

# FAIR FIGHTING RULES

NO DEGRADING LANGUAGE.

NO BLAMING.

NO YELLING.

NO USE OF FORCE.

NO TALK OF DIVORCE.

DEFINE YOURSELF, NOT YOUR SPOUSE.

STAY IN THE PRESENT.

TAKE TURNS SPEAKING.

WHEN NECESSARY, USE TIME OUTS.

# Fair Fighting Rules for Couples

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Every sport, from basketball to golf, has rules that define the game. Rules provide purpose, safety, structure, and predictability. They make it possible for everyone to understand what's going on, strategize, and resolve disagreements.

Unfortunately, while the necessity for rules is self-evident in the world of sports, it is often forgotten when trying to resolve conflict in families. This is one reason why some spouses would rather have a root canal than get into conflict—they've seen too many occasions where marital arguments were akin to playing full-contact American football with no referee, no safety equipment, and no commitment to a set of rules.

But conflict does not have to be unsafe, unpredictable and without purpose. When spouses are committed to following a set of rules, conflict can be an opportunity for couples to grow their “cooperation muscles.” Handling conflict constructively can even help couples develop greater closeness through achieving mutual understanding, learning to cooperate, taking each other's perspective, and resolving problems together.

So what is a good set of rules? The following list outlines nine suggested fair-fighting rules intended to help couples handle conflict without harming the relationship.

## **FAIR FIGHTING RULE #1: NO DEGRADING LANGUAGE**

Avoid name-calling, insults, put-downs or swearing. Putting your partner down or criticizing your partner's character shows disrespect for his or her dignity. In sports there are many rules that prevent one player from intentionally injuring another. In marriage and relationships, similar rules must apply. When you intentionally injure your partner, it's like saying, “You are not safe with me. I will do whatever it takes to protect myself or to win.”

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #2: NO BLAMING

It's pointless to blame each other. Blaming your spouse distracts you from solving the problem at hand. It invites your spouse to be defensive and it escalates the argument.

For example, if you leave a visa bill lying on the table, and the bill later goes missing, you might be tempted to blame your spouse. You might insist that your spouse is disorganized, must have picked it up and put it somewhere else. Your spouse, in turn, might accuse you of being absent-minded and insist that you just don't remember where you put it. But blaming each other will not accomplish anything. It won't help either of you feel any better. It won't strengthen your relationship at all. And it won't help you find the bill. In situations like this, make a conscious decision that your relationship is too important to undermine it with blame and judgment. Focus on keeping your goodwill for each other intact and finding solutions to the problem instead of blaming.

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #3: NO YELLING

Yelling only escalates things. Chances are nothing will get resolved when your emotions are running so high. If you're mad and feel like yelling, then it's time to step away and cool down (see rule #9).

Keep in mind that yelling can be subjective. What is yelling to your spouse may not be yelling to you. Perhaps you are not tuned in to how you sound. Or you may have grown up in a home where family members were loud and passionate, and talking loud when you are upset seems normal.

Your spouse's experience is the one that counts here, however. If it feels like yelling to your spouse, then you are at least raising your voice, if not yelling. Make a conscious effort to lower your voice. The meaning of your communication lies in how your message is actually landing with others. If you can't tone it down because you are too upset, then it is probably best to take a time-out.

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #4: NO USE OF FORCE

Using physical force or threatening to use force (i.e. a raised fist or a verbal threat) in any way is unacceptable. Develop the self-discipline to set limits on your anger and your behavior *before* you reach this level. If either of you resort to physical force and violence in your relationship, seek professional help.

Use of force includes pushing, shoving, grabbing, hitting, punching, slapping or restraining. It includes punching a hole in a wall, throwing things or breaking something in anger. Acting out your anger in these ways violates the other person's boundaries and sense of safety. Each of us has a right to be safe and free of abuse or physical danger in our relationships.

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #5: NO TALK OF DIVORCE

In the heat of an argument, threatening to leave the relationship is manipulative and hurtful. It creates anxiety about being abandoned and undermines your ability to resolve your issues. It quickly erodes your partner's confidence in your commitment to the relationship. Trust is not easily restored once it is broken in this way. It makes the problems in your relationship seem much bigger than they need to be.

