

Relationship Conflict: How to Fight Fair

Well-Being Tips ✦



Conflict is a normal part of even the healthiest relationships; however, conflict can become toxic when there is an absence of mutual respect. Luckily, relationship experts have identified several fair fighting tips to help keep conflict respectful and productive. "Fighting fair" with your significant other can allow for increased understanding of one another and even fortify your relationship. Try out these fair fighting tips next time conflict comes up in your relationship:

- **Soften the start-up:** If you are the one starting the conversation, try to gently bring up the conflict. Being harsh or critical right from the start is likely to make your partner feel defensive and less receptive to your needs ([Lisitsa, 2024](#)). Here is an example:
 - **Harsh start up:** "I cannot believe you put my favorite shirt in the dryer again! How many times do I have to ask you not to do that?"
 - **Soft start up:** "I noticed that you put my favorite shirt in the dryer again. I am upset because it shrunk. How can we make sure that it gets hung up to dry next time?"
- **Focus on one issue or instance:** When someone does something that aggravates or hurts us, it is tempting to bring up every time they have ever done something to aggravate or hurt us. Doing so can cause the conflict to escalate and become unfocused, which is less likely to result in a workable solution. Instead, keep your focus on the issue at hand. Try to avoid using words like "always" or "never."
 - **Unfocused statement:** "You are never careful with any of my belongings!"
 - **Focused statement:** "This shirt is important to me. I would really appreciate it if you could try to remember not to put in the dryer."
- **Do not use degrading language.** Again, keep your focus on the issue you would like to be addressed rather than attacking your partner's character. Do not use put-downs, name-calling, or swear.
- **Try to stay engaged and don't stonewall.** Stonewalling is when an individual stops engaging altogether during conflict. This is not likely to help resolve the issue and may make your partner feel ignored or as though you do not care ([TherapistAid, 2020](#)). If you feel too overwhelmed to communicate, skip to the next tip.

- **Call a time-out to self-soothe.** If you notice you are beginning to feel overwhelmed by emotion, communicate to your partner that you would like to take 20–30-minute break to calm down. During this time, you might:
 - Go for a walk
 - Do some journaling
 - Listen to calming music
 - Make a list of the positive qualities of the relationshipAfter everyone is feeling more calm, come back together to discuss the conflict further.
- **Be curious and put yourself in their shoes.** No, really. Try your best to imagine where the other person is coming from. Can you imagine what their experience of the conflict might be? What other factors in their life might be impacting how they are showing up right now? Have they been sick? Had a stressful time at work lately? Do your best to imagine the conflict from the other person's position. Sometimes, even if a compromise can't be reached, relationships benefit from simply understanding one another's perspective.
- **Assume positive intent.** In other words, reject the idea that the other person is trying to annoy or hurt you on purpose. Example:
 - **Assuming negative intent:** My partner put my shirt in the dryer because they wanted to upset me.
 - **Assuming positive intent:** My partner did laundry this week to help me out because I told them I had a busy week ahead. They put the shirt in the dryer by accident.
- **Try to reach a compromise.** Being in relationship with others sometimes requires us to make concessions ([Benson, 2024](#)). Try to open yourself to the possibility of compromise. Can you imagine an outcome where everyone is at least partially satisfied with the solution? Example:
 - **Compromise example:** "Thanks for doing my laundry. I know it is hard to remember exactly what can go in the dryer and what cannot. Can you try to ask me next time you are unsure if something should be put in the dryer or not?"

Keep these fair fighting tips handy for the next time you experience conflict in your romantic relationship. (Psst...These fair fighting tips work just as well in other kinds of relationships, too, like friendships or family relationships!) If you need additional support maintaining a healthy relationship with your significant other, contact MSCC to schedule a couple's counseling session.

The Medical Student Counseling Center (MSCC) offers free, confidential personal counseling, disability and accessibility services, academic and career development support, and wellness consultations to MD and PA students.

Contact MSCC

osac-mscc@uiowa.edu

(Email should not be used to share confidential information or in the event of an emergency.)

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