# ‘But You Never Said...’ Why Couples Remember Differently

## The root of many arguments, memory is affected by mood and emotions



Joe and Carrie Aulenbacher pose in the den of their Erie, Pa., home with one of their two arcade games. The couple remembers differently whether they agreed to purchase one or two arcade games. Mr. Aulenbacher bought two, and they compromised by putting the second in his weight room. *PHOTO: RICKY RHODES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Carrie Aulenbacher remembers the conversation clearly: Her husband told her he wanted to buy an arcade machine he found on [eBay](http://quotes.wsj.com/EBAY). He said he’d been saving up for it as a birthday present to himself. The spouses sat at the kitchen table and discussed where it would go in the den.

Two weeks later, Ms. Aulenbacher came home from work and found two arcade machines in the garage—and her husband beaming with pride.

“What are these?” she demanded.

“I told you I was picking them up today,” he replied.

She asked him why he’d bought two. He said he’d told her he was getting “a package deal.” She reminded him they’d measured the den for just one. He stood his ground.

“I believe I told her there was a chance I was going to get two,” says Joe Aulenbacher, who is 37 and lives in Erie, Pa.

“It still gets me going to think about it a year later,” says Ms. Aulenbacher, 36. “My home is now overrun with two machines I never agreed upon.” The couple compromised by putting one game in the den and the other in Mr. Aulenbacher’s weight room.

It is striking how many arguments in a relationship start with two different versions of an event: “Your tone of voice was rude.” “No it wasn’t.” “You didn’t say you’d be working late.” “Yes I did.” “I told you we were having dinner with my mother tonight.” “No, honey. You didn't.”

How can two people have different memories of the same event? It starts with the way each person perceives the event in the first place—and how they encoded that memory. “You may recall something differently at least in part because you understood it differently at the time,” says Dr. Michael Ross, professor emeritus in the psychology department at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, who has studied memory for many years.

‘*Women tend to remember more about relationship issues. Their memories are often more vivid, but not necessarily more accurate than men’s.*’

Researchers know that spouses sometimes can’t even agree on concrete events that happened in the past 24 hours—such as whether they had an argument or whether one received a gift from the other. A study in the early 1980s, published in the journal “Behavioral Assessment,” found that couples couldn’t perfectly agree on whether they had sex the previous night.

Women tend to remember more about relationship issues than men do. When husbands and wives are asked to recall concrete relationship events, such as their first date, an argument or a recent vacation, women’s memories are more vivid and detailed.

But not necessarily more accurate. When given a standard memory test where they are shown names or pictures and then asked to recall them, women do just about the same as men.

Researchers have found that women report having more emotions during relationship events than men do. They may remember events better because they pay more attention to the relationship and reminisce more about it.

People also remember their own actions better. So they can recall what they did, just not what their spouse did. Researchers call this an egocentric bias, and study it by asking people to recall their contributions to events, as well as their spouse’s. Who cleans the kitchen more? Who started the argument? Whether the event is positive or negative, people tend to believe that they had more responsibility.

Your mood—both when an event happens and when you recall it later—plays a big part in memory, experts say. If you are in a positive mood or feeling positive about the other person, you will more likely recall a positive experience or give a positive interpretation to a negative experience. Similarly, negative moods tend to reap negative memories.

Negative moods may also cause stronger memories. A person who lost an argument remembers it more clearly than the person who won it, says Dr. Ross. Men tend to win more arguments, he says, which may help to explain why women remember the spat more. But men who lost an argument remember it as well as women who lost.

**COPING WITH ‘HE SAID, SHE SAID’**

* **Assume good intent.** Most likely, your partner is not lying when his or her story differs from yours. Your memories of the event are simply different.
* **Accept that there is not one version of events.** Both stories may have some validity.
* **Do not argue based on memories.** Let go of ‘you did this,’ ‘no I didn’t.’
* **Focus on the truth** of how the event made you feel, not your memory of what happened.
* **Practice collaborative memory.** Recall joyful events—the birth of a child, a favorite vacation, the day you got the keys to your home.

Reminiscing plays a big part in memory—how often you recall it and whether your memory changes. It is quite possible to remember your most recent version of the story, not the way it actually happened.

And if your feelings about the other person have changed, that can change your memory too.

Andrew Christensen, a distinguished research professor in the psychology department of the University of California, Los Angeles, couples therapist and co-author of “Reconcilable Differences,” says couples should try to accept that there is not one version of what really happened to get past troubling memory differences. And the discrepancies may be innocent—no one is lying. Focus on the truth of the emotions of the event, and not what really happened.

Finally, focus on the positive things you remember. One of the great joys of being part of a couple is what researchers call collaborative memory—creating shared reminiscences. Practice this. Recall the birth of a child, the day you got the keys to your homes, a favorite vacation. Build the memory together.

Mr. and Ms. Aulenbacher, who have been married for 10 years, each believe their own memory is more reliable. Mr. Aulenbacher, who is a security officer for a college, prides himself on having to remember every detail of a case or event at work, without taking notes. Ms. Aulenbacher, who a secretary for a real-estate firm and writes romance novels on the side, says she has relied on her memory to succeed at both occupations. “As a writer, I get caught up in the minutiae of everything that is happening because when I tell the story later I am going to want to tell all the details,” she says.

And yet they have argued over whose version of events is correct. A comment made by a brother-in-law, a version of who they sat next to at last year’s company Christmas party, the story of whether or not they almost broke up before getting married—these have all been sources of dispute.

Over the years, Ms. Aulenbacher says she has learned not to dig in her heels over who said what. “Personally, there are a lot of times where I know what I said and he is convinced that he is right and because it is more important to me to get to the end result I will let him think what he thinks so we can just move on.”

This isn’t always easy. Often, Ms. Aulenbacher will check her journal to see what happened—just for her own peace of mind.

Surprisingly, Mr. Aulenbacher is a fan of his wife’s fact-checking of events, too. “It’s amazing how many times I will ask, ‘And what does the journal actually say?’ and I will have been right,” he says. “That will solve the argument right there.”

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