

These Are the Most Common Arguments Married Couples Have

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A ranking of the 12 biggest sources of conflict for married couples.

By [Lauren Vinopal](#) Aug 06 2019, 4:09 PM



If marriage is a fight club, then the first rule of fight club is that social scientists are going to talk about it. Helping couples anticipate and manage predictable conflicts in more productive ways, after all, is essential to maintaining healthier relationships overall. So what kind of conflicts are married couples having? Researchers have found that fights come in all different sizes about everything from intimacy to commitment, and tend to fluctuate in size with time.

But you knew that.

What you may not have paid attention to is what you argue about with your spouse the most. As much as money looms large in our lives and culture, according to a study led by Lauren Papp, the associate dean of research at the University of Madison-Wisconsin's School of Human Ecology, it is not a big area for spousal rivalry. Same goes for your sex life, which couples certainly do fight about, but tend to resolve with relative ease

To find these patterns, Papp and her colleagues had 100 husbands and 100 wives privately keep track of their fights in diaries over the course of 15 days. When they tallied those fights, overarching patterns emerged. Here's a ranking of the most common fights among married couples with kids.

12. Personality

Whether your spouse is too talkative, shy, flirtatious, or even insensitive, it did not matter that much to moms and dads compared to other types of marital conflict. Fights about their spouse's personalities only accounted for 5.5 percent of arguments reported by husbands and 8.6 percent by wives. That reflects other research that suggests personality is not as important a factor when it comes to mate selection as people think. Of course, people don't tend to date, marry, and have children with people they find insufferable, but beyond that personality differences tend to show up in other conflicts without being the center of attention.

11. Friends

If you hate your spouse's friends, they hate your friends, or you just hate what they do together, these power struggles are slightly heavier for parents. Fights about friends made up 7.1 percent of husbands' marital conflicts and 8.1 percent of wives'. Although these fights were not about money specifically, the findings indicate that spending is more likely to come up in fights about friendship for wives, but not husbands. This may reflect a more traditional division of labor in marriage where men see themselves as breadwinners who are in charge of how their spouses spend their money when they go out. Interestingly, other research indicates that when husbands dislike their wife's friends at the start of a marriage, it was a significant predictor for divorce, but for husbands, it did not matter. Perhaps this is because men generally have fewer friends for their wives to hate.

10. Intimacy

Fights about having enough sex and showing enough affection are important to relationship happiness, but often weigh less because couples tend to handle them in constructive ways. Arguments about intimacy made up for 7.9 percent of total conflict for husbands and 8.5 percent of conflict for wives. Papp and her colleagues speculate that conflicts about intimacy rarely come with a sense of urgency, unlike arguments about work, money, and children. Presumably, partners who are not overly impulsive can shelve these topics until they've decided how they feel and discuss it in a thoughtful way. Of course, there are exceptions. In cases where one person does not want to have sex at all or cannot perform, but refuses to seek professional help, conflict about intimacy is almost impossible to resolve. But barring any larger underlying issues, couples tend to come out on the other side of these conflicts for the better.

9. Commitment

Commitment and intimacy work similarly in that fights about trust and fidelity are meaningful, but they happen less frequently than conflicts about work, money, and kids. And when these conflicts do occur, there's typically an opportunity for growth. Husbands only argued about commitment 8.2 percent of the time and wives 9.1 percent of the time. Statistics on how many couples who stay together after infidelity are difficult to come by because cheaters are rarely honest with social scientists — one informal survey estimates that somewhere around 15 percent of couples survive infidelity. And yet a growing amount of evidence suggests that attitudes toward cheating are becoming less black-and-white and many happily married people cheat for reasons that have nothing to do with their relationship satisfaction. And given the gravity of these impasses, couples are more likely to seek out counseling in order to figure out what caused them to cheat. This professional perspective can help couples navigate through the conflict more productively.

8. Relatives

Fighting about relatives is a lot like fighting about friends, but more intense because family is an extension of one's self, people do not choose them, and unless the relationship is toxic, they're rarely willing to cut them off completely. That's why discussions about extended family account for about 10.7 percent of fights for husbands and 11.9 percent for wives. Whether it's an overbearing mother-in-law,

racist grandparent, or an unemployed brother overstaying his welcome, these fights include a third-party contributing to the conflict, which makes them more challenging. However, the significance of these fights really comes down to the boundaries couples set with their families, but like many of these conflicts, there are notable differences between men and women. For instance, one study found that when wives reported high levels of closeness with their in-laws early on in the marriage, they experienced a 20 percent higher risk of divorce — but when husbands reported the same closeness, they were at about a 20 percent lower risk. Psychologist Terri Apter suspects this may be because women tend to be more empathetic and forgiving when it comes to criticism of their mothers, whereas men tend to get more defensive about negative feedback directed toward their moms.

