

Fair Fighting: How to Argue without Damaging the Relationship

When you're fighting fairly, you:

- Fundamentally see relationships as 100% / 100% - each partner is 100% responsible for their own behavior, and each partner is 100% responsible for the health of the relationship.
- Ask yourself why you feel upset, taking a moment to think about your own feelings before starting an argument, and are willing to communicate your feelings.
- Are willing to look at the role you played in the matter, even if the other person is in the wrong.
- Are willing to express your feelings with words and take responsibility for them. "I feel angry/hurt when..."
- Have as your objective to aim for a solution.
- Recognize there is no one single winner or loser in a fair fight. Both either win more intimacy or lose it.
- Never assume you know what a person is thinking unless you ask in plain language. Never assume or predict how another person will react; what another person will accept or reject.
- Discuss one issue at a time.
- Bring up hurts, grievances and irritations when they come to your attention.
- Discuss the issue, not the person.
- Take turns talking and listening. When this feels impossible, agree to set a timer for each person to talk without interruption for 2-5 minutes.
- Recognize yelling and other forms of unfair fighting as a need for a break (minimum 20-min timeout to calm the nervous system). Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem when everyone has cooled down.
- Ask your partner for a time-out and agree to resume the discussion later if you absolutely cannot continue the argument.
- Ask yourself, "what am I committed to?" and seek the support of a therapist if needed.

When you're fighting unfairly, you:

- Fundamentally see relationships as 50% / 50% at best and 100% / 0% at worst.
- Expect your partner to read your mind and act accordingly, or otherwise be punished as you see fit.
- Refuse to acknowledge how you may have contributed to the problem via action or inaction. Focus on your defense.
- Take the other person's inventory with a list of criticisms. "You always/never..."
- Aim to make the other person wrong.
- Need to win and be right, above all else.
- Base your resentment, argument, and demands on assumptions about what the other person is thinking, feeling, and doing about the problem.
- Take the argument off topic to deflect attention away from your own behavior.
- Carefully save past hurts, grievances and irritations as weapons to discuss everything the person has ever done wrong.
- Express contempt for the other person with degrading language (verbal and non-verbal), leading to dueling character attacks, while the original issue is forgotten.
- Constantly interrupt when you don't like or agree with what the other person is saying.
- Use yelling to "win" the argument by being the loudest.
- Respond to the argument by abruptly leaving the room, retreating into your shell and refusing to speak, or expressing resignation ("whatever, I don't care"). This is "stonewalling."
- Refuse professional support when asked to participate.

Dr. John Gottman refers to four negative communication patterns - Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling – as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," because they are shown by research to be the biggest predictors of the end of a relationship. For more information, visit: <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/>

Examples of Unfair Fighting – Verbal & Non-Verbal

- Eye-rolling
- Sneering
- Sarcasm
- Swearing (e.g. “I can’t take this sh--!”)
- Name calling (e.g. “don’t be a baby!...you’re crazy!”)
- Labeling (e.g. “don’t get all bipolar on me...you’re so ADD”)
- Raising voice

Signs/Types of Abuse

Emotional / Psychological Abuse - Insults, threats, isolation, extreme jealousy, and controlling behaviors.

- belittling, humiliation • Yelling and screaming • Controlling what partner does, what they wear, and where they go • Isolation from friends and family • Threatening to commit suicide if partner leaves • Threatening to kill partner, their loved ones, or pets • Destroying something important to partner • Gaslighting: manipulating partner into questioning their own sanity • Blaming partner for abusive behavior

Physical Abuse - Violence, or threats of violence.

- Hitting, punching, kicking, hair-pulling, or other physical harm • Using objects or weapons to cause harm • Physical restraint • Preventing partner from eating or sleeping • Threatening to repeat physical harm

Sexual Abuse - Unwanted sexual contact, forcing pregnancy, or forcing partner to terminate pregnancy.

- Persistent unwanted comments about partner’s body or sexuality • Unwanted kissing or touching • Threatening or coercing partner into unwanted sexual activity • Rape or attempted rape • Preventing access to contraception, refusing to use it, or purposefully damaging it • Harming partner in order to force miscarriage • Purposefully infecting someone with a sexually-transmitted infection

Other Types of Abuse

- Digital Abuse: Constantly demanding to look through partner’s phone, monitoring their emails and texts, posting hurtful information or pictures on social media, or sending threatening texts or emails.
- Financial Abuse: Using money to manipulate and control partner, not allowing them to work or go to school, not giving them money for necessities, or stealing their money or possessions.
- Stalking: A pattern of following, monitoring, or harassing someone, causing them to fear for their safety.