



Nine Rules for Fair Fighting: Everybody Wins!

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT

Ahh... "Happily ever after" and the ensuing and inevitable marital bliss and domestic tranquility that follows. . . . Well, that's great for Disney, but what about real people like you and me who actually fight, argue and bicker? We want peace in the home and in our relationships, but not at the expense of rolling over and playing dead anytime a difference of opinion crops up? However, because we refuse being passive about it we can sometime get pretty aggressive in our arguments. We have all experienced that and we know that while one person may "win" the argument it is the relationship that really loses.

How We Fight

While no one likes conflict, the fact is it is a part of all relationships. Thus, it makes sense to learn all we can about how to structure our conflicts so we can actually resolve problems and differences without slaying

the relationship in the process.

In my work as a marriage and family therapist I have come to see conflict as being the catalyst for creating serious change in people's lives and relationships: for better or worse. For better when it is structured, positive and healthy. For worse when it is unstructured, abusive and destructive. Fighting, then, is not the problem. It is how we fight that is the problem.

Nine Rules for Fair Fighting

Over the years I have picked up the following rules for fighting fair. These rules are simple to learn, but they are not easy to put into practice. Quite frankly, if they were easy, they wouldn't be worth it. In relationships you truly get what you pay for. The cost of investing in mastering these rules will pay big dividends in your relationship time and time again. Here they are:

1. **Fight by mutual consent:**

Don't insist on a fight at a time when one of you can't handle this type of strain. A good fight demands two ready participants.

2. **Stick to the present:**

Don't dredge up past mistakes and faults about which you can do nothing.

3. **Stick to the subject:**

Limit this fight to this subject. Don't throw every other problem into it; take them at a different time.

4. **Don't hit below the belt:**

In your lives together you discover each other's sensitive areas. Don't throw them at each other.

5. **Don't quit; work it out:**

Bring the fight to a mutual conclusion. Otherwise, it will just recur again and again. One or both may need a time out to cool down, but do work it out.

6. **Don't try to win, EVER:**

You actually lose by winning. If one wins, the other loses and begins to

build resentment about this relationship. That destroys rather than builds the relationship.

7. Respect crying: It is a valid response to how we feel, but don't let crying sidetrack you. It is a response for men as well as women.

8. No name calling: Saying things you'll only regret later cause bitter feelings and do nothing to solve problems.

9. No violence: Physical violence violates all of the above rules for fighting by mutual consent.

No Score Keeping

If you choose to adopt these rules adopt them as your own. Do not keep score of how much more you are keeping these rules than your partner is. I encourage you to take the high road. Keep them yourself because you believe they are the right way to conduct yourself. This does three things: 1. It allows you to maintain your integrity; 2. Prevents "tit for tat" from destroying the chance for these rules to work; and 3. It sets up a different dynamic for the relationship: if you and your spouse are used to doing the "Tango" when you fight and

all of a sudden all you will do is "Waltz" your partner is left with a simple choice: continue to Tango alone or begin to Waltz with you.

Remember, a fight between a couple has the purpose of clearing the air and expressing deep feelings in order to build a more unified life. Keep your goal in mind - the goal of sharing your lives with each other.

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