



Why do we argue so much?

Jennifer and Jonathan were so looking forwards to their vacation. They were finally going to get a break from the busy grind of their hectic lives. Much to their disappointment, the vacation was marred by many arguments that left each of them feeling sad and more alone than when they were home, busy in their daily routines. Scott and Meredith were ready to tear their hair out. Their 14 year old daughter was continually lacking in discipline, and there were ongoing arguments about her numerous last minute demands of her parents, without thought as to their schedules and their pressures. In contrast, when they expressed their expectations of her, their daughter became as oppositional, hard headed and stubborn as a mule. Finally, Melissa and Matt had made great progress in therapy. They felt closer, and had overcome some destructive interpersonal patterns. They were disappointed when they came to session a week later, following another argument that had erupted during the intervening week. Surprisingly, each of these very different scenarios has a similar underlying explanation. Understanding the fundamentals of this process helps in creating a more satisfactory outcome to each of these three (and other similar) situations.

I often demonstrate our varying states of mind using a variety of balls. As an example, when you squeeze together two different colored balls made from play dough, they merge, and eventually, the two balls cannot be separated into their original colors. In contrast, the same actions with two baseballs merely lead to a clunking sound. Finally, squeezing two squish balls together will temporarily distort the shapes of the balls. Upon releasing the pressure, the balls pop back into their original shapes.

So what on earth do these balls have to do with family arguments? People have two basic needs: A need to belong and be loved. And, a need to be separate, independent and to maintain our unique identities. These two needs are equally opposite and equally strong and continually exert unconscious conflicting pressures upon us.

Without our realization, our “self” morphs into each of the various models of the balls which I described. Thus, when we are happy, relaxed, content, well rested and well fed, we tend to be as resilient as the squish ball. Our boundaries are firm but flexible. In contrast, when we are ill, tired, hungry, stressed, overwhelmed, and/or spend way too much time with another person, we become like the play dough or the hard ball. Our resilience and flexibility disappear, and unconsciously, we easily lose our identities, or resort to protecting them with a hard outer shell.

Intimate relationships threaten our core self more than any other. We allow our partners and family members entry into our innermost circles, and we allow ourselves to “need” more emotional support, love and validation from our family members. As a result of this greater closeness, we are more vulnerable and family members are most able to threaten our core self.

We, creative humans that we are, find perfect solutions for this dilemma. We unconsciously generate arguments, simply because they provide temporary bad feelings, allowing for distance from our loved one, thereby ensuring our emotional safety.

Let's return to Jennifer and Jonathan whose vacation was marred by the incessant arguments. They each had made assumptions about the vacation prior to their trip to a relaxing resort, and they had never checked in with each other about the silent plans they had created. Thus, Jonathan, who worked many long hours at a demanding career thought that the vacation would be perfect for golfing, working out and spending dinners with his wife. Jennifer, who also worked long hours in a demanding career, thought the vacation would be a wonderful opportunity for the two of them to "connect." She envisioned hours spent walking on the beach, lounging at the pool and having time to sight see.

In reality, on vacation, both Jennifer and Jonathan were now together more hours than usual. Alarm bells were sounding deep in their psyches, warning about the dangers to the survival of each of their identities. One unconscious solution to the fear of losing oneself is to imagine that the other will just adapt and mold themselves to you. Hence, they become like you, and your self is protected. However, this underlying wish cannot be accepted by the other, because it threatens the core self of the other. Can you see that incessant arguments are an excellent protective mechanism for both Jennifer and Jonathan? Distance is created, to counteract the closeness brought on by greater time and proximity to each other. There are definite strategies once can implement to improve this situation.

Neither Jennifer nor Jonathan took their partners' needs into account, as they created their dream assumptions. Had they conversed about their ideals prior to the trip, they could have created time each day to meet both of their individual and joint needs, and the vacation would have been very successful. The process of hearing and responding to each others' needs creates mutual respect and calms the inner fears that the self will be lost in all the togetherness.

Many parents of teens experience the same frustration as Scott and Meredith. Their children expect them to always meet and fulfill their needs and demands immediately. However, the teens have no sense that their parents are separate people who also have needs and expectations. In reality, babies are best represented by the play dough. They are malleable and totally filled by parents. As all parents of two year olds know, it doesn't take long for their children's individuality and independence to emerge. But the real battle for individual identity doesn't usually begin prior to the early teen years when the teens are forever shifting from play dough to hardball selves. Knowing this, parents can begin non-judgmental conversations with their teens about what they are feeling and experiencing. Listening carefully, validating and respecting the thoughts and feelings of the teen is the best way of communicating your acceptance of the teen's emerging separateness. Once the teen's emerging autonomy is respected, they are in a better place to hear about their parents' needs and wants. Sometimes, family psychotherapy provides a safe and excellent forum to begin such conversations.

This brings me back to Melissa and Matt, who had made great strides in therapy. Luckily, I warned them that they were very likely to experience a regression, so they were not totally surprised when an argument ensued during the intervening week. We continued to work on reducing conflict by enhancing emotional safety and mutual respect.

To summarize, the ideal state of mind is best represented by the squish ball, which is flexible, but still able to retain its core characteristics. So how can we shift from play dough and hard ball, so that we are more flexible and resilient more frequently? The answer comes from knowing oneself, understanding one's self and developing healthy communication styles within yourself and with others. Just as Adam was charged with naming all the living creatures in the new world God had created, each of us has to go through the task of naming all of the parts within our inner worlds. Locating, labeling and understanding our complex inner selves lead to us knowing ourselves well,

and then effectively communicating our needs to our loved ones. The resultant honest communication and mutual respect of our needs, as well as those of whom we love, permits the more stable and flexible selves to emerge, leading to greater intimacy and independence.

In subsequent articles, I will describe my process of mapping and mastery of the inner world, a method of learning to become as flexible, resilient and cohesive as the squish ball.

Dr. Tamara Sofair-Fisch is a NJ licensed Psychologist with practices in West Orange (973) 669-3333 and Lawrenceville, NJ (609) 883-2577. In addition to helping numerous individuals and couples, she teaches and trains licensed therapists in her unique approach: Mapping and Mastery of the Inner World. To learn more, visit www.RelationshipSolutionsNJ.com or contact her at DrTamaraSF@RelationshipSolutionsNJ.com.

Call us today to schedule a consultation.

West Orange Office

395 PLEASANT VALLEY WAY

WEST ORANGE, NJ 07052

PHONE 973-669-3333

Lawrenceville Office

2737 PRINCETON PIKE

LAWRENCEVILLE, NJ 08648

PHONE 609-883-2577

Visit us online at www.RelationshipSolutionsNJ.com