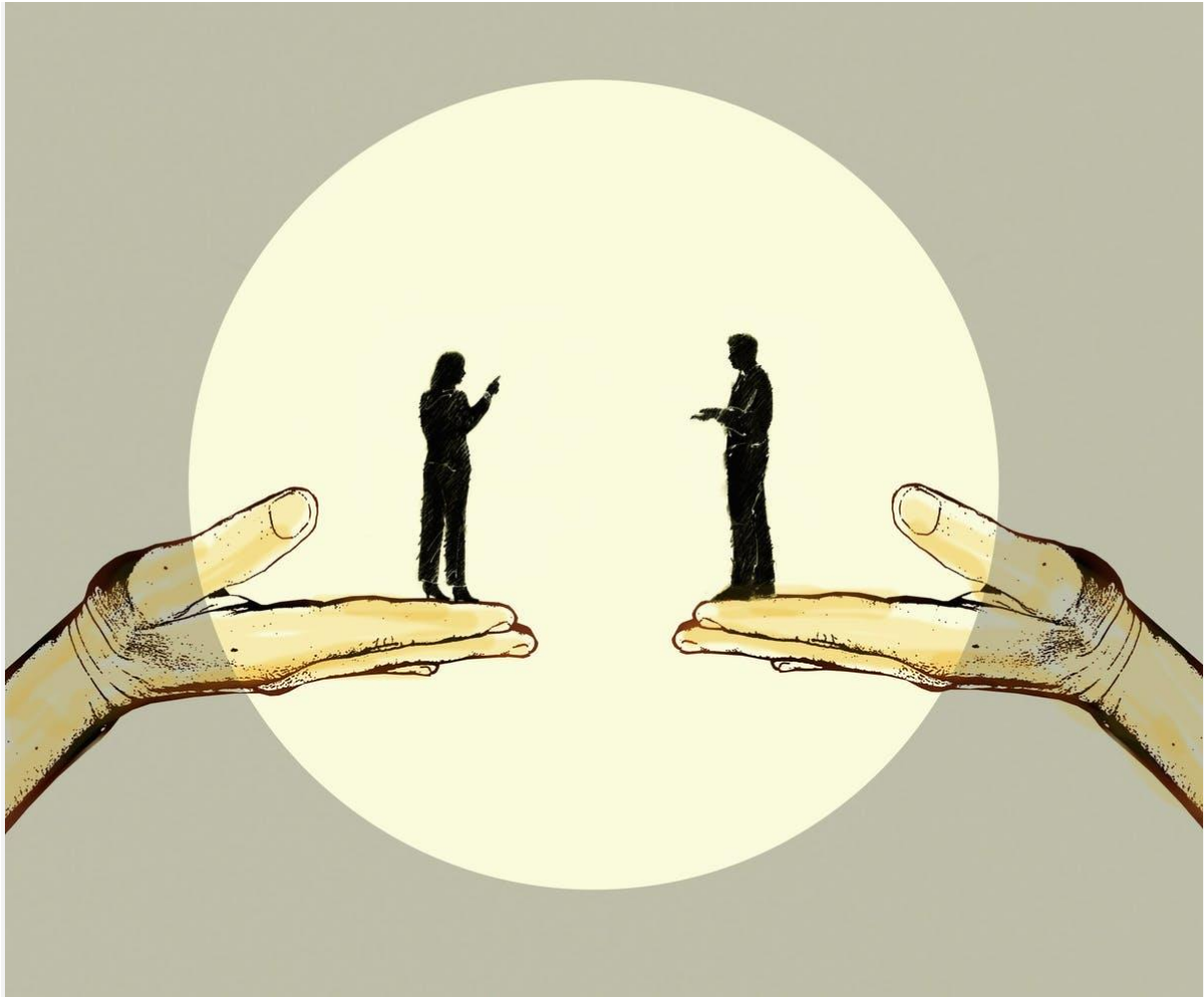
### **Moving beyond blame and shame**

The upshot of this disconnect is that couples may find themselves in what Ben-Ari calls an “emotionally divorced” relationship: “the couple might be together but have no energy, hope or skills to create a meaningful connection.”

But this needn’t be the end game for the relationship. “For growth to happen, couples need to move away from shaming, criticising and blaming, to a more safe and conscious connection,” says Ben-Ari.

This journey starts with trying to understand and recognise each other’s feelings.

“The idea is to peel down the layers of the onion, and to start talking about the deeper underlying issue,” says Peeters. “Do not talk about the money, bin, kids or the exact time someone came home. That’s just the outer layer. When we start talking about the feelings underneath, like feeling controlled or unsupported, then the real conversation and potential for healing and growth starts.”



Therapy helps couples move on from a game of attack and defend

In doing this, it's important that both people in the relationship pay attention to how they express themselves, too.

"There is a huge difference between being emotional and entitled to change versus expressing vulnerability, empathy and longing," says Ben-Ari.

The first category may sound something like, "I feel disappointed and sad that you are always on the screens and I deserve more! You always... you never...". As opposed to "Lately I feel lonely. I know how busy you are these days and that you need to be on top of things at work, but I miss us. I miss the time we are together with no distractions. I miss you".

Couples therapy helps to facilitate these crucial conversations, and develop healthier ways of communicating together.

"You learn to communicate in ways that are respectful instead of a game of attack and defend," says Peeters. "It aims to help couples learn to understand each other better, and to help each other grow as a person."

Ben-Ari agrees that therapy is a process that paves the way to “safe conversations, deep connection and joyfulness”.

“The idea is not to ‘keep people together’ as being together says nothing about the quality of the connection,” she adds. “Couple therapy is an exciting journey of discovery and transformation to experience the relationship that they desire... . I just show them the way, they need to choose to take it.”