

Fair Fighting

Fair fighting is a frank and open discussion of differences, without shouting or violence. It follows strict rules to keep the exchange fair and peaceful. Ideally, a fair fight ends by reaching a mutually agreeable solution.

Fair fighting springs from three key attitudes:

1. ***Conflict is inevitable.*** Partners in intimate relationships always want different things. There's no avoiding it, and it's okay. You need to acknowledge that each of you is an individual, with your own needs, desires, opinions, tastes, preferences, fears, and goals.
2. ***Our needs are equally valid.*** We both want things that are natural, reasonable, and understandable. Just because we want different things doesn't mean that either one's needs are more important or significant than the other's. You need for rest and privacy is just as important as my need for entertainment and companionship.
3. ***We can both win.*** Working together, we will come up with compromise solutions to our problems. We can get a good measure of what we want without depriving or taking advantage of the other.

Fair Fight Rules

1. **Set a time.** Secure your partner's agreement to have a serious discussion. If your partner doesn't want to fight right now, you should set a time in the very near future. At first you may encounter resistance and may have to be very persistent to set aside a definite time.
2. **State the problem.** Say what your partner does or doesn't do that you don't like. By describing the facts of your partner's behavior, you can avoid blaming.
3. **Stick to one issue.** You can only solve one problem at a time. When you're arguing, it's very tempting to change the subject or rake up the past. Resist the impulse and confine yourself to a single issue, in the present.
4. **Express the full range of feelings.** Use "I" messages to express how you feel about what your partner does or doesn't do that you don't like. Say "I feel mad" rather than "You make me mad." And look beyond irritation and anger to describe your full range of feelings.

Expressing feelings is not the same as "dumping" feelings. Dumping is when you raise your voice, blame, or make threats when you're angry. Expressing feelings is describing the feelings without a lot of emotional heat or attacking language.

5. **Propose change.** State clearly, simply, and directly what you want your partner to do or not do. Be specific. Avoid talking in terms of attitudes, as in “I want you to be more considerate.” Instead, state your objective in behavioral terms: “I want you to come right away when I say it’s time for dinner and talk to me at the table instead of reading the newspaper.”
6. **Describe consequences.** Describe any practical, emotional, financial, health, or other benefits of the change you are proposing. Also include how you’ll feel and what you’ll do if the change is not made. But beware of making empty threats or predicting dire consequences out of proportion to the problem.
7. **Prevent escalation.** There are three things you can do to prevent escalation; (1) Watch nonverbal behavior, (2) breathe deeply to slow down the pace of the exchange, and (3) declare a “time out.”

First stay aware of the nonverbal part of every fight. Watch for danger signals voices getting louder, threatening gestures, a shift from sitting to standing, pointing fingers, clenching fists, a book slammed down or other objects tossed around or broken, fast pacing, shoving, and so on.

Second, as soon as you notice that you are getting excited, stop talking and take a deep breath. Just turn away from your partner, inhale deeply into your abdomen, and release the breath slowly and completely in a big sigh. Suggest that your partner do the same to calm down. You are literally “taking a breather.” It calms you down and buys time to think about the rules of fair fighting.

If taking a breather to buy time doesn’t work, call a formal “time out.” Time out has very specific rules:

- a. **Agree in advance on a signal**, such as the T sign that professional sports referees use to call time out during a game.
- b. **No last words.** As soon as one person call time out, you both stop talking immediately.
- c. **Leave immediately.** The person who called time out leaves the room or, ideally, the house. If you’re in a car or some other place you can’t leave, stop talking for a set amount of time. A time out should last about an hour. Stay out of each other’s presence the whole time.
- d. **Always return** when time’s up.
- e. **Don’t use drugs or alcohol** during time out.

- f. *Don't rehearse* what you should have said or are going to say. This will just keep you upset. If possible, get some physical exercise during your time out.
 - g. *Check in* when you get back. See if this is a good time to resume the discussion. If either of you is still too upset to continue, set a time in the near future to talk again.
8. **End in agreement, counter proposal, or postponement.** Some fights end in simple agreement: You state your case, propose a change, and your partner says okay. More often, there is further discussion, and your partner makes a counter proposal for a change that is more acceptable.

You talk over the counter proposal and perhaps reach a compromise. Or perhaps not ... Many a successful fight ends with no agreement beyond the promise to fight fairly again. That's all right. There are many issues that cannot be resolved quickly.

Adapted From
***Messages: The Communication Book* - by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995.**