

# Break your ROW RUT

KEEP ARGUING ABOUT THE SAME OLD THINGS, IN THE SAME WAY? WHETHER YOU SCREAM OR SULK, THERE IS A WAY TO PUT YOURSELVES BACK TOGETHER

WORDS FIONA GIBSON

**Y**ou're in the midst of a row when you're hit with a feeling of déjà vu. Hang on a minute, you've had this argument before – countless times. 'I call it the forty-year argument,' says relationship coach Michael Myerscough. 'It can be about something that seems small – like one of you always brings the car back with no petrol in it – and ends up in a huge row with nothing being resolved.' Frustrating? Just a bit. Yet, according to Myerscough, recurring rows are relatively easy to fix. Trained in a new therapy from the US, called Relational Life Therapy, he focuses on the dynamics between a couple, figuring out how they can do things differently once and for all. He works with a 'relationship grid' (see below) comprising four positions, one of which almost everyone assumes mid-fight.

Try it – it works. Only yesterday, my husband and I had a spat over one of our pet hot spots: whether to have a day out (my choice) or relax at home (his). 'Fine, we'll stay home,' I barked, storming off to my study (and the grid's top left quarter). 'The biggest favour you can do yourself is figure out your position, then resolve to do things differently,' Myerscough says. 'So, if you tend to clam up and shut down, try yelling for a change. The instant you step out of your normal grid position, the argument has to go somewhere else.' Sounds too simple to work, so we challenged four *Red* readers stuck in an argument rut to test the theory.

## WHAT'S YOUR ARGUMENT STYLE?

### Aloof, shut down

**You say:** 'I'm too busy to talk to you now.'  
**You come across:** Cold, uncaring.  
**Switch position by:** Remembering your relationship does matter. Making your point without walking away.

### Crushed, inert

**You say:** 'You don't care, but then why would I expect anything better?'  
**You come across:** Sorry for yourself.  
**Switch position by:** Reminding yourself that you – and your opinions – count.

### Explosive, attacking

**You say:** 'You're so lazy. How dare you treat me like this?'  
**You come across:** Angry, losing control.  
**Switch position by:** Giving yourself time to calm down. Not going on the attack.

### Tearful, needy

**You say:** 'Now you've ruined everything!'  
**You come across:** Whining, manipulative.  
**Switch position by:** Anticipating your flashpoints. Being proactive about finding a solution.



## 'I'm disorganised, but find it hard to accept help'

Belinda, 30, is a freelance proofreader, who works from home in Sheffield. She is married to Joe, 36, a financial advisor.

Although Belinda has a designated workroom, her work materials tend to end up all over the house, and she is often panic-stricken as she hunts for crucial paperwork. 'I admit, it seems like chaos – but I do always get everything done,' she says. 'Yet Joe lectures me as if I'm a naughty child. He'll stand over me, ordering me to sort out my desk, interrupting my flow. I end up snapping at him, because I want to be left alone.'

Belinda recognises that she is at the 'top left' on the

grid (aloof, shut down). 'She needs to come to a more neutral position,' advises Myerscough, 'which means saying more than she does at present. People in this position tend not to know how to negotiate, so Belinda needs to appreciate Joe's intentions, even though they're not working for her.'

Myerscough suggests designating a time – 'say, Monday afternoons' – when she'll allow Joe to help her. 'Belinda needs to assert a boundary,' Myerscough adds, 'not build a wall.'

Grudgingly, Belinda agreed that Joe is only trying to be helpful. She then set time aside to allow Joe to help sort out her workspace. 'It was so hard to sit there obediently, when I was bored to tears. My instinct was to stomp off, and at one point he told me off for spinning on my swivel chair,' she laughs. 'But, although I hate to admit it, it's made me look forward to getting stuck into work, as it doesn't first involve searching for things.' Plus, Joe now feels valued and appreciated.

## 'He sits back while I'm run ragged'

Helen, 35, a careers advisor, is married to Jamie, 34, a surveyor. They live in Sunderland and have two children aged three and five.

