

You don't have to win this one

A short book about arguing to be right with the person you
live with

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You and the person you live with disagree about something small, which day the plumber came, which way is quicker, what was said at Christmas, and you don't let it go. You produce the evidence. You find the calendar. You keep going until they concede, or go quiet, and you've won, and the evening has gone somewhere neither of you wanted it to.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. You were right, often enough. Facts matter, and letting a wrong thing stand feels like a small lie. The second is that the certainty you feel is exactly what they feel, that people see bias in whoever disagrees with them and never in themselves, and that treating your partner as the biased one sets off a spiral in which each of you behaves in ways that make the other look worse. Dropping a fact isn't conceding it. Most of the facts you fight over don't matter, and the ones that do deserve a different conversation from a skirmish at dinner. The third is practical. Before you argue to be right, you ask whether it's true and whether it matters, and unless the answer to both is yes, you drop it, out loud. Chapters 19 to 22 cover how.

This book doesn't say that facts don't matter, that you should never disagree, or that you should give in on things that count. It says that being right about the plumber is a prize not worth the evening, and that there's a way to stop paying for it that isn't losing.

One caution. If disagreements in your house come with contempt, or threats, or if you're frightened of the person you live with, that isn't the habit this book is about. Arguing to be right is something people of good will do to each other. If it isn't good will, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free and open day and night on 0808 2000 247.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

It was Tuesday, not Wednesday

You're at dinner and your partner says the plumber came on Wednesday. He came on Tuesday. You know he came on Tuesday, because you took the morning off, and you say so. They say no, it was Wednesday, because they remember it was the day after the recycling. You say the recycling is Monday. They say it was Tuesday that week because of the bank holiday. You get your phone out. You find the calendar. It says Tuesday. You show them. They look at it and say "well, whatever, it doesn't matter", and go back to their plate, and the rest of dinner happens in a slightly different temperature, and you've won.

Or it's the route to their parents', and you say the motorway and they say the back road, and forty minutes later you're on the motorway in traffic and they haven't said anything and don't need to. Or it's what their mother said at Christmas, which you both heard and remember differently, and you're each certain, and the certainty is the whole of the evidence. Or it's the recipe, or the thermostat, or whether you'd already told them about Saturday.

These are invented, but I'd guess you've had three of them this month. Notice what they have in common. In each case there's a fact, or something shaped like one. In each case you're sure. In each case the being sure turns into a campaign, with evidence and escalation and a finish, and the finish is a concession from the other person, or a silence that does the job of one. And in each case what you have at the end is the fact, confirmed, and an evening with a chill in it.

Some words. I'll call the disputed thing **the fact**, whether it's a date or a memory or a plan or a preference dressed as one. Getting the other person to give in I'll call **the win**, and their giving in, **the concession**. I'll call the way disagreements escalate **the spiral**, which is a researcher's word I'll credit in chapter 4. The neutral observer's view of the argument, the one neither of you is taking, I'll call **the third seat**. The two questions this book turns on are **Is it true?** and **Does it matter?**, and the act of stopping without conceding I'll call **dropping it**, or **dropping it out loud** when you say so. The running tally that nobody admits to keeping I'll call **the score**. The person who stops arguing without agreeing I'll say is **withdrawing**, which is also a researcher's term. And **the evening** is what's lost.

Before you go on, do one thing. For a fortnight, keep a list. Every time you argue with the person you live with about a fact, write down what the fact was, who won, and what the next hour was like. Not why you were right. What it was about, and how the evening went. Most people who do this find the list longer than expected, the facts smaller, and the column for the evening the same word over and over.

Why winning seems right

Before I argue with the habit I want to be fair to it, because it isn't stupidity and it isn't cruelty. It's usually a good quality pointed at the wrong target.

Truth matters. You care whether things are so. A person who lets a false thing stand because correcting it is awkward is a person who's chosen comfort over accuracy, and you'd rather not be that.

Letting it go feels like lying. If you know the plumber came on Tuesday and you say "maybe it was Wednesday", you've said a thing you don't believe, to keep the peace, and that sits badly.

Being right is being competent. You remember things. You plan routes. You know the recipe. The fact is a small demonstration that you're a reliable person, and having it overruled by someone who's wrong is a small demotion.

They'll keep being wrong. If you don't correct the plumber's day, they'll say Wednesday to the plumber, and the insurance, and their mother, and it'll be your problem later.

It's the principle. It's not about the plumber. It's about whether what you say is believed, and that matters.

It's not about winning. You'd say this if asked, and mean it. You don't care about winning. You care about it being right, and if they'd just look at the calendar there'd be nothing to argue about.

It's habit, by now. The correction comes out before you've decided to make it, in the tone it's always come out in, and a correction that's been made a thousand times isn't a choice any more. It's a reflex with a phone in its hand.

And you were right. Often. The calendar said Tuesday. You have a record, and the record is good.

And there's the moment itself, which is worth naming as a reason. The fact is stated, the correction is available, and the second between the two is the shortest second in the day. Nobody decides to argue about a plumber. They find themselves three sentences in, with the phone already out, and the deciding happened somewhere before the first sentence, in a place the habit lives and the person doesn't visit.

There are needs under all of this. To be accurate. To be believed. To be seen as competent by the person whose opinion matters most. Not to say things you don't believe. Those are good needs, and the method later in the book meets them better than winning does. What I'll show is that the certainty driving the campaign is the same certainty on the other side of the table, that both of you are inside a spiral neither of you started, that dropping a fact isn't lying, and that the record of being right is a record of evenings.

"I'm just being accurate"

Start with the belief that makes the habit feel like a virtue. You're not trying to win. You're being accurate. The fact is the fact, and you're the one who has it.

Emily Pronin, Daniel Lin and Lee Ross, in 2002, ran three studies on what they called the bias blind spot. In surveys, people rated themselves as less subject to a range of cognitive and motivational biases than the average person, than their classmates, than fellow travellers at an airport. That's ordinary enough. What's less ordinary is what happened next. When people were shown that they'd displayed a bias, and read a description of how it works, they insisted their own judgements had been accurate and objective anyway. And in a final study, people rated a peer's self-serving explanation of a test result as biased, and their own identical self-serving explanation as free of bias.

