



Fair Fighting Rules

Before you begin, ask yourself why you feel upset.

Are you angry because your partner left the mustard on the counter? Or are you angry because you feel like you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just one more piece of evidence? Take time to think about your own feelings before starting an argument.

Discuss one topic at a time.

Don't let "You left dishes in the sink" turn into "You watch too much TV." Discussions that get off-topic are more likely to get heated, and less likely to solve the original problem. Choose one topic and stick to it.

No degrading language.

Discuss the issue, not the person. No put-downs, swearing, or name-calling. Degrading language is an attempt to express negative feelings while making sure your partner feels just as bad. Doing so leads to more character attacks while the original issue is forgotten.

Express your feelings with words.

I feel hurt when you ignore my phone calls. I feel scared when you yell. Structure your sentences as "I" statements (*I feel **emotion** when **event***) to express how you feel while taking responsibility for your emotions. However, starting with "I" does not give a license to ignore the other fair fighting rules.

Take turns speaking.

Give your full attention while your partner speaks. Avoid making corrections or thinking about what you want to say. Your only job is to understand their point of view, even if you disagree. If you find it difficult to not interrupt, try setting a timer allowing 1-2 minutes for each person to speak without interruption.

No stonewalling.

Sometimes, the easiest way to respond to an argument is to retreat into your shell and refuse to speak. This is called stonewalling. You might feel better temporarily, but the original issue will remain unresolved, and your partner will feel more upset. If you absolutely cannot go on, tell your partner you need to take a time-out. Agree to resume the discussion later.

No yelling.

Yelling does not help anyone see your point of view. Instead, it sends the message that only your words matter. Even if yelling intimidates your partner into giving up, the underlying problem only grows worse.

Take a time-out if things get too heated.

In a perfect world, we would all follow these rules 100% of the time... but it just doesn't work like that. If an argument starts to become personal or heated, take a time-out. Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down.

Attempt to come to a compromise or an understanding.

There isn't always a perfect answer to an argument. Life is too messy for that. Do your best to come to a compromise (this means some give and take from both sides). If you can't come to a compromise, simply taking the time to understand your partner's perspective can help soothe negative feelings.



Disagreements and outright arguments are part of the territory of close relationships. Nothing destroys a relationship faster than the hurtful things couples say to each other in a bitter argument, it's crucial that couples learn to argue well. Imagine you had used the following rules in your last argument. How would it have been different? Under each rule think about how observing the rule might have affected the course of the argument:

Be honest. <i>If we had been more honest, our last argument...</i>	Spend as much time listening as you do talking. <i>If each of us had spent more time listening, our last argument...</i>
Admit your mistakes. <i>If we had been more willing to admit to a mistake, our last argument...</i>	Put yourself in your partner's shoes. <i>If we had made a bigger effort to see each other's point of view, our last argument...</i>
Refrain from blaming or shaming. <i>If we had focused on our own feelings instead of blaming each other, our last argument...</i>	Take a "time out" if things get too intense. <i>If we had taken a time out when things got too intense, our last argument...</i>
Assume your partner wants you to be happy. <i>If we had done this instead of assuming that we were just trying to make each other feel bad, our last argument...</i>	When the argument is over, do something healing such as a hug or saying "I love you." <i>If we had known that we would have to end with a hug, our last argument...</i>

Frequent arguments are often a sign that couples need to take better care of themselves and each other. Get together and agree on a time every week to do something that you both enjoy.