

Fair Fighting for Couples

What is fair fighting?

Fair fighting is a way of handling and resolving the differences of opinion that occur between spouses or partners. Fair fights consist of three stages: starting the fight and stating its agenda; the heated part of the argument; and the negotiation or wind-down phase. Many couples engage in "dirty" fighting, which consists of mutual blaming and accusations, explosive anger, and not hearing each other.

What are the usual major areas of differences for couples?

Different ideas result in conflict in the following areas at some time in most relationships:

- child rearing
- managing money
- in-laws
- sex
- individual time versus shared time
- social life
- jealousy
- alcohol or drug use
- differences in goals and values
- control struggles (who's in charge)
- communication problems
- sharing household and child care responsibilities.

Why is it good to have conflict out in the open?

A relationship will not be truly intimate unless each partner knows what the other one is thinking and feeling. This means bringing differences of opinion out into the open, not "suffering in silence." Speaking up, finding out what's wrong, and then coming to a joint decision on what to do about it are signs of a healthy relationship. Many people do not learn these skills in childhood and may therefore need help to have a fair fight.

How do you prepare yourself for a fair fight?

- Be sure that you have identified the real issue. Perhaps you think you are upset about a recent event, but it may cover up something bigger you are really concerned or angry about.
- Ask yourself if the issue is worth raising. Make sure it is about something your partner has done or not done, rather than about who he or she is.
- Try to choose a time when the stress level is not high.
- Decide before you raise the issue what solution would be acceptable to you.

How do you prepare your partner for a fair fight?

- Make an appointment with your partner for the fight. Make sure it is within a day after the

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grievance starts, so that you feel less frustration.

- Tell your partner what the fight will be about.
- Try to choose a time when your partner is not under stress.

What are the rules of fair fighting?

- No physical violence.
- Each partner must follow the rules of active listening to make sure each has understood what the other is saying. This means making eye contact, verbally acknowledging the other's feelings (apologizing when appropriate), and asking questions to be sure each has understood the other's feelings.
- If anger escalates, take a brief time-out (from half an hour to no more than 24 hours) and state a definite time to return to the issue. If anger returns when the discussion resumes, use another specified time-out.
- Be specific. State your problem and why it bothers you.
- After you have stated the problem, your partner states his or her point of view on the issue.
- Do not state what you believe your partner is thinking. Each person speaks for himself or herself.
- Agree to disagree sometimes.
- Maintain mutually respectful behavior. Do not call names or accuse your partner of lying.
- If you are having trouble coming to an agreement or compromise, agree on an intermission, from an hour to a week.
- Avoid psychological interpretations of your partner ("You are just like your mother").
- Use "I" statements (as in, "I feel annoyed when you leave your things around for me to pick up"), rather than more blaming "you" statements ("You are inconsiderate").
- Avoid stating old grievances and stick to the agenda of the current fight.

What should you do after the fight is over?

The fight is over when both parties agree to a compromise or reach a mutual agreement that the fight is over.

When the fight is over:

- Each partner needs to think about what he or she learned from the fight. For example, has any new information been gained about a partner's likes or dislikes?
- Each partner needs to think about how he or she was hurt or hurt the other during the fight.
- Each partner needs to think about whether the fight was valuable in letting off steam.
- Is each partner satisfied with the conclusion?

Share your thoughts with your partner.

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