The finding isn't that people are biased. Everybody knows that. It's that the feeling of being unbiased, of just seeing the facts, is universal and is present in people who've just been shown they're wrong. From inside, accuracy and bias feel identical. They both feel like seeing clearly.

Now sit at the dinner table. You feel certain the plumber came on Tuesday. That certainty feels like accuracy. Across the table, your partner feels certain it was Wednesday, and their certainty feels, to them, exactly as you feel yours. Neither of you is experiencing bias. Both of you are experiencing clarity. One of you is wrong, and the wrong one doesn't feel any different from the right one,

because that's what Pronin's studies found. The feeling of being right isn't evidence of being right. It's what disagreement feels like from either chair.

I'm not saying you weren't right about the plumber. The calendar said Tuesday. I'm saying that the certainty you had before you found the calendar was worth nothing as evidence, because they had the same certainty and were wrong. And I'm saying that in the arguments where there's no calendar, which is most of them, what was said at Christmas, whose idea the holiday was, whether you'd mentioned Saturday, you're both running on that same worthless certainty, and calling it accuracy.

"I'm just being accurate" is what everyone in an argument thinks. Both of you think it. That's the problem, and it's not one that more certainty solves.

"They're the one being stubborn"

Once the fact is disputed, there's a second thing you notice, which is that your partner won't budge. You've shown them the evidence. They're still saying Wednesday. That's not a disagreement any more. That's stubbornness, and stubbornness has to be pushed through.

Kathleen Kennedy and Emily Pronin, in 2008, studied what happens between people who disagree. Their first finding was that people see those who disagree with them as biased. Not wrong, biased, meaning their judgement is distorted by something. The second was that this perception drives how people then behave. Seeing the other person as biased, people took more conflict-escalating approaches to them, pushing harder, conceding less, treating them as someone to be got round rather than talked to. The third finding closed the loop. When the researchers manipulated people into seeing their adversary as biased, those people behaved more conflictually, and that behaviour made them look more biased and less worth cooperating with, to the other side. The researchers called it a bias-perception conflict spiral. You see them as biased, so you push. Your pushing makes you look biased to them, so they push. Round it goes.

Two people each sure the other's watch is wrong is a fair comparison for two sentences. Each one sets theirs more firmly, and neither looks at a clock.

Apply the spiral to the plumber. Your partner said Wednesday. To you, that's a person whose memory is distorted, probably by the recycling. So you produce the calendar with a certain edge, because you're dealing with someone stubborn. To them, the edge is the sign that you've stopped listening and started managing, which is what a biased person does. So they say "whatever", which is the concession that isn't one, and the temperature drops, and you both file the evening as the other one being difficult.

The point isn't that you're the stubborn one. It's that "they're the stubborn one" is what the spiral produces in both chairs, and that the sentence, once believed, is what makes the next move harder. Neither of you started the spiral. Both of you are in it. And the person who notices that first is the one who can step out, which is chapter 13's subject, and it doesn't require the other one to do anything at all.

"If I let it go, I'm admitting they're right"

Here's the belief that makes the win feel compulsory. If you stop pressing, you've conceded. The only options are to win or to lose, and losing means agreeing to a thing that isn't true.

There's a third option, and the habit has hidden it. You can drop the fact without conceding it. Dropping isn't agreeing. It's declining to continue, and it says nothing about who was right.

Consider the plumber. You could say "you might be right, I'm not sure it matters", and nothing in that sentence is false. You might be right is true, in the sense that you haven't checked. I'm not sure it matters is true, in the sense that it doesn't. You haven't said the plumber came on Wednesday. You haven't said your partner was right. You've said the argument isn't worth having, which is an accurate statement about the argument.

The belief that dropping is conceding comes from imagining the argument as a contest with a scoreboard, where an unfinished round goes to the other side. That's how it feels from inside, and it's why chapter 1 named the score. But there's no scoreboard. There's a dinner table, and a fact about a plumber, and two people. The round doesn't go to anyone if nobody finishes it. It just ends, and the evening is still there.

There's also the question of what you'd be lying about. "Maybe it was Wednesday" would be a small lie if you were certain, and chapter 3 is about why you shouldn't be, without the calendar. "It

doesn't matter" isn't a lie at all. It's the truest thing anyone says in the whole exchange. The plumber came. The job got done. The day is a detail, and saying so isn't surrender. It's proportion.

So the choice isn't between winning and losing. It's between winning, losing, and dropping, and the third one is the only one that doesn't cost the evening. Chapter 21 has the sentences. For now I'd just like you to notice that they exist, because the habit has spent years telling you they don't.

"If I'm wrong I'll admit it, so why can't they?"

Here's a belief that feels like fairness. You're not unreasonable. When you're wrong, you say so. You've admitted things. It's your partner who can't, and that's why the arguments run on.

Look at how often you're wrong, by your own account. Rarely, I'd guess, because you're careful, and you check, and you remember things. So the admissions are rare, not because you're stubborn but because the occasions are rare. That's how it looks from your chair. From theirs, it looks like a person who admits nothing and produces calendars, and who explains the rarity of their admissions by the rarity of their errors, which is exactly what Pronin's participants did. They saw a peer's self-serving account of a test result as biased and their own identical account as plain fact. "I'd admit it if I were wrong, I'm just not wrong very often" is a self-serving account, and it feels like accuracy, and it would feel like bias if your partner said it.

There's a second problem with the fairness argument, which is that it's a move in the spiral. "I'd admit it, why can't you" is a claim about the other person's character, made in the middle of a disagreement about a plumber, and Kennedy and Pronin's finding is that treating the other person as the biased one is what makes them dig in. You've stopped arguing about Tuesday and started arguing about whether they're the kind of person who can admit things, and nobody has ever conceded a date in order to prove they're not stubborn.

And there's what your admissions have looked like, on the occasions they've happened. In my observation, people who argue to be right admit error in a particular way, which is fast, complete and slightly grand, so that the admission itself becomes a small demonstration of character. "You're right, I was wrong, I hold my hands up." That's a good sentence and it's also a way of being right about being wrong, and partners notice.

