

Fighting Fair to Resolve Conflict

What Kind of “Fighter” Are You?

- Do you avoid conflict at all costs?
- Do you feel that any criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Do you hit “below the belt” and later regret it?
- Do you feel “out of control” when faced with a conflict?
- Do you become withdrawn and silent when you are angry?
- Do you hang on to complaints from the past?

Conflict Styles

Sometimes people never learn to handle anger appropriately. In this case, they may develop an unhealthy style of conflict, such as:

◇ “Mad Bomber”

Gets angry and has no trouble expressing it, but does so with little control.

◇ “Smolderer”

Stores up complaints, but doesn’t express them directly. Seethes inwardly and acts out angry feelings in passive ways.

In most relationships, conflict is inevitable, and for many of us, conflict can cause some discomfort. If handled appropriately, however, conflict can actually strengthen relationships and improve our understanding of each other. When handled poorly, conflict can cause broken friendships, ended relationships, and long-simmering feuds.

What Causes Conflict?

Conflict can occur whenever two or more people - whether close friends, family members, co-workers, or romantic partners - disagree about their perceptions, desires, ideas, or values. These differences can range from the trivial, such as who last took out the garbage, to more significant disagreements which strike at the heart of our most fundamental beliefs and concerns. Regardless of the substance of the disagreement, though, conflict can, and often does, arouse strong feelings.



Conflict and Anger

Disagreements can leave people feeling angry or hurt. For many people, feeling hurt puts them in a position of vulnerability. People generally feel less in control when they are hurt, and they may move into feeling angry as a way of feeling less vulnerable or more “powerful.” Feeling angry isn't necessarily a problem if it is handled constructively; however, problems with anger are often worsened by common beliefs that are not necessarily true. Parental messages can plant the idea that being angry is the same as being out of control or acting childish. Some people may also have the idea that anger equals aggression, but the truth is that anger is a normal human emotion, just as normal - and healthy - as happiness and sadness.

Basic Guidelines for Fair Fighting

Fair fighting is a way to manage conflict and associated feelings effectively. To fight fairly, you just need to follow some basic guidelines to help keep your disagreements from becoming entrenched or destructive. This may be difficult when you think the other person's point of view is silly, irrational, or just plain unfair. But remember, he or she may think the same thing about your ideas.



- ◆ **Remain calm.** Try not to overreact to difficult situations. Others will be more likely to consider your viewpoint if you express your opinions calmly and respectfully.
- ◆ **Express feelings in words, not actions.** Telling someone directly and honestly how you feel can be a very powerful form of communication. If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a "time out" and do something to help yourself regroup - take a walk, do some deep breathing, play with the dog, do the dishes - whatever works for you. Remember to set a time that same day when the two of you can meet again to discuss the issue without the conversation becoming emotionally volatile.
- ◆ **Be specific about what is bothering you.** Vague complaints are hard to work on. The more specific, the better.
- ◆ **Deal with only one issue at a time.** Don't introduce other topics until each is fully discussed. This avoids the "kitchen sink" effect where people throw in all their complaints without really resolving anything.
- ◆ **No "hitting below the belt."** Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger, and vulnerability.
- ◆ **Avoid accusations.** Accusations will cause others to get defensive. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.
- ◆ **Don't generalize.** Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and can make an already tense situation even worse.
- ◆ **Don't exaggerate.** Exaggerating or inventing a complaint - or your feelings about it - will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with facts and your honest feelings.
- ◆ **Don't stockpile.** Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time can be counterproductive. It's almost impossible to deal with numerous old problems for which interpretations may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.
- ◆ **Avoid clamming up.** When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication.
- ◆ **Establish common ground rules.** You may even want to ask your partner-in-conflict to read and discuss the information in this handout with you. When parties accept positive common ground rules for managing a conflict, resolution becomes much more likely.

Ten Steps to Fair Fighting

The following are ten steps to use in order to make the fair fighting ground rules effective:

1. Before you begin, ask yourself, "What specifically is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue?"
2. Know what your goals are before you begin. Ask yourself, "What are the possible outcomes that I would consider acceptable?"
3. Remember that the idea is not to "win" but to come to a mutually satisfying and peaceful solution to the problem.
4. Set a time for a discussion with your partner-in-conflict. It should be as soon as possible but agreeable to both of you. Springing something when the other person is unprepared may leave him or her feeling the need to fend off an attack. If you encounter resistance to setting a time, try to help the other person see that the problem is important to you.
5. State the problem clearly and try to stick to the facts. Once you've stated the facts, state your feelings. Use "I" messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt, or disappointment. Avoid "you" messages such as "You make me angry...."
6. Invite your partner-in-conflict to share his or her point of view, and use active listening skills. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear out his or her concerns and feelings. Try to restate what you've heard in a way that lets your partner know you have fully understood, and ask him or her to do the same for you.
7. Try to take the other's perspective - That is, try to see the problem through his or her eyes. The "opposing" viewpoint can sometimes make sense even if you don't agree.
8. Propose specific solutions and invite the other person to do the same.
9. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.
10. Be ready to compromise. Allowing the other person only one course of action will most likely hinder resolution. When there is agreement on a proposal for change, celebrate! Set a trial period to see how the proposed change works out, then discuss the possibility of modifying or continuing the change. If no solution to the original problem has been reached, schedule a time to begin the discussion again.

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If Nothing Seems to Work...

Sometimes despite our best fair-fighting efforts, a disagreement or conflict can seem almost impossible to resolve. When this occurs, talking with a trained professional may help. A trained mediator can help you communicate more effectively and work your way through to a solution. Alternatively, an Employee Assistance Program professional counselor can provide short-term counseling for individuals and couples who have difficulty managing conflict, as well as counseling about other concerns you might have.

Remember that conflict is a normal, inevitable, and even healthy aspect of most relationships. When managed well, it can be used to enhance and strengthen relationships with friends, family members, co-workers, and romantic partners. Fair fighting provides the tools and techniques to help you achieve positive results when problems arise.

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