



Married for a couple of decades, Carla and James spent an inordinate amount of time bickering.

By definition, bickering differs from run-of-the-mill arguing because of its tone, which is contemptuous, and its focus, which is on matters most would consider trivial or petty. I say “most” because, whatever the nature of the dispute, folks who bicker don’t consider their issues trivial. Quite the opposite. To them, the contentious topic in question is very serious. So serious, for some, to move them to hurt one another. We’ve all heard accounts of domestic violence, or even murder, when people bickering over something unquestionably trivial lose control and escalate.

In this sense, bickering reflects, among other things, an absence of perspective. There is a difference in the minds of those who, as my mother would say, create a “tempest in a teapot,” compared with folks who harbor a more panoramic view of life, meaning they don’t make mountains of mole hills. When this mental myopia becomes extreme, a person may adopt bickering as an attitude, not just a behavior. We all know someone who bickers with just about everybody and everything. Not pleasant.

For Carla and James, the foci of their eye poking sessions were many. They nit-picked about each other’s habits, appearance, opinions, idiosyncrasies, and the like.

“You realize what message you are sending to each other, right?” I asked them.

They both presented a clueless countenance, which is characteristic of those who bicker. Often, they lack self-awareness and, given their myopic perspective, can’t mentally step back, look at themselves and see the bigger picture. Taking this couple’s lack of response as an indication they did not, in fact, realize the message being sent, I suggested one: “Each of you is unhappy and making darn sure the other person knows it.”

In many couplings, chronic bickering is a barometer of discontent with the relationship. Instead of cutting to the chase and having a blunt discussion or even

respectful argument about what really ails their partnership, they take potshots at what is tangential. Why? It's safer. The bickering represents a kind of code for a far deeper message, and, too often, neither party wants to decrypt it.

I witnessed this dynamic in sharp relief when counseling a father and his only daughter, a senior in high school. Their bickering was downright nasty, complete with name calling and blunt force insults. I've seen a lot in my decades as a psychotherapist, but they left my mouth agape several times.

Frankly, I think dad met his match. His daughter did a much better job of pecking away, and her eye rolls and sarcastic grunts effectively dismantled his attempt to look calm and rational while jabbing her with patronizing insults. My efforts to persuade them that no good would come from such behavior and that each of them would suffer because of it, failed utterly. As I said, self-awareness is not the strong suit among those who bicker.

I recall my parents respectfully arguing about matters of substance a time or two, but not bicker. Late in his life, I asked dad why he and mom argued so little, never bickered, and always respected each other regardless.

“Life's too short to fight,” he replied with a farmer's succinct certainty.

It would be a better world if those who bicker heeded his counsel.

But, don't bet on it.