

Fair Fighting Rules

By Barbara Griswold, LMFT

No one likes conflict, but without conflict and disagreement, relationships don't grow. So don't avoid conflict! The secret is to learn to communicate in positive, productive ways when you aren't seeing eye to eye, or getting your needs met.

- 1. Before you begin, ask yourself why you're upset.** Are you truly angry because your partner left their towel on the bathroom floor? Or are you upset because you feel you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just another piece of evidence? Take time to think about what's really bugging you.
- 2. Discuss one issue at a time, not everything that is wrong with the relationship.** "I'm angry you didn't come home on time" can quickly lead to "and you are not affectionate enough!" Now you need to resolve two problems instead of one, which makes problem-solving less likely, and can feel like just an attack session to your partner.
- 3. No name-calling or put-downs.** The other person isn't "crazy" or "ridiculous" because they don't see things your way. They aren't a "slob" or "lazy" if they aren't doing certain behaviors you'd like. This type of language injures your partner's self-esteem, and no argument is worth that. It can also lead to more character attacks, while the original issue is forgotten.
- 4. No sarcasm, eye-rolling, or swearing.** This can be a sign the discussion has crossed over from a healthy irritation to expressing harmful contempt.
- 5. Avoid mind-reading or assumptions.** Don't say things like "you did this just to hurt me" or "I know you don't feel attracted to me anymore." It is disrespectful to assume you know another person's reasons or motivations. Instead, be brave enough to ask questions to check your theories, and listen to their answers.
- 6. Don't accuse. Express your feelings with "I feel" messages.** Instead of "you are thoughtless" or "you drive too fast," you might say, "I feel hurt when you take calls during dinner," or "I feel uncomfortable when you drive that quickly, so can you drive more slowly when I'm in the car?" This doesn't mean you can say anything you want as long as it starts with an "I" -- watch out for judgements like "I feel you are being ridiculous!"
- 7. Take turns talking. Don't talk over each other or interrupt.** If this rule is difficult, try setting a timer allowing 1 minute for each person to speak without interruption, then have the listener tell the speaker what they heard. And don't spend your partner's minute thinking about what you want to say back. Listen with a real intention to understand their point of view, not looking at it as right or wrong.
- 8. Stay focused on the present.** Only mention highly relevant references to the past.
- 9. Don't bring other people into the argument.** Avoid comments like "and your mother agrees with me!" This will only lead to defensiveness. Keep the focus of the conversation on your feelings.



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- 10. Avoid extreme words like "always" and "never."** When you make sweeping statements like "you never help me around the house" or "you are always late," your partner will immediately defend with examples of the times that hasn't been true. *(continued)*
- 11. Try to turn your complaints into specific requests.** Instead of "you never help around the house" you could say, "I could really use more help putting the kids to bed at night." Instead of "you are always late," you could say, "I would really appreciate it if you could call me when you are running late."
- 12. Avoid counterattacking and blaming.** Attacking the person who brought up the complaint by saying "well, you do the same thing!" or "well, you aren't perfect!" don't lead to solving the original problem. Stay focused on one complaint at a time.
- 13. Don't let your tone escalate.** Sometimes arguments seem like they are "won" by being the loudest, but your partner may just shut down, and the problem isn't solved.
- 14. No pushing, shoving, or throwing things.** If this happens, this is no longer a problem-solving discussion.
- 15. Stay calm, sit down, and take a time-out if things get too heated.** If an argument starts to become too heated or is no longer constructive, take a "time-out." Take a break and come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down. If needed, agree on a better time to continue the conversation. But this doesn't mean you should punish your partner with the silent treatment.
- 16. Avoid right/wrong arguments.** Statements like "that's not how it happened!" or "you're wrong!" don't lead to problem-solving. It's OK if your partner has an alternate version of events. Here's the good news: You don't have to see a situation the same way to solve problems.
- 17. No bomb dropping.** Don't say "this just isn't working," or "I'm leaving," or "I want a divorce" or make other vague threats or ultimatums out of frustration. This can jeopardize the entire feeling of security in the relationship. These kind of decisions should only be made when calm.
- 18. Be willing to see your partner's point of view.** Remember, what is important to someone else should matter just as much as what is important to you.
- 19. Avoid fighting in front of the kids.** While modeling occasional calm disagreement is OK, if it is not calm, postpone until the kids aren't around. They may feel they are to blame for heated arguments and may be concerned that your relationship is in trouble, which can lead to anxiety for them.
- 20. Focus on reaching an agreement or an understanding instead of winning the argument.** Brainstorm all options and the pros and cons of each before making a decision. Don't dismiss any ideas immediately. Work as a team to attack the problem, not each other. If you can't solve the problem or compromise, merely understanding can help soothe negative feelings.
- 21. Give your partner kudos and thanks** for tackling tough topics and sharing their feelings, even if it was a hard conversation or things didn't get resolved.
- 22. No sulking or pouting** once the argument is over if you didn't get your way.