

## Stop Arguments Before They Start

“Honey, guess what?” Beth called out, opening the front door. “My presentation was a big hit! George paid me several compliments and everyone says he hardly ever does that.” She found her husband sitting at the computer.

Steve turned around, smiled, and said, “That’s wonderful, Sweetie.” And then he turned back to the computer.

That’s it? In two seconds, Beth went from elated to crushed. She had been about to give Steve the blow-by-blow. She pictured her story as the main event of the evening. And she wanted to give him attention to make up for all the time her presentation had taken. She saw her vision of the evening fizzling away fast.

“Is a little support too much to ask?” thought Beth, changing out of her suit. After the way I slaved over that thing. Hmm, maybe that was the problem. Maybe he didn’t *like* her slaving over it. He *seemed* supportive, but maybe underneath, he resented the time it took. After all, he had questioned her closely about the wisdom of taking this job. And he had wondered if two high-pressure jobs in the family would mean shortchanging the kids. Of course, his job was not up for debate, thought Beth resentfully.

He talks about how he wants her to fulfill her potential, but what happens when it’s time to walk the talk? She finally gets her big moment and he barely notices!

When Steve came into the bedroom to hear more about her presentation, he was astonished to find that excited Beth had turned into furious Beth. It took them an hour to sort everything out. Steve had seemed preoccupied when she came home because he had just read an email saying his brother had just been laid off.

From the outside, it’s easy to see that Beth was weaving a story about what Steve was thinking. It was this story that she was upset about, rather than anything he actually did. If only it were so easy to see from the inside! The truth is, every day, all of us write such stories without even realizing it.

Why do we do this? Maybe it’s our natural creativity working overtime. Maybe it’s our nature to constantly search for meaning, as many philosophers have claimed. We’re so good at it, we find meaning where there is none! Who knows for sure?

What we do know is that we’re sensitive, emotional creatures. (Yes, men, too!) This means that the meaning we find usually has something to do with us not being good enough, respected enough, or cared for enough.

The good news is we are also rational beings. We can test our stories to see whether they are fact or fiction. The next time you are upset with your partner, try these 3 steps:

- 1) Separate “what they did” from your story about “what they did.” Ask yourself which is really bothering you.**
- 2) If it’s the story that’s bothering you, ask these 2 questions:  
*What’s the evidence for this story?*  
*Could a different story be true?***

**3) Find out the truth: ask. Steps 1 and 2 will help you bring an open mind to this conversation. But to really separate fact from fiction, you have to ask.**

Beth and Steve did get to step 3, but not before they spent an unpleasant hour arguing.

Use these three steps to stop misunderstandings before they start. Then you can spend less time arguing and more time supporting, appreciating, and enjoying each other.

**P.S. It works with friends, family, and co-workers, too!**

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Claire Hatch, LICSW, is a licensed counselor who specializes in turning marriages around. She works with clients in her Seattle area office and by phone around the world. Claire also gives seminars on how to turn conflict to connection, build a strong marriage, and balance family and work. Visit [www.clairehatch.com](http://www.clairehatch.com) or contact Claire by email at: [claire@clairehatch.com](mailto:claire@clairehatch.com).

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