

Fighting Fair and Conflict

Even the healthiest of relationships will experience conflict at times. Conflict can even strengthen a relationship, as long as it is resolved in a constructive manner with respect for both partners.

Differences of opinion can stir up a lot of emotions, such as anger or hurt. These emotions are normal and should not become a problem as long as both partners communicate with respect.

Fighting Fair: Ground Rules

- **Remain calm.** Try not to overreact to a difficult situation. Your partner will be more likely to consider and understand your viewpoint when you remain calm.
- **Express feelings in words, not actions.** If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a time out and do something to help yourself feel calm: take a walk, do some deep breathing, play with the dog or write in your journal.
- **Be specific about what is bothering you.** Vague complaints are hard to work on and can lead to miscommunication.
- **Deal with only one issue at a time.** Don't introduce other topics until each issue is fully discussed.
- **No hitting below the belt.** Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger and vulnerability.
- **Avoid accusations.** Accusations will lead others to focus on defending themselves rather than on understanding you. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.
- **Try not to generalize.** Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and will heighten tensions.
- **Avoid make believe.** Exaggerating or inventing a complaint will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with the facts and your honest feelings.
- **Don't stockpile your complaints.** Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time is counterproductive. Try to deal with problems as they arise.
- **Avoid clamming up.** Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication. When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. However, if you feel yourself getting overwhelmed or shutting down, you may need to take a break from the discussion. Just tell your partner that you will return to the conversation as soon as you are able, and then don't forget to follow up.
- **Establish common ground rules.** You may even want to ask your partner to read and discuss this information with you. When both people accept positive common ground rules for managing a conflict, resolution becomes much more likely.

Fighting Fair: Step-by-Step

1. Before you begin, ask yourself, “What exactly is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue?”
2. Identify your goals before you begin. What are the possible outcomes that could be acceptable to you?
3. Remember that the idea is not to win, but to come to a mutually satisfying solution to the problem.
4. Set a time for a discussion with the other person. It should be as soon as possible, but agreeable to both persons. Springing a conversation on someone when they are unprepared may leave them feeling like they have to fend off an attack. If you encounter resistance to setting a time, try to help the other person see that the problem is important to you.
5. State the problem clearly. At first, try to stick to the facts; then, once you’ve stated the facts, state your feelings. Use “I” messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt or disappointment. Avoid “you” messages, such as, “You make me angry.” Instead, try something like, “I feel angry when you...”
6. Invite the other person to share his or her point of view. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear his or her concerns and feelings. Try to restate what you heard in a way that lets your partner know you fully understand, and ask your partner to do the same for you.
7. Try to take the other’s perspective; that is, try to see the problem through their eyes. The opposing viewpoint can make sense to you, even if you don’t agree with it.
8. Propose specific solutions and invite the other person to propose solutions, too.
9. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.
10. Be willing to compromise. Allowing the other person only one option will make it difficult to resolve the concern. When you reach an agreement on a way forward, celebrate! Decide together on a time to check-in, discuss how things are working and make changes to your agreement, if necessary. If no solution has been reached regarding the original problem, schedule a time to revisit the issue and continue the discussion.

This content was adapted from the following sources:

- Counseling & Mental Health Center at The University of Texas at Austin: www.cmhc.utexas.edu/fightingfair.html
- McKay, M., Davis, M., & Fanning, P. (1983). *MESSAGES: The Communication Book*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- University of Florida Counseling & Wellness Center: www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Fair-Fighting-in-Intimate-Relationships.aspx