



Why Resolving Arguments is Not About Right or Wrong

"If I resent someone for what they did in the past...I should tell the person directly, not that he was wrong, but how I feel about what he did. It's not a matter of right or wrong. I just need to try to have my feelings recognized, understood and cared about."

- Psychologists Rusk & Rusk, from the book *Mind Traps*

So many people in this world waste a lot of time arguing over all the wrong things. We turn our disputes with each other into battles of right versus wrong, doing all we can to position ourselves in the former and our opponent in the latter. There's just one major problem with this method: It can never be resolved.

There is never a clear "right" and "wrong" because no two people have the same perspectives, beliefs, or viewpoints. No two people have the same upbringing or cultural backgrounds. Nor do any two people have the same hopes, dreams, fears, needs, desires, or insecurities. Since it is these emotions that motivate behavior and influence what different people consider good or bad, arguing over them or trying to get the other person to see things precisely how you do is a trivial pursuit that is sure to end in failure. Everyone is just acting upon what is right for them at that particular moment in time, as they see it. The injuries that result are collateral damage caused by our conflicting needs and desires, not planned malice.

When our goals cause conflict with each other, most people get caught up in a hopeless campaign of attempting to prove they were right and the other person was wrong. A better approach is to skip the goal of proving yourself right, and rather, focus on how certain actions may have resulted in injuries that no one set out to inflict. After all, even when others engage in outright hostility or teasing, it's less about making you feel miserable than it is about trying to make themselves more secure.

As the aforementioned psychologists add, when approaching conflict you should come with the view that "I don't need you to agree with me as much as I need you to understand how I think and to care about how I feel." (*p. 125) Understanding and caring – not right or wrong – should be the goals you have in mind when it comes to working out conflicts with others.

So rather than blaming or condemning, finger pointing or judging, try to resolve your differences by...

- Talking with the person about how you feel
- Explaining why you feel that way
- Specifically state what it is that upset you, being as specific as possible
- Ask about the motives for their behavior; you may be surprised
- Ask about how they perceive the situation, and LISTEN CAREFULLY
- Don't try to force the person to see things from your point of view, only that you do have a different point of view and so this is how you interpret things
- Don't represent your feelings or views as universal truth or insist that they accept your viewpoints as accurate, only that they respect your feelings as a person
- Understand that you may be at least partially wrong as well, and that your views and perspectives may not accurately fit reality
- Don't start out assuming hurt is intentional and maliciously motivated; usually it is not
- Without blaming, judging or condemning, talk about what can be done to avoid hurt in the future.

Believe it or not, EVERYONE has compassion. Those who say they don't or act as though they don't are either psychopaths or they're putting forth a defense mechanism. (Usually the latter.) Teens especially are well practiced in the art of pretending they don't care, but the truth is that everyone has a conscience to one degree or another. And since everyone has compassion, we should try to make our focus in resolving conflicts about mutual compassion, not right or wrong. While no two people, coming from separate needs, interests, perspectives and vantage points will ever perfectly agree about any given situation (that's precisely what creates conflict to begin with), everyone more or less shares the same drive for basic human decency. By making your focus more about differing perspectives and differing feelings, and less about right or wrong, you stand a far better chance at resolving your differences in a way that makes everyone feel better.