The test isn't whether you'd admit it. It's whether you drop the ones you can't check. A person who says "you might be right" about the things nobody can know is a person whose rare admissions of error will be believed when they come. A person who only concedes when the calendar forces it has taught their partner that concessions are extracted, not offered, and will find their own extracted in return.

"It's the principle"

When the fact is small, the habit reaches for something larger. It's not about the plumber. It's the principle. It's about whether what you say gets believed in this house.

I'd ask you to name the principle, out loud, in a sentence. When people try this, the sentence usually comes out as something like "I want to be believed" or "I don't want to be treated as though my memory can't be trusted". Those are real things and they matter. They're also not about the plumber, and the plumber's day is a poor place to fight for them, because winning that argument doesn't get you believed. It gets you the calendar, and a partner who's learned that disagreeing with you about a date costs an evening.

If being believed is the principle, then the way to be believed is to be someone whose disagreements are proportionate. A person who fights every date is a person whose certainty is worth less, not more, because it's spent on everything. A person who lets the plumber go and holds firm on the mortgage is a person whose firmness means something. The principle is served by dropping the small ones. It's undermined by winning them.

And if the principle is bigger than that, if the real thing is that you feel your partner routinely dismisses what you say, then that's a real disagreement about the relationship, and it deserves a real conversation, at a chosen time, in the shape an earlier book in this series describes. What it doesn't deserve is to be fought as a proxy war over the recycling, where it can't be won because it isn't on the table.

So when "it's the principle" arrives, take it seriously enough to ask what the principle is. If it's about the fact, it's not a principle. If it's about the two of you, it's not about the fact, and the fact is in the way.

"They'll never learn if I don't correct them"

Some of the arguing has a teaching motive. If you let the wrong route stand, they'll take it again. If you don't correct the recipe, the cake will fail again. Correction is how people learn, and you're doing them a service.

Consider what people learn from being defeated at dinner. In my observation, they learn that disagreeing with you about a route ends in a demonstration that they were wrong, with evidence, in front of the children. They don't learn the route. They learn to stop offering routes. The next time there's a choice of ways to go, they'll say "you decide", and you'll have won the road and lost the passenger.

Nickola Overall and James McNulty, in a 2017 review of what kind of communication during conflict helps couples, drew a distinction that's useful here. Direct opposition, saying plainly that something's wrong and needs to change, was beneficial when the problem was serious and the partner was able to change it, and harmful when the partner wasn't secure enough to respond. Cooperative communication, affection and validation, was harmful when a serious problem needed changing, because it left it unchanged, but was beneficial when the problem was minor, couldn't be changed, or involved a partner whose defensiveness got in the way. An earlier book in this series uses this review for the case where something serious does need raising. I'm using it here for the other half. The plumber's day is minor. The route to the in-

laws is minor. What was said at Christmas can't be changed. For those, direct opposition isn't teaching. It's the harmful case, and the review says so.

There's a real version of correction, and it looks nothing like the argument. If your partner really does keep taking a slower route and it really does matter, the correction is "the motorway's usually quicker at this time, do you want to try it next week?", said once, in the car, not as a verdict, and then dropped whether they take it or not. That's a correction someone can take. A win isn't a correction. It's a defeat with information attached, and people don't keep the information from their defeats. They keep the defeat.

"I can't stand being misremembered"

The worst arguments are about memory. What she said at Christmas. Whether you told them about Saturday. Who suggested the holiday. There's no calendar for these, and the certainty on both sides is total, and the argument has nowhere to go and goes there for an hour.

I'd like to say something plain about memory disputes, and it's this. They're unwinnable by design. Not because your partner is stubborn, and not because your memory is bad, but because a memory isn't a recording. It's a reconstruction, made fresh each time from fragments, and shaped by what you expected and how you felt and what's happened since. Both of you are reconstructing Christmas, and both reconstructions are confident, and there's no third recording to check them against. Chapter 3's point about certainty is at its sharpest here. You're both sure, and being sure is what reconstruction feels like.

So what's the argument for? If it can't establish what was said, it must be about something else, and I think it's usually about one of two things. Either it's about a feeling that's real and current, that their mother is dismissive of you, say, which the Christmas remark is being used to prove and which could be talked about directly. Or it's about being believed, chapter 7's principle, and the memory has become the test. In neither case is the remark the thing. The remark is the ground the thing is being fought on, and it's ground on which nobody can win.

The two questions from chapter 19 settle memory disputes faster than any evidence could. Is it true? Unknowable. Does it matter? If the answer is that it matters because of what it shows, then talk about what it shows. If it matters only as a fact, it's a fact nobody can check, and the only thing that continuing establishes is that both of you would rather be right than have the evening.

"I can't stand being misremembered" is a real feeling and I'd honour it by saying it plainly rather than fighting it out. "It bothers me that we remember that so differently" is a sentence about you, and it's true, and it can be heard. "You're wrong, she said it on Boxing Day" is a sentence about Boxing Day, and it can't be settled, and it'll be back next Christmas.

"We've always argued like this, it's fine"

Some couples will say this is just how they are. They bicker. It's been twenty years. Nobody's hurt.

Two things. The first is the score. If you kept the list from chapter 1, look at the column for who won. If it's mostly you, that's not two people bickering. That's one person winning and the other one conceding, twenty years running, and I'd ask what the concessions have been made of. Some will have been real agreement. Most, in my experience of people who look at this honestly, are "whatever", which is a way of leaving the argument that leaves the fact with you and the feeling with them.

The second is a pattern that researchers have studied in couples for decades. Andrew Christensen and Christopher Heavey, in 1990, filmed thirty-one couples in two disagreements each, and described what they called the demand and withdraw pattern. One partner presses, with requests and complaints and criticism, and the other retreats, with defensiveness or silence. They found that both partners were more likely to press when discussing a change they wanted, and more likely to withdraw when discussing one the other wanted, and that men withdrew more overall. It's a small study and it's about wanted changes rather than plumbers, and I'd hold the gender finding loosely. But the structure is the thing to notice. When one person presses, the other withdraws, and withdrawal isn't agreement. It's a way of ending the exchange without conceding the point, and it leaves the point unresolved and the presser feeling they've won.