'Our sticking point is whenever we're getting ready to go away,' Helen says. 'I do all the packing for our children and myself, and get so stressed trying to remember everything – including booking the cat and dog into their holiday homes, cancelling the milk... By the time we set off, I'm so miserable about Jamie not pulling his weight, I'm barely speaking to him.'

Myerscough points out that Helen's tendency to sulk is doing her no favours. 'She needs to be clear about which jobs need doing, and what she is and isn't willing to do. She should also work on her self-esteem, telling herself, "I am at least equal to you and deserve your respect".'

By the time their next trip rolls around, Helen is aware that she fits into the bottom left quarter. 'This time,' she says, 'I told Jamie that I didn't want him to leave everything to me. I realised that he is willing to muck in if he's told what to do, and that part of me doesn't trust him to do things properly. Even then, after he'd packed the children's clothes, I counted their T-shirts to make sure he'd packed enough.'

Still some way to go, then – but a marked improvement. 'It takes time to build trust,' Myerscough adds, 'but Helen needs to let go of the fact that she takes care of everything. Is it really so bad if they have to buy extra T-shirts when they're away?'

## 'I'll get tearful, instead of talking about it'

Diane, 34, and Paul, 37, have a 10-month-old son and live in North Yorkshire. Diane is a full-time mum, while Paul is an electrical engineer.

'I would appreciate a birthday present,' says Diane. 'On my last birthday, Paul went to work without even mentioning it. By the time he got home, I was so low and teary – then he just gave me a dog-eared card.'

Diane adds that they rarely go out as a couple, as Paul doesn't think to organise it, and realises that her response to this fits the bottom right quarter of the grid. 'If he really cared about our relationship, surely he'd be more thoughtful?' she says.

Myerscough says Diane should ask for what she wants. 'This will help to get her out of tearful, needy corner – bottom right,' he says.

'I'd fallen into this stubborn rut of thinking, "So you won't organise a night out? Then I won't, either",' says Diane. Myerscough observes, 'Diane was trying to trick Paul into doing what she wanted, which wasn't helping anyone.'

So Diane booked a night out, which boosted their feelings of togetherness. Although Paul has yet to arrange a 'date', he has greeted Diane's other plans for nights out with enthusiasm. 'It's made me realise it doesn't really matter who arranges things,' she says. But, when her next birthday approaches, Diane plans to drop very big hints.

## 'His lateness screws everything up'

Adriana, 40, runs a gift shop and her husband, Chris, 39, works in medical research. They live in North Fife and have children aged two, four and seven.

'The vast majority of our rows are due to Chris' timekeeping,' says Adriana. 'He is a workaholic and I suspect he uses his job to avoid the chaos of home life. Yet I depend on him being here at certain times, so I can either go out myself, or take one of our kids to something, without having to drag along the other two... Then he'll go and roll in an hour late and mess everything up.'

Adriana admits that she is volatile and sits firmly in the grid's top right corner. 'I have a terrible temper. I usually manage to keep a lid on it with the kids, but with Chris I let rip.' Unsurprisingly Chris leaps to the defensive, so rather than apologising (let's face it, like he *should*), he ends up arguing back.

'The louder she shouts, the less Chris hears,' observes Myerscough. 'I'm not saying his behaviour is acceptable, but she needs to take deep breaths, walk away and learn how to contain herself, so that she comes across as credible, not hysterical.'

Adriana agrees to try. 'Next time Chris wandered in late,' she reports back, 'I took deep breaths, even though my blood was boiling, because he'd put me to great inconvenience – I'd had to get an emergency babysitter just so I could go to my book group. Although my gut reaction was to yell at him, it was almost a relief to have made the decision not to. Our rows usually finish with me shaking and sobbing in the bathroom, so I'm the loser, really.'

For the first time ever, Chris was genuinely apologetic. On her return home, Adriana calmly reminded him that she doesn't go out often and would appreciate his support when she does. 'He took that on board. Then we talked about his working day and that it would benefit all of us – him included – if he could leave on time.' He's still not quite the patron saint of punctuality, but Adriana says, 'things are much better and, best of all, there's a calmer atmosphere at home.'

Visit Michael Myerscough's website at [therelationshipgym.com](http://therelationshipgym.com)