

FIGHTING FAIR



IN LOVE AND MARRIAGE

by David L. Antion

Marital squabbles aren't fun. But they need not be destructive if a couple knows how to "fight" correctly. Here are the rules.

It comes as no surprise to hear that married couples have arguments. In fact, sometimes they have more than arguments. They have fights! But it isn't polite to call them "fights" — so let's call them "opportunities."

This article is about opportunities to calmly or not so calmly discuss troublesome issues, to improve communication in a marriage, and to

increase true intimacy between husband and wife.

According to Robert Kelley, author of *Courtship, Marriage and the Family*, a marital argument is "a result of a breakdown in the working partnership between husband and wife." These breakdowns occur for a number of reasons — emotional frustrations, hurt feelings, misunderstood role expectations, and

every variety of poor communications. Sex, money, and children seem to be the subjects most often argued about.

It takes skill and self-control to turn these destructive squabbles into "fair fights" that improve husband-wife communications, solve problems, and produce positive results. But it can be done by following the rules:

RULE

1



Do Your Thing to Cool Off

Whatever the source of an argument, once it begins people can become extremely angry. In an atmosphere of tension, frustration, and hurt feelings, facts can get distorted, and common sense talk isn't always achieved. Instead, evil motives may be imputed to every statement. Words may be seized upon and taken completely out of context. So if a couple is obviously heading into an argument, it's best to reduce the level of their emotional state before they begin.

Each of us has his own particular way to cool off. Some people like to go for a walk; others might want to engage in violent sports activities such as handball or tennis. A bath or sauna can also be relaxing. But however you do it, cool off!

Once you've calmed down from your initial anger, you may choose to forget the whole thing. If not, you are ready to implement rule #2.

RULE

2



Argue with the Right Person

This may sound like a ridiculous thing to say. After all, you might ask, who else would I argue with? What this rule actually means is that we should argue with the person we are really angry with and not pick on an innocent party. For instance, if you are angry with your boss, don't take it out on your wife. If it's your wife that's the problem,

don't take it out on the kids or the dog. A definite sign that you're arguing with the wrong person is when your anger is all out of proportion to the actual offense.

Some psychologists refer to this type of arguing as "dumping" — piling your frustrations, angers, and hostilities on others, taking out your built-up wrath on innocent people. Children are often the victim in this game of "dumping." They are scolded, spanked, or criticized, sometimes because their parents are frustrated with others, not really with them.

Dumping is cruel, and it allows a person to escape a confrontation with the real issue at hand. It resolves nothing.

RULE

3



Argue About the Right Thing

You'd be surprised how many arguments are started and fought viciously about the wrong subjects! Counselors and psychologists are well aware that the problems people present are not necessarily the problems of prime concern to them. The real problems lie underneath.

The same goes for married couples. For instance, a husband may criticize his wife's housekeeping when he really may be upset with her lovemaking. Or a wife may criticize her husband about always being at work, when, in reality, she is hurt because she doesn't feel he gives her enough attention.

When we argue, we need to carefully examine ourselves to find out how we feel and exactly what is the source of our irritation. A husband should ask himself, "Am I really angry with my wife's housekeeping? Is that really the issue? Or could it be something else?"

Of course sometimes it is difficult — humiliating, embarrassing and potentially hurtful — for us to share

what is really troubling us with our mates! It takes courage to open up and reveal ourselves! We become vulnerable when we show what really hurts us. It could be used against us. There must be love and trust in the relationship in order to argue about the right thing. But it pays big dividends when it is done.

RULE

4



Argue at the Right Time

Bringing up a sensitive subject to one's mate not only requires courage and trust, but also proper timing. In fact, the choice of the right time is more important than the choice of the right words. It may work out fine if you blurt out from the heart what's troubling you, instead of keeping it hidden. But if you don't choose the right time to bring up a sensitive subject, you may only make matters worse.

How many times have couples begun an argument just before they were supposed to leave for a party? Not only have they damaged their marriage relationship, they've ruined a good evening as well.

When bringing up a sensitive subject to your mate — one over which you are irritated and must confront him or her — do so at the right time, when you're both able to cope with a discussion. Don't bring it up in front of company. And don't bring it up when you know that your time is too limited to properly discuss it.