Kennedy and Pronin's spiral from chapter 4 tells you what twenty years of that does. Each of you has a settled view of the other as the difficult one. Each of you has twenty years of evidence for it, gathered from inside the spiral. The bickering isn't fine. It's a stable arrangement in which one person is right and the other is quiet, and the quiet one has been keeping the score you haven't, and the score is not in your favour, whatever the calendar said.

If it's really fine, the test is chapter 15's. Do you both enjoy it? Is the evening after the argument the same as the evening before? If yes, you're one of the couples for whom it's play, and this book isn't about you. If the honest answer is that the arguments end with one person on their phone in another room, it isn't play, however long it's gone on.

"Winning clears the air"

Here's a belief about what the win does. Once the fact is settled, it's over. The air's clear. Better to have it out and finish it than let it fester.

Look at who's holding the fact at the end. You are, with the calendar. What's your partner holding? They said Wednesday, they were shown Tuesday, they said "whatever". They're holding the "whatever", and the edge you produced the calendar with, and the fact that dinner became a demonstration. Nothing's clear for them. The air is full of a thing you can't see, because from your chair the argument is over and from theirs it's been filed.

Eli Finkel and colleagues, in 2013, followed a hundred and twenty couples for two years. In the first year, everyone's marital quality declined, which the researchers noted is the normal pattern. In the second year, half the couples were given a short intervention, twenty-one minutes in total, spread over the year, that asked them to think about their conflicts differently. I'll describe it in chapter 20. The couples who got it stopped declining. The couples who didn't kept going down. And the thing that carried the effect, in the researchers' analysis, was distress about conflict. The intervention reduced how distressing the couples found their arguments, and that was what preserved the marriage. Not fewer arguments. Less distress in them.

That's what the win doesn't clear. It settles the fact and leaves the distress, and it's the distress, not the plumber, that the research connects to how the marriage goes. Every win adds to the distress

on one side of the table while feeling like resolution on the other, and the side that's carrying it isn't the side that thinks the air is clear.

Look at the sofa, half an hour after the calendar. You're pleased, in a small way, and slightly puzzled that the room is cold. Your partner is on their phone. Neither of you says anything about the plumber, and neither of you says anything about anything else either. That's the cleared air, and it's clear in the way a room is clear after somebody's left it.

There's a related habit worth a paragraph, which is having the same argument again. If the air were clear, the argument about the route wouldn't recur, and it does, monthly, because it was never about the route. The recurring argument is a sign that the last win didn't settle anything, and that both of you are carrying the same disagreement to the same table and fighting it on the same ground. A later book in this series may take that habit on its own. Here I'd say only that a repeated argument is one that winning can't end, because winning is what's kept it going.

"I'd be a doormat"

The fear under all of this is that if you stop, you'll have no views. You'll agree with everything. You'll be the partner who says "whatever you think" and means it, and that's not a person you want to be or a person anyone wants to live with.

I'd separate the fact from you. Dropping the plumber's day isn't dropping yourself. It's dropping a date. You still know the plumber came on Tuesday. You still have your memory, your judgement, your competence. What you've declined to do is spend an evening proving it, and declining to spend an evening on a small thing isn't a personality change. It's a decision about the evening.

The doormat fear imagines that there's a single dial for firmness, and that turning it down for the plumber turns it down for everything. There isn't. There's a choice at each disagreement, and the choice can go differently depending on what's at stake. Overall and McNulty's review is the guide. Direct opposition is right when the problem is serious and can change. It's wrong when the problem is minor or can't. A person who applies that is firm about the mortgage and easy about the plumber, and that's not a doormat. That's someone whose firmness has been reserved for things that need it, and whose partner has learned that when they do dig in, it's because it matters.

There's a version of the fear that's about the other person taking advantage. If you drop the small ones, they'll push on the big ones. In my experience the reverse happens. A partner who's spent years in the spiral, braced for every fact to become a campaign, relaxes

when the campaigns stop, and a relaxed partner is more willing to hear a firm no when it comes, because it's rare and it's not part of a pattern. Chapter 22 is about the things that matter and how to hold them. The holding is easier for a person who's stopped fighting over dates, not harder.

The doormat is the person with no views. You'll have exactly as many views as before. You'll just have stopped charging admission to hear them.

"They start it"

Fair enough. They said Wednesday first. They took the back road. They brought up Christmas. You didn't start any of it. You just responded, and the response got long.

Go back to the spiral. Kennedy and Pronin's account has no first move in it that anyone can see. You see their Wednesday as the start. They see your Tuesday, said with that certainty, as the start. Each of you is responding to a provocation the other one didn't know they'd made, and the spiral doesn't have an origin. It has two people each convinced they're the one responding.

Who started it is the least useful question in any argument, because it can't be answered and because it doesn't matter to the exit. The spiral can be left from either chair, at any point, by one person declining to make the next move. That person doesn't have to be the one who started it. It just has to be the one who noticed, and the one who noticed is the one reading this.

There's a cost to exiting first, and I'd name it honestly. It feels like losing. The other person said Wednesday and you said "you might be right, it doesn't matter", and it feels as though Wednesday has won. It hasn't. The fact hasn't changed. The plumber came when he came. What's happened is that the spiral stopped one turn earlier than it would have, and the evening survived. If that's losing, it's a kind of losing that leaves you with more than winning does.

And notice what happens on the other side of the table when you exit. Your partner, braced for the calendar, gets "you might be right" instead. Kennedy and Pronin's finding is that conflictual moves make the mover look biased. The opposite is also true. A conciliatory move, from someone who could have pressed, reads as fair, and a partner who sees you as fair is a partner who stops bracing. One exit doesn't end twenty years of spiral. Ten of them start to.

"I only do it with them"

You don't argue about dates with your colleagues. You don't correct your friends' memories of Christmas. You'd never produce a calendar at a dinner party. It's only at home, with them, so something about them must bring it out.

Two things. The first is that they're there. Your colleagues aren't at your table at seven o'clock when you're tired. Your friends don't take the route to your in-laws. The person you live with is the only one who's present for enough of your days to have a plumber to disagree about, and the frequency of arguments is mostly the frequency of contact.

