

Relationships

HI, CAROLYN: I'm gay. Congratulations, you're the first person I've told. I live in a part of the country where there is no real gay community, and my family isn't gay-friendly.



CAROLYN HAX

If I were to start over someplace else, I'd be doing it completely alone. I have no idea where to turn. — **Huntsville, Ala.**

DEAR HUNTSVILLE: This isn't about being closeted in Huntsville. Anytime you feel stuck, sort the reasons into two piles: constants and choices. Then remind yourself as often as necessary that every choice can be changed.

I can argue that you're "completely alone" right where you are. And as long as you're choosing not to live openly where you are, then you'll never foreseeably be anything but alone.

Maybe it feels unsafe to come out; that's something only you can assess.

And maybe you feel too insecure or unstable to start over alone, or you just take comfort in family, despite your secret. Fair enough. But: "completely alone" is the way countless people arrive in new locations to launch new lives, especially when the old lives aren't working. Starting from scratch is both a byproduct of our mobile society, and a catalyst for it; Americans treat a fresh start as their birthright.

Certainly some moves that are conceived as fresh starts can spiral into alienation and financial distress. The more vulnerable you are emotionally, physically, socially, financially and professionally, the more safeguards you need to build into your relocation.

For you, that might just mean you shop for your new community carefully, holding out for both professional opportunity and societal open-mindedness — and also scout ahead for gay-friendly volunteer or community groups, so you can establish quick proximity to potential friends.

Also, avoid strict leases and keep escape funds in savings. Your needs may be emotional, but be relentlessly practical in your plans.

Dear Carolyn: This has bothered me since Christmas. In my boyfriend's family, they draw names so that everyone gives a gift to one person. Their agreed-on price is twice as expensive as it is in my family (we also have a lottery system). So I spent twice as much on someone in my boyfriend's family as on my own sister. I feel that I was unjust.

Should I have given her a more expensive gift? My family could not have afforded more. — **Anonymous**

Dear Anonymous: Spending over limits often annoys people who observe them — and can be a slap in the face to those who couldn't afford to spend more. Heed the limit on your one gift, then satisfy your sense of justice by giving your whole family an extra something they all can enjoy. Good food or wine would do it.

■ READ CAROLYN HAX EVERY DAY IN THE FREE PRESS. WRITE TO HER CARE OF THE WASHINGTON POST, STYLE PLUS, 1150 15TH ST., NW, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20071 OR E-MAIL TELLME@WASHPOST.COM.



CHIA MESSINA

Couples mediator and relationship author Laurie Puhn says the right verbal skills can save a marriage.

FIGHT RIGHT — IN 5 MINUTES OR LESS

Author says couples can quibble, but follow some ground rules

By **ERIN HILL PERRY**
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Fights are inevitable in any relationship. No matter how great two people are together, they are still individuals who have different ways of thinking. But there is a right way to battle — and it should only take about 5 minutes.

In her latest book, "Fight Less, Love More: 5-Minute Conversations to Change Your Relationship without Blowing Up or Giving In" (\$24.99, Rodale Books), Laurie Puhn focuses on how couples can improve bad communication habits that often lead to arguments.

Puhn, a family lawyer and couples mediator in New York, says she wants couples to know it's OK to fight, as long as they keep it short.

"You want to be assertive in a fight, and to be assertive, you have to use the right words at the right time," Puhn says.

QUESTION: Can every

argument be solved in five minutes?

ANSWER: Yes. And I would tell every single couple, no matter how joyfully and blissfully happy you are in the beginning of your relationship or your marriage, you are going to hit a point where you wonder if you married the right person. My answer to that is "You did. What you need to do now is learn some new verbal skills."

Q: You identify two kinds of bad fights — the snowball fight and the revolving door fight. When things get heated, how can a couple turn it around?

A: When you feel yourself moving further away from a solution, and if it's becoming harder to reach a solution because now you're cursing, or now you're screaming, or you're off-topic, or you're talking about the same thing in circles and getting nowhere ... You ask for a do-over. And you put on your detective hat, and you ask your partner neutral questions: "I'm trying to understand, what am I missing



there are dumb arguments. What makes them dumb?

A: What makes them dumb is that you do not need a solution to it. The goal of a good fight is to find a solution, whether it's where to move, how to discipline your kids, where to spend the money, whether or not your husband should be talking about your health condition to other people. You need an answer.

The dumb argument really is about "I'm right. You're wrong," and the need to be right and to push your partner to admit it. It can drive you to insanity, and that's dumb.

Q: What seems to be the most common argument among couples you treat?

A: The biggest argument is about feeling neglected and who started it. ... Almost all these couples suffer from the same thing. It's the silent killer of love — neglect — which happens to every happy couple if you're not aware of it as a natural spiral downward.

Q: What are the biggest mistakes couples make when they argue?

A: They're condescending during the argument.

Q: What should couples consider when they fight?

A: How many questions you ask during a fight. What I mean is, are you doing all the talking? Are you trying to have a one-sided argument where your partner really doesn't contribute anything? If you get a one-sided argument, you get a one-sided solution. Anything that you think of yourself, it won't work.

■ CONTACT ERIN HILL PERRY AT ELHILL@FREEPRESS.COM AND 313-222-6428.



Today's topic

What's the most annoying thing about winter? Here's what local moms had to say:

On Detroit.MomsLikeMe.com

"Drivers who believe that just because they are driving some type of SUV or truck that they won't slide on the ice."
—Last2Know

"When the 'squirters' freeze and I have to pull over to the side of the road, get a handful of snow, and manually wipe the windshield, all in hopes of not freezing my fingers or dirtying my coat."
—HappyMomof4Girls

"Snow hitting during rush hour almost every time."
—MommaEx0309

"1. Dry skin. 2. Gas bill. 3. Black ice. 4. Gray and slushy days. 5. The cold keeps me from wanting to 'go back out' once I'm inside. 6. Lack of vitamin D. 7. Oh, and our garage door sounds funky."
—pnutbutrjellytime

"The finger-numbing cold steering wheel of my car."
—bethfoody

"not being able to wear cute shoes for fear of cold wet open toes and/or ruining those cute shoes."
—shaari

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