7. Habits

It's surprising that chewing loudly, a lack of punctuality, or looking at your phone too much would outweigh cheating on your spouse in terms of conflicts, but husbands reported that fights about bad habits made up 16.2 percent of total arguments, compared to 17.1 percent for wives. This is partially because not everyone cheats or struggles with intimacy issues, but everyone has some sort of annoying habit and likely quite a few. Bad habits are universal and there are ample opportunities to fight about them, even if those fights are not that serious. What these fights lack in quality they make up for in quantity, which is why they rank so high in this particular study but should be taken with a grain of salt, Papp notes. Couples can anticipate regular conflict about this, but it's not that serious. Interestingly, Papp has found in other studies that arguments about habits appear to increase when parents become empty-nesters. "Perhaps your partner's personal habits become more noticeable when children are not there day-to-day," she says.

6. Money

Although money was the source of conflict that prompted Papp's initial study, in the data it ranked right in the middle. Husbands said about 18.3 percent of their arguments were about spending, salaries, bills, and other money matters, versus 19.4 percent of wives. That's not to say that conflicts about money are not bad. Research shows these kinds of conflicts are emotionally loaded ones that last longer and are resolved less frequently. For men especially, money is tied to power, which can make conflicts about it especially heated.

But it's not technically the topic couples argue most about. It's more of a key supporting actor in so many other marital conflicts like work, leisure, and friends, but it's not the star.

"Differences about money are universal," Papp explains. "All couples need to make decisions about spending and saving and there's plenty of potential for two people to bring different earlier experiences, different expectations, and different behaviors related to money."

5. Work

Work and money are nearly tied in terms of conflict frequency because they're so closely related. Arguments related to their spouse's job accounted for 19.3 percent of arguments for husbands and 18.9 percent for wives. Friction about professional commitments like traveling for work and spending long hours with people of the opposite sex are also tied to conflicts about commitment, trust, and boundaries. Some concerns are not always in their spouse's heads — there is evidence that people are more likely to cheat on their spouses with coworkers and on business trips. Since most people have to work at least five days and 40 hours a week, these issues can come up a lot — and as much as certain jobs predict infidelity, such as finance, hospitality, and even social work.

4. Leisure

Something as pleasant as leisure does not sound like it should be a top source of conflict, but these are fights about how free time is spent. For parents of young children, this leads to the question: What free time? Well, because that time is so scarce, conflicts about it more severe. Like any other resource, the less people have, the more fiercely they fight over it. One study found that the way couples spend free time with each other can have a much more significant impact on relationship satisfaction than people realize. Quality time together is important, but when couples took part in activities only one of them enjoyed, their relationship suffered. Researchers also found that wives were more likely to go along with activities they were not interested in than the other way around. Although fights about personality were not as heavily weighted by husbands and wives overall, it seems like personality differences tend to show up in conflicts about leisure, and that couples who have fun together stay together.

3. Communication

Having different styles of communicating, not listening, or not being heard are all frequent and significant sources of conflict. Part of the reason why communication comprised 21.1 percent of conflicts for husbands and 21.8 percent of conflicts for wives is that men and women are socialized to communicate in very different ways. While women tend to be more verbal when it comes to expressing their emotions, men are likely to shut down in response to this. So likely, in fact, those psychologists actually created a term for it: "Stonewalling." Other research out of the Gottman Institute ranks stonewalling as one of four communications issues that can lead to divorce, including contempt, defensiveness, and criticism of a partner's personality. On top of that, couples fight about communication because communication is tied to every other conflict on this list. If you're fighting about money, it's very easy to spiral into a fight about how to talk about money and stay there.

2. Chores

While there's evidence that chores become less of a hotspot for couples once children grow up and move out of the house, for parents of young children, chores represent 25.1 percent of fights for husbands and 24.1 percent of wives. However, the division of domestic labor has become a much larger source of marital conflict for parents now than past generations due to the rise of dual-income homes. As more women have entered the workforce, men have been much more resistant to increase their share of domestic labor. Married mothers who are the sole breadwinner do a full hour of housework per day, compared to breadwinner dads who do about 11 minutes per day, research shows, and study after study shows that women in cohabitating relationships do more chores regardless of income. Other evidence indicates that husbands are not intentionally averse to helping, but when women gate-keep housework or act like experts about how chores are supposed to be done, men tend to see it as a power struggle and are less likely to help. This can often create a cycle of conflict around chores that rarely get solved because there is laundry to do.

1. Children

Children are by far the most frequent and significant topic for couples who are raising them to fight about. Overall, 36.4 percent of arguments husbands had and 38.9 percent of arguments wives had were related to how their kids behave, differences in parenting styles, how to discipline them, and other topics related to raising kids. It's estimated that parenting disputes contribute to about 20 percent of divorces. This number is anticipated to go up higher in instances when children are struggling with some sort of mental or physical disability. Couples fight about raising children for the same reason parents talk trash about each other on the playground — there is no one right way to parent. But for moms and dads, their children are extensions of themselves and they will protect them from bad child-rearing at all costs, even if that cost is their marriage. And unlike other fights about intimacy and commitment, conflicts about children don't go away after couples divorce and can get more heated. Even for empty-nesters, conversations about adult children remain an important factor for relationship happiness in the long-term. Ultimately, children are the most significant conflict for parents because they're what matters most to them. Once couples have kids, they never stop talking about them. In all of those conversations, moms and dads will find plenty to fight about.