The second is that they're safe. You don't correct your colleague's memory because your colleague might think less of you, and might say so, and there's a cost. You correct your partner because there's no cost, or none that arrives tonight. The people we're worst with are the people we're surest of, because sureness removes the brake that politeness supplies everywhere else. That's not something they bring out in you. It's something their steadiness allows in you, and it's a poor use of steadiness.

An earlier book in this series, about taking things personally, makes a point about samples that applies here in reverse. Your partner's sample of you is the private one. Your colleagues get the public you, who lets dates go and laughs off misrememberings. Your partner gets the you who reaches for the calendar. If you asked your colleagues whether you argue to be right, they'd say no.

If you asked your partner, they'd have a list. Both are describing you accurately. One of them is describing the version that only appears where it's safe.

The fix isn't to make home less safe. It's to bring home the courtesy you extend everywhere else, which costs you nothing at work and would cost you nothing at dinner. You already know how to let a date go. You do it every day, with people who matter less.

"It's just banter, we enjoy it"

Some couples argue for fun. The bickering is a form of play, both of them know it, and the evening after is the same as the evening before. If that's you, this chapter is short, and the book may not be for you.

The test is the one I've mentioned twice, and here it is properly. Look at the hour after the argument. If it's the same as the hour before, with the same warmth and the same ease and nobody on their phone in another room, the argument was banter, and keep it. It's a way of being close that some people have, and it's not for me to say otherwise.

If the hour after is different, it wasn't banter, however it felt at the time. One of you enjoyed it and one of you didn't, and the one who didn't has learned to perform enjoyment because the alternative is a second argument about the first. The score is being kept, and it's being kept by the person who says "whatever".

There's a way to find out which you've got, and it's to ask, once, outside an argument, on a good day. "Do you actually enjoy it when we go at each other about that sort of thing, or do you just put up with it?" Ask it kindly and mean it, and then listen to the answer and not to what you'd like the answer to be. If they say they enjoy it, believe them and carry on. If they pause, the pause is the answer, and the rest of this book applies.

The couples for whom it's genuinely play tend to have one feature in common, in my observation. Nobody wins. The banter goes back and forth and ends in a laugh and the fact is never established, because establishing it was never the point. If your arguments end with a calendar, they're not that. They end with a winner, and a game with a winner every time isn't a game.

"I'm right more often, so it's efficient"

Some readers will grant everything so far and hold onto a last piece of arithmetic. Fine, certainty isn't evidence. But you keep a record, and the record says you're right more often than not. Maybe seven times in ten. So deferring to your judgement is efficient, and the arguing is just the cost of getting to the right answer faster.

Run the arithmetic all the way through. Seven in ten means three in ten where you were wrong, and think about what those three looked like. They were the arguments where you were certain, produced the evidence, and the evidence said Wednesday. Or the memory disputes with no evidence, where you're counting yourself right because nobody could prove otherwise. Those three aren't the cheap ones. They're the arguments that ran longest, because your certainty was full and your record was on the line, and they're the ones your partner remembers, because they were the ones where the calendar turned round.

Then price the seven. In each, you were right about a fact that, by chapter 19's second question, mostly didn't matter, and the price was the evening. Seven evenings for seven plumbers' days. Efficiency is a ratio of what you got to what you spent, and what you got was a date and what you spent was the hour after dinner, seven times. That's not efficient. It's expensive, and the expense doesn't show up in the record because the record only counts the fact.

There's a cheaper way to be right about facts, and it's the one chapter 21 gives for anything with a record. "Let's check later." The calendar is free. It takes four seconds. The argument that precedes the calendar is the expensive part, and it adds nothing to the calendar's accuracy. If efficiency were the aim, you'd go straight to the check every time, without the campaign, and say nothing when it came in. That you don't is a sign that the campaign was the point, and the campaign has nothing to do with being right. It's about being seen to be.

And there's the seventy per cent itself, which is a number produced by the person it flatters. Pronin's bias blind spot applies to records as well as to judgements. A person who's argued to be right for years has a memory of the wins and a thinner memory of the losses, because the losses ended with "whatever" and the wins ended with a calendar held up, and a calendar held up is a more memorable thing. The record is as reliable as the certainty was, and chapter 3 is about that.

What winning costs you

I've argued the mechanism. This chapter is the bill, and you've been paying it while feeling that you'd won.

The evenings. Every win on the list from chapter 1 has a column next to it for the hour after, and the column reads the same way down. A year of that is a lot of evenings spent in the temperature that follows a calendar.

The spiral. Each win adds to your partner's picture of you as the one who has to be right, and Kennedy and Pronin's finding is that the picture drives their moves, which drive yours. You're not just paying for tonight's argument. You're funding next week's.

The withdrawal. Christensen and Heavey's withdrawers weren't agreeing. They were leaving. A partner who's withdrawn from enough arguments withdraws from the subjects, and then from offering views, and then from the conversation, and you'll notice that they've gone quiet and not connect it to the calendar.

The decline. Finkel's control couples declined in marital quality across two years for no reason anyone could point to, and the mediator was conflict distress. Every win is a small deposit of that.

The things they stop telling you. A person who'll be corrected doesn't offer. They stop mentioning what they remember, in case it's wrong. They stop suggesting routes. They stop telling you what their mother said, because you'll dispute it. The information you were fighting to have right dries up, because the source has learned what happens to it.

The things you're wrong about. This is the one people miss. A partner who's stopped arguing has stopped correcting you too. The facts you're wrong about, and there are some, stand, because the person who could correct them has learned it isn't worth it. The habit that was meant to keep the house accurate has made it less so, by silencing the only other witness.

And the version of you they know. You know yourself as someone who cares about the truth. They know someone who has to be right. The second version is the one at the table every night, and it's the one your partner describes to their sister, and it isn't who you meant to be.

What it does to them

Winning is quiet for the winner and loud for the other person, so it's worth a chapter from their side.

Living with someone who has to be right means learning what happens when you're wrong, which is a demonstration. So you check before you speak. You hedge. You say "I think it was Wednesday, but I might be wrong", and then when you were right you don't say so, because that would start another one. Over time you speak less about facts, because facts are where the demonstrations happen, and you speak more about nothing, because nothing is safe.