Some people play what Eric Berne in his book, *The Games People Play*, called the "Sweetheart" game. One mate brings up faults of the other in front of company. He usually does this in a way that is quite a putdown to his spouse. However, at the end of the putdown, he usually says something like this: "Isn't that right, Sweetheart?" Of course, the use of this affectionate term makes him look good. It also

puts his mate in the awkward position of not being able to say anything in retaliation. This is a "game" — but it is not fun or pleasant to play! However, married couples sometimes use other names in their arguments besides "Sweetheart."

RULE 5



Don't Bring Up Past Fights

Once an argument has taken place, it ought to be resolved and buried, never to be resurrected! However, some people tend to "give in" in order to end the argument before they are really satisfied with the outcome. Because they abandon an argument before it's really resolved, they will tend to resurrect that old argument in the context of a new one. Once again, this is subtly showing dissatisfaction with the outcome of past arguments. The unsuspecting mate was previously *deceived* into thinking everything was okay. This breeds mistrust and lack of confidence and can only damage the marriage relationship.

RULE 6



Avoid Name-calling

In a "fair fight" both parties are trying to resolve a conflict in the best way possible. But in the course of an argument, frustrated and hurt mates may lash out, and in turn hurt and frustrate their spouse. And they usually do it through the medium of insults or name-calling.

This form of personal verbal as-

sault is very destructive. First of all, it throws the entire argument off any logical track. Instead of trying to settle the problem at hand, it only serves to add another problem. Instead of examining one's own words and actions to see where they might be improved and how they might contribute to a solution, the party that resorts to name-calling focuses attention on the mate and attempts to blame him for the problem.

In any case, name-calling hurts. It hurts the relationship between the couple. It sidesteps the real reason for the argument. And it ruins the mutual respect that married people should have for one another.

RULE 7



Avoid "Stamp Saving"

Sometimes we save up grievances like we save trading stamps. Perhaps we don't immediately say anything to our mate about a particular problem. But then after weeks or months when we do have an argument, we unload all kinds of things over which we had hostile feelings in the past.

A mate may be shocked to learn of little incidents (maybe not so little to their spouse) which are now being brought up days, weeks, or even months later during an argument over something else. The husband or wife may not even suspect the other spouse felt this way because his true feelings weren't revealed at the time of the original offense. But now, since an argument is in progress, one mate decides to cash in all these "trading stamps" at once.

"Stamp collecting" breeds a reaction of distrust and lack of confidence. Your mate may begin to wonder about everything that happens from that point on, thinking thoughts like: "He seems okay now, but will he throw this up in my face later on?"

Your mate may develop an insecurity and a distrust of you because of not knowing whether bygone incidents may be resurrected in the future.

The cure for *cashing in stamps* is this: Either express your displeasure about the incidents *at the time they occur* or at the earliest convenient time, or make up your mind to forget them forever!

But what if you see a recurring fault and decide that it needs correcting? Then bring up that fault or action at the proper time — when it occurs again. But don't bring it up during an argument over something else.

In Summary

Marital arguments should always be constructive — beneficial to a marriage. They should enhance each partner's understanding of the other and make for increased harmony in the future. They should bring two people closer together as the problem is resolved. For each partner should learn to see things from the other's point of view as well as from his own.

As mature partners, each can realize that it is possible for two human beings to live together and have differences, that differences are not of themselves wrong or evil, and that those differences can be worked out compatibly, amicably, and lovingly.

They can learn that there is absolutely no reason to hide or pretend. Rather both partners can be honest and aboveboard, instead of allowing a wall of silence to come between them or letting hostility drive them apart.

If you and your mate can discuss these rules together and apply them, you'll have fewer marital squabbles. And you will find that your occasional arguments don't have to be a source of major depression, but can instead be a source of profit for both of you and a real benefit to the precious relationship you hope to keep. □

RECOMMENDED READING

The Intimate Enemy by George R. Bach and Peter Wyden. This excellent book outlines in more detail how to fight fairly in love and marriage (New York: Avon Books, 1968, 384 pages, paperback).