

# Screen drama

Is fighting over the remote ruining your relationship?

By **WILLIAM HAGEMAN**  
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For many couples, their only time together is in the evening, when they plop down in front of the TV. And argue. Over control of the remote, over what to watch, over the volume, for crying out loud.

The scenario is as familiar as a "Big Bang Theory" rerun.

"I can't believe that any long-term couple haven't

had at least one argument that's related to television in some way," says Mil Millington, the British author whose novels include the apropos "Things My Girlfriend and I Have Argued About" (Villard). "Especially these days, as TV is now geared to broadcasting things liable to make people very, very angry indeed — 'American Idol,' increasingly poor seasons of 'CSI,' 'Piers Morgan'..."

An obvious solution is to purchase a second TV. But that sort of defeats the purpose of this whole marriage thing, doesn't it? You don't see each other all day, then you come home with the intent of not seeing each other some more?

Maybe invest in digital video recording? But with just one TV, you'll still argue over what to watch, and when.

Nor does the notion of negotiating (he gets from 7



MIKE KEMP/RUBBERBALL PHOTO

to 8, she gets from 8 to 9) fly with Millington: "Negotiate and all you have is two people, neither of whom is

differences together, all the better for your marriage.

He also believes spats over what to watch go deeper.

"So at 9 o'clock Sunday night, when you're wondering what happened to your sex life, how you're going to make next month's housing and insurance payments, whether your job is about to disappear ... it can feel a lot safer to argue about whether to tune in and tune out with 'Oprah's Next Chapter,' 'Finding Bigfoot,' 'Celebrity Apprentice,' 'Family Guy' or a new episode of 'Girls.'"

One solution: Why not take advantage of the glut of programming to look for a few untested shows you might enjoy together?

"There's no question that conflicts and differences are part of any close relationship," says Seth Eisenberg, president of the PAIRS (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) Foundation ([pairs.com](http://pairs.com)), a Florida organization that promotes ways to nurture and sustain healthy relationships.

He says that in every marriage, the couple creates the "we." People don't surrender their individuality but work as a couple.

If you can settle your

Barring that, of course, there's always the nuclear option: Declare your home a TV-free zone. Cancel the cable, sell the set, start reading, have conversations rather than shouting matches.

That's reasonable, right, Mil? "Ask yourself this," he posits. "It might be OK not to have a TV, but do you want to be the kind of person who doesn't have a TV?"

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## Channeling connectedness

Seth Eisenberg of the PAIRS Foundation suggests that instead of stewing as Honey Boo Boo lights up a TV screen, couples and families could sharpen relationship-building skills:

**Talking tips:** This exercise lets one person express different aspects of a concern, say what he or she wants instead, and say it to someone who listens with empathy. Later they can talk about it, reverse roles or just thank each other for the new information.

**Emptying the emotional jug:** If someone is letting feelings show through sarcasm, criticism or withdrawing, that person is encouraged to express what is really going on. The listener asks a series of questions and thanks the speaker for confiding.

**Follow the leader:** Take turns being in charge of decision-making. The goal is to understand how to work at a relationship by being a positive part of one another's lives.

**Daily temperature reading:** Take 15 minutes each day to touch on five areas, in order: appreciations, new information, puzzles (things you're wondering about), concerns with recommendations (focus on a behavior, and include a specific request for what you want instead), and wishes, hopes and dreams.

— W.H.

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