The concessions are private. "Whatever" isn't agreement. It's a door closed on an argument that will be reopened, in your head, on the sofa, while they're pleased with the calendar. You go over it. You know the recycling was Tuesday that week. You don't say it. You add it to a list that you'd deny keeping, and the list is long, and it's about them.

Christensen and Heavey's withdrawing partner is the one in this chapter. Withdrawing looks, from the other side, like giving in, and feels, from the inside, like being pushed out. The withdrawer isn't persuaded. They're conserving. And a person who's conserved for twenty years has a lot conserved, and none of it is affection.

There's the child. A child at that table learns one of two things. Either they learn to argue, because that's how you get to be right in this house, and they'll bring it to their own table. Or they learn to

go quiet, like the parent who does, because quiet is how you survive a demonstration. Both are lessons about what a disagreement is, and both are wrong, and both were taught by a calendar.

There's the hedging, which becomes a way of speaking. "I might be wrong but." "I think, though you'd know better." Over years, a person who lives with the calendar develops a manner of qualifying everything they say, and carries it out of the house, to work, to friends, where it reads as a lack of confidence, and it isn't. It's a habit learned at a table where unqualified statements were expensive.

And there's what they stop sharing. The story about what their mother said at Christmas wasn't a claim to be tested. It was a thing they wanted to tell you. When it became a dispute about Boxing Day, they learned that telling you things is a risk, and the next thing their mother says, you won't hear about, and you'll wonder why they never tell you anything.

None of this is what you intend. You intend to be accurate. But from their side, accuracy arrives as being corrected, in front of the children, about a date, by the person who's meant to be on their side. That's what winning is, in the other chair.

The two questions

The next four chapters are the method, and the method starts with two questions that take about a second each and end most arguments before they start.

Is it true? Not "am I sure". Chapter 3 is about why sure is worthless. Is there a record? A calendar, a message, a receipt, a photo? If there is, the question is answered by looking, not by arguing, and looking is chapter 21's job. If there isn't, and the fact is a memory or an impression, the honest answer is "I don't know", and a thing neither of you can know isn't a thing either of you can win.

Does it matter? Suppose you're right. Suppose the plumber came on Tuesday and you could prove it this second. What changes? If the answer is "nothing, but I'd have been right", it doesn't matter, and the argument is about the score. If the answer is "the insurance claim has the wrong date on it", it matters, and it's a job, not an argument. "Let's check the date before we send the form" is a sentence about a job.

Either no, drop it. If it's not true, or you can't know, or it doesn't matter, the argument has no content and the only thing left in it is the win. Drop it, out loud, in one of the sentences in chapter 21.

Both yes, chapter 22. If it's true, or checkable, and it matters, then you have a real disagreement about a real thing, and chapter 22 is about how to have that, and it doesn't look like the plumber.

Ask them silently. The questions are for you, at the table, in the second before you reach for your phone. They're not to be asked of your partner as a challenge. "Does it even matter?" said with an edge is a move in the spiral. Asked of yourself, it's the exit.

Write them on a card for a fortnight. Two questions on a card in your wallet, or on the fridge, or as the lock screen. Not because you'll forget them, but because the urge to correct is faster than memory, and a card in view is faster than the urge.

Expect most arguments to fail the second question. In my observation, if the list from chapter 1 is honest, nine in ten of the facts on it don't matter by this test, and the tenth is a job. That's not a sign that your disagreements are trivial. It's a sign that the arguments were never about the disagreements.

The third seat

When an argument has started and the two questions didn't catch it, there's a way to see it that the research suggests does real work, and it takes about thirty seconds.

Finkel's intervention. The couples in Finkel's study who stopped declining were asked, three times over a year, to write for seven minutes about their most recent significant disagreement from the point of view of a neutral third party who wanted the best for everyone involved. How would that person see it? What good might they find in it? How could you take that view next time? Twenty-one minutes in total, over a year, and the decline in marital quality that the other couples showed was gone. The mechanism, in the researchers' analysis, was that the couples became less distressed by their conflicts. They didn't argue less. They minded less, and minding less was what preserved the marriage.

The third seat at the table. You won't write for seven minutes at dinner. But the shift is available in thirty seconds, and it's this. Imagine a third person at the table, someone who likes you both and wants the evening to go well, watching the argument about the plumber. What do they see? Two tired people disagreeing about a date, one of them reaching for a phone. What would they want? For it to stop. What would they think of the person who stopped it? Well of them. That's the third seat, and taking it for half a minute is enough to make the calendar feel like what it is.

The third seat is not the referee. The neutral party in Finkel's task wasn't deciding who was right. They wanted the best for both. If you find your imagined observer siding with you, you haven't left your chair. Try again with someone who'd be fond of your partner. Their mother, on a good day.

Use it after, too. Finkel's couples used it on arguments that had already happened. So can you. On the sofa afterwards, in the temperature that follows a win, thirty seconds in the third seat will usually tell you something the chair you were in couldn't, which is what the win looked like from outside, and what it cost the person across the table.

Do it three times. That's what the study did. Not after every argument, but for three real ones over a few months. The point isn't the writing. It's that a mind that has taken the third seat three times starts to find it on its own, at the table, before the phone comes out.

Dropping it out loud

Deciding to drop it is most of the work. Saying so is the part that reaches your partner, and it needs a sentence, because a silent drop looks like a sulk.

"You might be right." Four words, said as though you mean them, because you might. This is the sentence for facts you can't check. It doesn't say they are right. It says the question's open, which it is, and that you're not going to close it by force.

"I don't think it matters which day it was." The sentence for facts that fail the second question. It's true, it's kind, and it moves the conversation off the fact and back to whatever the fact interrupted, which was usually dinner.

"Let's check later." For facts with a record. Then, and this is the whole of it, when you check and you were right, say nothing. Not "see". Not "told you". Nothing. The check settled the fact. The silence settles the evening. If they were right, say so, plainly, "you were right, it was Wednesday", because that sentence is worth more to the spiral than a hundred wins.

"I'd rather have the evening." For when the argument has already started and you can both feel it. It's honest about what's at stake, it takes the fact off the table, and it offers the other person the same exit, which most people take.

