Responding to Your Child’s Anger

Susan E. Murray

Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/85

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lake Union Herald at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lake Union Herald by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.
The Wall Street Journal published an article by Elizabeth Bernstein in the March 23 issue. Titled “But You Never Said...,” the article features Carrie and Joe Aulenbacher’s different memories of why they ended up with two large arcade game machines in their home. Carrie remembers that Joe said he had been saving up for a personal birthday present for himself, and they discussed where it would go in their den. However, two weeks later, she came home to discover two arcade machines in their garage. Joe remains adamant that he said he was getting a “package deal.” A year later, it is still an issue for Carrie, as she never agreed to this arrangement.

Two people remembering different versions of an event is not unusual, but is often the basis for arguments that can erode a relationship. How can two people have different memories of the same event? It starts with the way each perceives the event in the first place. You may recall something differently, at least in part, because you understood it differently at the time, suggests researcher Michael Ross. Researchers know that some spouses can’t agree on concrete events that happened in the past 24 hours — whether they had an argument, received a gift, or even had sex with one another.

Your mood — both when an event happens and when you recall it later — plays a big part in memory. If you are in a positive mood or feel positive about the other person, more likely you will remember a positive experience or give a positive spin on a negative experience. Similarly, negative moods tend to reap negative memories. A person who lost an argument remembers it more clearly than the person who won it.

Arthur Christensen, author of Reconcilable Differences, says couples should try to accept that there is not just one version of what really happened and to get past troubling memory differences. He says the discrepancies may be innocent — no one is lying. Focus on the emotions of the event and not what really happened.

Every couple has disagreements, but when recurring conflicts start to pull your relationship apart, this becomes toxic. The goal is to keep small incompatibilities from causing big problems. A helpful approach is to find a time and place where both are comfortable, calm and receptive to each other. Talk about your own emotional reactions to a memory, specific behavior or issue, keeping the focus on your own feelings rather than on the other person and what he or she did or didn’t do. Work to remain as neutral as possible as you work through the issue.

One of the great joys of being part of a couple, says Elizabeth, is what researchers call collaborative memory-creating shared reminiscences. Recall the day your child was born, when you picked up the keys for your first apartment or house, a favorite vacation. Build your memories together, and have some fun while you do.

Remember to assume good intent. Most likely, your partner is not lying when his or her story is different than yours. Your memories of the event are simply different. Accept that there is not one version of events. Both stories have some validity. Do not argue based on memories. Let go of “you did this,” “no, I didn’t.” Focus on the truth of how the event made you feel, not your memory of what happened. Practice collaborative memory. Enjoy the journey of your shared memories and rejoice in what you do agree on.

Susan E. Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.