



Ten Rules for Friendly Fighting

Or how to ensure that conflicts will strengthen your relationship instead of harm it.

1. **Embrace conflict.** There is no need to fear it. Conflict is normal, even healthy. Differences between you mean that there are things you can learn from each other. Often conflict shows us where we can or need to grow.
2. **Go after the issue, not each other.** Friendly fighting sticks with the issue. Neither party resorts to name calling or character assassination. It's enough to deal with the problem without adding the new problem of hurting each other's feelings.
3. **Listen respectfully.** When people feel strongly about something, it's only fair to hear them out. Respectful listening means acknowledging their feelings, either verbally or through focused attention. It means never telling someone that he or she "shouldn't" feel that way. It means saving your point of view until after you've let the other person know you understand that they feel intensely about the subject, even if you don't quite get it.
4. **Talk softly.** The louder someone yells, the less likely they are to be heard. Even if your partner yells, there's no need to yell back. Taking the volume down makes it possible for people to start focusing on the issues instead of reacting to the noise.
5. **Get curious, not defensive.** Defending yourself, whether by vehemently protesting your innocence or rightness or by turning the tables and attacking, escalates the fight. Instead of upping the ante, ask for more information, details, and examples. There is usually some basis for the other person's complaint. When you meet a complaint with curiosity, you make room for understanding.
6. **Ask for specifics.** Global statements that include the words "always" and "never" almost always get you nowhere and never are true. When your partner has complaints, ask to move from global comments of exasperation to specific examples so you can understand exactly what he or she is talking about. When you have complaints, do your best to give your partner examples to work with.
7. **Find points of agreement.** There almost always are parts of a conflict that can be points of agreement. Finding common ground, even if it's agreeing that there is a problem, is an important start to finding a common solution.
8. **Look for options.** Fighting ends when cooperation begins. Asking politely for suggestions or alternatives invites collaboration. Careful consideration of options shows respect. Offering alternatives of your own shows that you also are willing to try something new.
9. **Make concessions.** Small concessions can turn the situation around. If you give a little, it makes room for the other person to make concessions too. Small concessions lead to larger compromises. Compromise doesn't have to mean that you're meeting each other exactly 50-50. Sometimes it's a 60-40 or even 80-20 agreement. This isn't about scorekeeping. It's about finding a solution that is workable for both of you.
10. **Make peace.** An elderly friend who has been married for 68 years tells me that she and her husband made a rule on their wedding day never to go to bed angry. They agreed from the outset that the relationship is more important than winning arguments. Sometimes this meant they stayed up very, very late until they came to a workable compromise. Sometimes it meant that one or the other of them decided the issue wasn't really important enough to lose sleep over. Since they both value the marriage, neither one gave in or gave up most of the time. When one did give in or give up, the other showed appreciation and made a peace offering of his or her own. These folks still love each other after 68 years of the inevitable conflicts that come with living with another person. They are probably onto something.

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