The check you're itching to make. Sometimes there is a record and you know it's on your side and the urge to produce it is nearly physical. This is the moment the method is for. "Let's check later" is

still the sentence, and later means later, not in ninety seconds with the phone under the table. The check will confirm what you know. The delay is what tells your partner that confirming it wasn't the point, and the delay is the whole difference between a fact settled and a fact wielded.

Say it without the edge. Each of these sentences can be said as a move in the spiral, with a tone that means "I'm being the bigger person". That's not dropping it. That's winning by a different route, and your partner will hear it. Say them flat and warm, the way you'd say them to a friend whose memory of a restaurant differed from yours.

Then change the subject. Dropping it and then sitting in silence is a drop that hasn't finished. Ask about their day. Pass the salt. The argument is over when the conversation has gone somewhere else, and you can take it there.

Don't announce the method. "I've decided not to argue about this sort of thing any more" is a speech, and speeches about your own restraint are a way of being right about being right. Just drop it. They'll notice within a fortnight, and the noticing will do more than any announcement.

When it does matter

Some disagreements pass both questions. The money. Where the children go to school. Whether to move. Whether your partner's mother is coming for a fortnight. Those are true and they matter, and dropping them would be the doormat that chapter 12 said you needn't become. This chapter is how to have them without the calendar.

Direct, because it matters. Overall and McNulty's review is the guide. When a problem is serious and can be changed, direct opposition works and cooperative smoothing doesn't. So say what you think, plainly. "I don't think we can afford the extension this year and I'd like us to look at the numbers together." That's direct. It's also not a win, because it asks for a joint look rather than a concession.

Kind, because they're your partner. Direct and kind aren't opposites. The review's caution was that direct opposition harms when the other person isn't secure enough to respond, and a person who's been on the wrong end of the calendar for years isn't secure. The kindness is what makes the directness usable. "I might be missing something, but here's what worries me."

One thing. Not the extension and the holiday and their mother and the thing from 2019. One disagreement at a time, and the one that matters most.

Not at ten at night. The real disagreements happen worst at the end of the day, and a later book in this series is about the argument at bedtime. Here I'd say only that a serious thing deserves a time when both of you can think, and that "can we talk about the extension on Saturday morning?" is a sentence that respects the thing by not fighting it tired.

Book it. An earlier book in this series is about raising difficult things and its method is to ask for a time. The same applies here. A disagreement that matters gets a slot, and the slot is what tells your partner that this one isn't the plumber.

Still no win. Even on the things that matter, the aim isn't a concession. It's a decision you can both live with, made with both minds in the room. You may not get your way. The extension may happen. What you'll have had is a real disagreement, had properly, about a real thing, which is the opposite of what this book is about and the thing the habit was crowding out.

The decision

You've got the argument and the method. What's left is to decide, and I'd like the decision to fit in one sentence.

Before I argue to be right, I ask whether it's true and whether it matters, and unless both, I drop it out loud.

Three parts.

The first is the pause. The second before the phone comes out, in which the two questions get asked, silently, of yourself.

The second is the drop. One of the four sentences, flat and warm, and then the subject changed. No announcement, no edge, no "see" when the check comes in.

The third is the exception. When both questions come back yes, a real conversation, direct and kind, one thing, at a chosen time. Not a skirmish and not a surrender.

There's a form of planning that helps with rules like this, and it's been tested many times. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran reviewed ninety-four studies of it in 2006. You decide in advance what you'll do and when, in the form "when this happens, I'll do that", and people who plan that way follow through much more often than people who only hold the intention. So write three.

When I feel the urge to correct a fact my partner has stated, I'll ask myself whether it matters before I say anything.

When I've decided it doesn't matter, I'll say "you might be right" and ask them something about their day.

When I've checked a fact later and I was right, I'll say nothing about it.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding. The first week, the urge to correct will arrive as often as ever, and the questions will arrive a beat behind it, and you'll drop about half. The drops will feel like losing, and the evenings after them will feel better than the evenings after the wins, and you'll notice the difference by the weekend. In the second week your partner will say something wrong and wait for the calendar and it won't come, and you'll see the wait on their face. By a month the questions will be arriving before the urge, and you'll have had one real disagreement about something that mattered, at a chosen time, and it'll have gone better than the ones about the plumber ever did. The score will stop being kept, on both sides, because there'll be nothing to add to it. And your partner will start telling you things again, small things, what their mother said, a route they tried, because the telling has stopped being a risk.

Memories, money, the children, in-laws, bedtime and when it's more than arguing

The rule holds everywhere. A few kinds of argument need their own paragraph.

Memories. Chapter 9 is the argument. There's no record, so the first question can't be answered, so drop it. If the memory matters because of what it shows, talk about what it shows, as a thing about you and not a claim about Boxing Day.

Money. Money disagreements pass both questions more often than most, and they're the ones that deserve the slot in chapter 22. What they don't deserve is to be fought as facts. "You said we could afford it" is a memory dispute wearing a money argument's clothes. "Can we look at the account together on Saturday?" is a money conversation.

The children. Two things. Arguments about facts in front of them teach them what chapter 18 says. And disagreements about the children themselves, school, bedtimes, screens, are the real kind, and they need the slot, away from the children, and a decision you can both hold to, because a child who sees two parents disagree in front of them learns which one to ask.

In-laws. What his mother said and what her father meant are the most contested facts in most households and the least checkable. They also aren't about the in-laws. They're about whether your partner is on your side, and that's a question you can ask directly, on a good day, without Boxing Day in it.

Bedtime. The argument at ten at night, when both of you are done, is the worst version of every argument in this book, and a later book in the series is about the belief that it has to be settled before sleep. Here I'd say only that "let's leave it till the morning" is a drop, and that the morning nearly always finds the fact smaller.

The partner who argues to be right. If you're reading this because you live with the calendar rather than hold it, the exit is available from your chair too. "You might be right" said by the person who was going to be shown the calendar anyway ends the spiral just as well, and it's not surrender. It's declining to be in the argument. What you can also do is say, on a good day, outside any argument, "when you show me the calendar it makes me feel small", which is a real disagreement about a real thing, and deserves the slot.

