

RESOLVING CONFLICT THROUGH FAIR FIGHTING

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Conflict is present in all intimate relationships. Whether conflict is resolved constructively or acted out destructively is what determines its impact on the relationship. The following suggestions are designed to help couples resolve conflict by teaching them how to **fight fairly**.

- **Create a “circuit breaker” that will prevent fights from escalating out of control.** Establish a special code word (e.g. “time-out!”) that signals a “cease fire.” Even a comical word can break the cycle of tension. If you feel out of control, you will probably need to temporarily remove yourself from the situation. If so, make a definite time and place to continue the conversation.
- **Avoid “letting it all hang out.”** Tragically, cruel statements made in the heat of battle tend to be long remembered and seldom forgiven. Anger research demonstrates that venting aggression doesn’t resolve anger, but merely rehearses it. Repetitive explosions in the service of “telling it like it is” may push partners even further away and rarely alter the circumstances that are making one feel angry in the first place.
- **Identify the feelings underlying your anger.** Anger often functions as a protective shield against feelings that are more difficult to express, such as sadness, powerlessness or a fear of intimacy.
- **Avoid the tendency to chronically complain.** Many couples seem unable to distinguish between ordinary life events and issues that really matter. Before complaining, reflect on questions such as: “*Is my partner’s behavior really bad for our relationship?*” This allows one to see the Big Picture rather than the Little Behavior.
- **Cultivate an attitude of respect.** The word respect is derived from *respicere*, a Greek word which means “the willingness to look again.” Our willingness to see our partners as human beings who deserve to be treated with dignity and kindness is basic to a healthy relationship. Without this respect, a healthy relationship isn’t possible.
- **Change yourself and your relationship will change.** Most power struggles are rooted in trying to get someone else to change. This battle usually becomes the biggest obstacle to change and healing. As an experiment, focus on what *you* can do differently instead of on what you feel your partner “should” be doing.
- **Remember that timing is everything.** Many destructive fights occur when one partner feels “ambushed.” Before unloading on your partner, try an approach such as: “*Something has come up for me - is now a good time to talk about it?*” This can create an appropriate context for dialogue at a time when you are *both* open to it.
- **Beware of the ABC’s** inherent in most arguments - **A**ccusation, **B**lame, and **C**oercion. Consider changing your focus from asking “*Who’s to blame here?*” to “*How do we get on the same team?*” Speak about *your* experience and feelings. For example: “*I feel upset that you criticized me in front of your family.*” “**I**” statements promote self-responsibility and avoid the blaming quality of “**You!**” statements.
- **While your partner is talking listen as non-defensively as you can.** If you’re already preparing your rebuttal in your head, you aren’t really listening.
- **Be willing to acknowledge and validate your partner’s feelings.** Many times in couples work, this is the point where one spouse turns to me and says: “But I don’t agree with what

she's saying!" Validating your partner doesn't mean that they are right, or that you agree with them. It simply means that you are demonstrating your willingness to understand. Use reflective listening statements such as: "*Let me see if I understand you - I hear you saying that....*" This will allow your partner to feel heard and ensures that you understand, rather than assume, what is being shared.

- ***Avoid trying to fix the problem immediately.*** Make sure both of you fully understand the issue before attempting a "quick fix." Communication is a *process* that takes time.
- ***Ask clearly and directly for what you want - and wait!*** Individuals who are not experienced in assertive communication have a tendency to prematurely "erase" their request - "*Oh, forget it - I knew it was too much to ask.*" Give your partner time to internally process the request, even if it means coming back to it in a few days. You then have a better chance of reaching a lasting agreement that will work for both of you.

It would be naïve to suggest that these skills will be mastered by reading one article - it takes practice. However, making a positive intention to "fight fairly" and then taking a simple step, such as creating a weekly couples meeting, can lead to immediate improvement. Finally, if you find yourself getting stuck, consider seeking short-term help from a counselor with specific expertise in couples' communication and conflict resolution. ***Great relationships are worth fighting for.***

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