*From Candace: Likewise, saying anything like, "well divorce me then!", is essentially saying to your spouse, "I will never change, no matter what you say or need."*

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #6: DEFINE YOURSELF, NOT YOUR SPOUSE

This rule is about being the expert of your own world, not your spouse's world. Use words that describe how you feel, and what you want and need, not what your partner feels, wants, or believes.

It may seem easier to analyze your partner than to analyze yourself, but interpreting your partner's thoughts, feelings and motives will distract you from identifying your own underlying issues, and will likely invite defensiveness from your spouse.

More importantly, telling your spouse what he or she thinks, believes or wants is controlling and presumptuous. It is saying that you know your spouse's inner world better than your spouse does.

Instead, work on identifying your own unmet needs, feelings, and ways of thinking and describe these needs and feelings to your spouse.

*From Candace: Get used to and good at using "I feel" or "I need" statements. Your spouse is **not** a mind-reader!*

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #7: STAY IN THE PRESENT

Stay in the present and resist the temptation to use the situation as an occasion to bring up other issues from the past. It's discouraging to keep bringing up the past. You can't change the past. You can only change today. You can look forward to a better future. Try to keep your focus on what can be done today to resolve the issue at hand and go forward from there. If you get off-topic, on to other issues, stop yourselves and agree to get back on track. You can always come back to other issues later.

If you do find yourself bringing up issues from the past it is likely because those issues were never resolved in the first place. Things may have happened that you and your spouse never really talked about. Or you may have tried to talk about it in the past but without fighting fair. This rule will be easier to follow, going forward, if you both make a commitment to discuss issues as they happen rather than letting them fester.

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #8: TAKE TURNS SPEAKING

Let one person speak at a time. When one speaks, the other should be listening—really listening, not just planning their rebuttal. Take turns speaking and listening so that you both have a chance to say what you need.

Have you ever tried to work through a difficult issue when your spouse was talking over top of you and interrupting you? How did you feel? Consciously remind yourself about this when you feel an overwhelming urge to interrupt or speak your mind.

## FAIR FIGHTING RULE #9: WHEN NECESSARY, USE TIME-OUTS

Violating these fair fighting rules is typically a sign that you have already crossed a threshold physiologically, in which signals from the more primitive, emotional centers of your brain have begun to drown out the signals from the more rational parts of your brain. Stress hormones flood your body at this stage. Self-preservation becomes the focus. In this fight-or-flight state, creative problem-solving and mutual cooperation are unlikely. You end up in an escalating argument that becomes more and more hostile and defensive. In fact, it is impossible to have a rational discussion in a climate of hostility and disrespect. This is when its time for rule #9: call a time-out.

A time-out is a short break to cool off, calm down and get perspective. Think of it like pushing the pause button on a video. It's an opportunity to restore calm and be more reflective instead of reactive. Use the time-out to reflect on why you feel the way you do. Think about how to express yourself in a positive way. Try to think about the other person's feelings and point of view. Think things through before you speak. Then "push play" again and return to each other to resolve the issues calmly.

A time-out should be at least a half-hour long (but no longer than twenty-four hours). It takes at least a half-hour for your body's physiology to return to a normal resting state and for your thoughts to

become less hostile or defensive. It's surprising how different a person's outlook can be after they've had a chance to calm down.

## CONCLUSION

For some people, rules such as these represent a completely different way of fighting than what they were exposed to in their families of origin. Many spouses grew up in homes where yelling, blaming, name-calling and finger-pointing were considered normal methods for handling disagreements. Such methods seem normal when they happen so often and we are not exposed to any other models for handling disagreements.

How well do you "follow the rules" when you fight? As you read through this list, evaluate your own fighting style. Do you "fight fair" or are you a "below the belt" fighter? Which of these rules do you struggle with? Are there changes you need to make? **Write down any rules that you find yourself breaking in an argument. Write down any steps you could take to help you keep that rule.**

Try posting these rules on your fridge door and refer to them daily. Commit them to memory and agree to live by them when you have a disagreement. If you both commit to following these rules, you will notice a significant and positive change in the way you "fight" with each other. With practice and perseverance, your disagreements may not even seem like fights, but discussions. It will seem easier to reach solutions. Above all, these rules will help you keep your arguments in check so that they do not harm your relationship.