When it's more than arguing. If the arguments in your house end with one person frightened, or if being right comes with contempt, name-calling, threats, or control over what you can do or spend, this isn't a habit and this book isn't the answer. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is on 0808 2000 247, free, at any hour. And if the arguing is ordinary but has become most of what you do together, couples counselling exists, Relate is the best-known provider in the UK, and going isn't an admission that anything's ending. It's two people getting a third seat that stays.

When you had to win again

It'll happen. You'll be tired, and they'll say Wednesday, and the calendar will be out before the questions have arrived, and you'll win, and the temperature will drop, and you'll remember the book on the sofa afterwards.

One win isn't the marriage. The list from chapter 1 will show a month with more drops in it than any month before, and one calendar is one line. What happened is that the habit is old and the questions are new, and speed goes to the old one for a while.

Drop it late. It still works after the calendar. "That was a stupid thing to argue about, I'm sorry, I don't know why it mattered to me." Said on the sofa, that's a drop, and it does something a win in the moment never does, which is show your partner that the calendar isn't the last word any more. In my observation, the late drop lands harder than the early one, because it costs more and they know it.

Work out which belief got through. Was it "I'm just being accurate", at a moment when you were sure? Then chapter 3, and the calendar goes in another room for a fortnight. Was it a memory, with no record and total certainty? Then chapter 9. Was it a subject that's always a win for you, routes or dates or what their mother said? Then that subject gets the two questions written on a card until they come on their own.

And notice what the slip was made of. It was almost certainly tiredness, a subject you're sure about, and a partner who said the wrong thing at the wrong moment, and the three together outran the questions. None of that is character. It's conditions, and the conditions will come round again, and next time the questions will be a beat faster, because they've been used, which is the only way they get faster.

No streaks. Don't count evenings without an argument. Count drops. One win in a month of drops is a month that's gone differently from every month before it, and the score, if anyone's still keeping it, has changed direction.

It was Tuesday

You're at dinner, some months on, and your partner says the plumber came on Wednesday. He came on Tuesday. You know he came on Tuesday. The urge arrives, as it always will, and behind it, a second later, the two questions. Is it true? Probably, you took the morning off. Does it matter? It doesn't. Nothing hangs on it. You say "you might be right, it was that sort of week", and ask whether they heard back from the school, and they did, and dinner goes on at the temperature it started at.

The route to their parents' came up on Saturday, and you said "let's try the back road, you know it better", and it was slower, and neither of you mentioned it, and the journey had a conversation in it that the motorway never had. Their mother said something on the phone last week and your partner told you about it, in full, with an impression, and you laughed, and didn't dispute the wording, and they told you the next thing too.

There was a real one, in March. The extension. You asked for Saturday morning and got it, and said what you thought, plainly, with the numbers, and they said what they thought, and neither of you produced a calendar, and the extension is happening in a smaller form than either of you had argued for, and you both think it's right.

Your partner said something in April that you've kept. They said the house had got quieter, and then corrected themselves, and said no, that wasn't it, it had got easier to talk in. They didn't connect it to anything. You did, and didn't say so, which is a kind of drop too.

None of this is a transformation. You won one last month, about the thermostat, and knew it on the sofa, and said so, and they said "it's fine, it was a bit warm", which was a drop from their side, and you noticed that they'd learned the sentence from you. The list is still going, in your phone. The column for who won has stopped meaning anything, because most of the lines say "dropped", and the column for the evening after says the same word down the page, and it's a different word from the one it used to be.

If you take one thing from this book, take this. Next time you reach for the calendar, ask yourself whether it matters, and if it doesn't, say "you might be right" and change the subject. That's the whole method. Everything else is detail.

Notes

This book gives general information about an everyday habit. It isn't relationship counselling or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a counsellor who knows you both. The services I mention are for the UK as I found them in September 2026.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 19, 21, 25 and 26. The plumber, the route, the Christmas remark, the recipe and the thermostat are invented.

Before you start. The helpline number is from the NHS pages on getting help for domestic abuse, as verified for earlier books in this series.

Chapter 3. Pronin, Lin and Ross, "The bias blind spot: perceptions of bias in self versus others", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, 2002, pages 369 to 381. Three studies, mostly surveys. The application to the dinner table is mine.

Chapter 4. Kennedy and Pronin, "When disagreement gets ugly: perceptions of bias and the escalation of conflict", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, 2008, pages 833 to 848. The term

"bias-perception conflict spiral" is theirs. The application to couples is mine, since their studies weren't of couples.

Chapter 6. Pronin, Lin and Ross, and Kennedy and Pronin, as above. The observation about grand admissions is mine.

Chapter 8. Overall and McNulty, "What type of communication during conflict is beneficial for intimate relationships?", *Current Opinion in Psychology* 13, 2017, pages 1 to 5. A review, used in the earlier book *Say it this week* for the case where a serious thing needs raising. The claim about what people learn from being defeated at dinner is my observation.

Chapter 10. Christensen and Heavey, "Gender and social structure in the demand/withdraw pattern of marital conflict", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, 1990, pages 73 to 81. Thirty-one couples, which the chapter says is small. The chapter uses the structure of the pattern and holds the gender finding loosely. Kennedy and Pronin as above.

Chapter 11. Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton and Gross, "A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time", *Psychological Science* 24, 2013, pages 1595 to 1601. One hundred and twenty couples over two years. The account of the conceder carrying the win is mine.

Chapter 12. Overall and McNulty as above.

Chapter 16. Pronin, Lin and Ross as above, for the record as a self-serving account. The arithmetic is mine.

Chapter 17. Kennedy and Pronin, Christensen and Heavey, and Finkel and colleagues as above. The rest is mine.

Chapter 18. Christensen and Heavey as above. The rest is mine.

Chapter 20. Finkel and colleagues as above. The description of the writing task, a neutral third party who wants the best for all, three times over the year, seven minutes each, is from the paper's summary and my knowledge of the study, and the notes flag that the exact wording should be checked against the full text. "The third seat" is my name for it, and the thirty-second version at the table is my adaptation and wasn't tested.

Chapter 22. Overall and McNulty as above. The earlier book on raising difficult things is Say it this week. The later book on the argument at bedtime is Go to bed cross if you have to.

Chapter 23. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule hasn't been tested as a package, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 24. The helpline as above. Relate is named as the best-known UK provider of couples counselling. No claim is made about its effectiveness.