

25 Ways to Fight Fair

<http://foryourmarriage.org/25-ways-to-fight-fair/>

1. Know your own feelings. We will never be able to constructively handle anger or conflict without being in touch with our own true feelings about something. Take some time to pray, talk to a friend, or a pastor, a Stephen Minister, a counselor... about whatever it is that makes you angry, so you can begin to work through it.

2. Anger is simply an emotion – neither right nor wrong in itself. There is no morality to feelings, and telling someone to ‘not feel’ some way is futile. Try to understand what is prompting your anger, or hurt. Morality comes into play when you choose a destructive action as a result of a feeling – like going on the attack.

3. Negotiation and compromise are essential in any marriage. During a calm, clear moment – when you are not in the middle of an argument! - agree together that neither partner should ever “win” a fight. Think about it: if one wins, the other loses. That builds resentment. And the result is that both have then lost because the relationship is damaged. I’ll say it again: Couples should never seek to ‘win’ a conflict. Even when one spouse is wrong, permit him or her salvage self-respect. It can be done! (If one or the other has a need to ‘win’, I’d suggest there are deeper issues going on.)

4. Cooling-off periods. Establish ground rules that permit either partner to “cool off” before trying to resolve anger. You know how you work, it may be necessary for you to take a walk or engage in some other physical activity in order to allow anger to diminish. In a time like that, a spouse can identify the issue at hand more clearly and organize his or her thoughts, thus keeping the fight more on focus. In addition to that -

5. Pin down a time and place. Be sure, however, that you just don’t push this thing off indefinitely. After cooling off, pin down a time and place to continue. For example, you agree - after the news goes off and in the living room, tonight, we’re going to talk about this – not in the bathroom doorway while brushing your teeth!

6. Fight by mutual consent. Don’t insist on a fight when your spouse is tired or unable to handle the strain. A *fair* fight requires two ready participants. If one isn’t ready, then the other may just be looking to ‘win’, and we already saw that this is destructive.

7. Stick to the subject. When a number of issues are accumulating, deal with them one at a time. Make an issue agenda, understanding that this may take some time. Make sure both of you agree to get past, insult rituals, and angry displays, which accomplish nothing. Shooting broadside like a roaring cannon *prevents* resolution.

8. State the issue honestly and clearly. Don’t simply say, “You never show me respect.” Rather, be clear and specific; and use ‘I statements’, not ‘YOU’ statements...

Like this, "I felt hurt when you said" ...or "when you said that, your tone of voice felt condescending." (*I* statements cause much less defensiveness.)

9. Don't camouflage. Don't center on less important or extraneous issues because you really don't want to deal with the *real* ones. "The potatoes are too salty tonight!" might be a minor irritant that covers the unspoken, "*I don't think that you understand all the pressure I'm under at work!*" and I don't know how to tell you.

10. Afraid to fight? One reason that someone can feel afraid to fight, may be a fear of being hurt or rejected. Thinking, "If I'm honest, I'm simply going to make things worse for us." Put the fear on the agenda for later discussion.

11. Don't hit below the belt. Everyone has vulnerable areas. Don't use your confidential knowledge of your partner's weaknesses and sensitivities to hurt him/her. Why would you do that? But many do...

12. Don't label. Avoid telling your spouse that he/she is neurotic, depressing, or a bore, frigid, cold, and etc. Rather, try something more like this, "*I'm feeling a little tense inside, honey, because you seem moody and depressed. I'd like us to talk about it.*"

13. Grant equal time. Agree that no issue is resolved until each partner has had an opportunity to express his/her feelings, ideas, and information about it. One or the other stomping your foot and saying, "And that's final!" is *not* a resolution, no matter how loudly you say it. This is one of those statements that proves how uncommon 'common sense' is.

14. Feedback and clarification. If the fight is emotional and heated, slow it down by starting a "feedback loop." One technique – and I do this occasionally with couples in my office – is to paraphrase back to your spouse what you are hearing them say. For example, "What I hear you saying is that I'm boring you because I have no outside interests. Is that right?" The other then responds by either confirming the accuracy of your statement or clarifying it. "I don't mean that you are boring, I just think you would be happier if you did something besides work all the time!"

15. Gain new understanding. Don't waste a good fight by not learning from it.

16. Implement changes. Follow-up anger with a fair, clear request for a change or improvement in whatever brought on the fight. Each partner must be clear as to what he/she agrees to modify or improve. Be specific and *realistic*. For example, it would be agreed that whenever the husband seemed tense, the wife would encourage him to tell her about it, instead of their old pattern of both keeping silent. You give permission to be vulnerable – 'I don't need you to appear perfect and un-phased by anything.'

17. Develop humor. Humor goes a long way towards promoting healing. Learn to laugh at yourselves.

18. Keep your fights to yourself. Exceptions would be when more serious problems suggest the need for a counselor. But don't force your friends, family members, and especially your children to choose sides in your conflicts.

19. Handling anger in front of children. When anger and conflict initially erupt in front of children, also try to resolve these feelings in front of them. You may need a cooling off period first, but they need to learn about negotiation, discussion, and compromise by watching you do it constructively. Apologizing for excesses in front of children also teaches them about reconciliation. I think that the lack of parental example is a major cause of the poor conflict skills that we see in the world today.

20. Don't attempt to resolve a conflict when drinking heavily.

21. "Touch" can begin dialogue. Use touch to help your spouse make the "entry" or "re-entry" into a communication mood. A foot reaching over in bed, a hand on the shoulder can say eloquently, *"Honey, one of us needs to begin the dialogue. I'm willing to start."*

22. Exclude violence. Agree in advance that real violence is *always* ruled out.

23. Is the problem elsewhere? (Similar to number one) Determine through honest inner searching whether your anger lies primarily (or only secondarily) within the marriage relationship. Spouses might be struggling with poor health, role insecurities at work, fear of death, anxiety about the future, or all sorts of unresolved issues. It can be reassuring when a couple realizes that their relationship may not always be the principle problem, even though the real problem still causes anguish, its not 'us'. In fact, we're allies!

24. Respect crying. Crying is a valid response to how we feel. Do not, however, let crying sidetrack from getting to the real issue causing the conflict.

25. Prayer as strength. Marriage is a spiritual relationship and prayer is the source of our spiritual strength. Principles of human behavior – things like these 25 ways to fight fair' are important, and useful, but couples should remember that we have other ways to deal with problems and issues. And truly, it's a cliché for a reason: "Prayer changes things"