

Rules for Fighting Fairly in Marriage: The Ultimate List*

*It's practically impossible to dig ourselves out of
AVALANCHES:
So don't let your SNOWBALL fights SNOWBALL out of
control!*

1. Physical violence is NEVER justified. Snowball fights, like slumber-party pillow fights, are fun because they are relatively painless. While "fighting" or having a serious, emotion-filled disagreement with one's partner may not be "fun," they are realistically inevitable, but they don't have to be painful, destructive experiences, which escalate, like an "avalanche." Rather, dealing with our conflicts in mature and healthy ways can even strengthen our relationships and bring us closer to our partners. Obviously, any use of physical violence, even when one does not intend to "hurt" the other is only ever *unhealthy and destructive*. However, the "volume and frequency of fights" are not necessarily accurate measures of a relationship's health, because different couples argue differently, some more than others. Conflict can be a sign of a healthy relationship, but never if it involves physical violence.¹

2. Communication = Attitude + Skill²
Expressing how we feel or what we are thinking is difficult enough for most people, but many simply lack the skills necessary to maintain a respectful tone or for another person to comprehend them, even at a basic emotional level. According to Dr. Todd Linaman of Family Life Communications, the combination of communication skills (or lack thereof)

¹ Simring, Steven, Sue Klavans Simring, and Gene Busnar, "Making Marriage Work by Fighting Fairly." Adapted from: *Making Marriage Work For Dummies* (Wiley Publishing, 1999). <http://www.dummies.com/WileyCDA/DummiesArticle/id-2150,subcat-FAMILY.html> (March 17, 2005).

² Linaman, Todd E., "Resolving Conflict in Marriage." *Family Life Matters* (Family Life Communications, Inc., 2005). <http://www.flc.org/hfl/marriage/mar-141.html>

**There are numerous such "rules," and they vary from author-to-author. The "best" set of rules are the ones that work for you and your partner.*

Note: The purpose of this document is to synthesize various sources and to use them exclusively for educational purposes. Every attempt has been made to cite sources appropriately. Some uncited information comes directly from collected sources/worksheets/hand-outs, which were not attributed to any author or published source.

and caring attitude (or lack thereof) can determine the consequences and patterns of conflict within a relationship.

- Uncaring attitude + poor communication can lead to abuse.
- Uncaring attitude + skilled communication skill can lead to manipulation.
- Caring attitude without communication skills leads to misunderstanding.
- Caring attitude with good communication skills is the best combination for "healthy conflict resolution."³

3. "Use strategic timing."⁴ When confrontation is important and necessary, overly reactive or provocative introductions and statements, especially those which are formed in anger, do not help the process of resolution and reconciliation.⁵ "Be sensitive to your partner's shifting moods" throughout the day.⁶ Some people are "morning people," while others are "night owls." Either way, there are better and worse times to 'pick a fight' or attempt to resolve a conflict lovingly. Finding moments of peace and relaxation to intentionally process areas of disagreement with one's spouse not only foster an atmosphere for productive negotiation and compromise, but each partner is likely to be in a more giving mood. Choosing a bad time to confront disagreements will likely lead to more resistance and a longer, more recurring argument.⁷

4. Avoid name-calling and other "cheap shots."

person dignity issue
Even if the person is objectively wrong (i.e. admits to committing a sin), 'love the sinner, but hate the sin.' "Even endearing terms and pet names can be hurtful when you are using a sarcastic tone."⁸ Maintain a respectful tone throughout the disagreement.⁹

³ Ibid.

⁴ Simring, Simring and Busnar

⁵ Linaman.

⁶ Simring, Simring and Busnar

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Stritof and Stritof Sheri and Bob, "How to Fight Fairly in Your Marriage." *Your Guide to Marriage*. <http://marriage.about.com/cs/conflictanddanger/ht/fightfair>.

⁹ *Saying I Do: A Marriage Preparation Program*. Couple's Book (Novalis / Paulist Press, 2006), p. 33.

5. Hold hands while you are fighting.

It is hard to stay angry when you touch. BUT ... If hand-holding becomes tainted by anger, cool down first before returning to the issue and reestablishing touch intimacy. Through touch intimacy, such as holding hands, our angry physical posture, which wants to clinch itself and "hold onto the anger," is challenged to let go by relating to someone else within our intimate, vulnerable space.¹⁰

6. Careful use of humor. Humor can be helpful in diffusing some tension in an argument, especially if it is used lovingly. However, "laughter is good, but teasing can be misinterpreted and can be hurtful."¹¹ Exploiting one's partner's "weak spot" or vulnerability only creates and worsens hurt feelings, which endure, because we inevitably open hard-to-heal wounds, which have already deepened over time.¹²

7. Never threaten to withhold expressions of love or sex.

While it is always important to respect your partner's desire or lack of desire for sexual activity at any given time, love and sexuality (broadly understood) are *essential* aspects of a healthy and functioning marriage. Again, we may disagree with each other on issues, but we must always, continually and consistently, express our love and unity to the person to whom we are married. Marital intimacy is abused when we use it as a 'power currency' with our spouses to manipulate them into giving us what we want. Maintaining a loving, respectful and generous sex life with our spouses not only disposes each partner to be more giving when disagreements arise, a healthy sex life renews each person's commitment to proactively address disagreements and to be persistent in working toward resolution.

8. Using the "Silent Treatment" never solves an argument.

It's OK to take some "cooling off" time away from a heated argument to let the raw emotions subside and to avoid saying something we will only regret. However, "shutting down" the other person with silence, used like a weapon, does just that ... It shuts down your ability to reconcile. Closing off the "open"

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Stritof and Stritof

¹² Simring, Simring and Busnar

communication that is essential to a healthy and functioning marriage makes the relationship itself unhealthy and dysfunctional. No matter how hard it is, we must do everything we can to keep that communication "valve" open.

9. Deal only with the issue of the moment.

Address disagreements one at a time. Otherwise, "you're sure to wind up fighting about personalities - not issues."¹³ Recalling previous arguments or using your partner's past bad behavior as "ammunition"¹⁴ against them calls into question your ability to resolve and reconcile issues with your partner, thus pushing the 'snowball' down the hill. A 'rule of thumb' for a previous disagreement's "shelf life," before it "expires" forever, is 72 hours, or 3 days. If it's more than 3 days old, keep it out of today's discussion.¹⁵ Focusing on the real issue of the moment will ultimately lead to greater understanding, especially if past "baggage" and more "personal attacks" are avoided. Forcing one's partner to defend his or her self never produces real, timely and mutually agreeable resolutions.¹⁶

¹³ Simring, Simring and Busnar

¹⁴ *Saying I Do*, p. 33

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Simring, Simring and Busnar

10. "Understand what's really going on." ¹⁷

Find out what the root cause of an emerging argument is as the situation is still developing, if possible, and before the situation "explodes" out of control. Does one or the other partner have a goal in mind, or is one or the other just "venting"? ¹⁸ To bring about a desired outcome, such as a change of behavior in one's spouse or to persuade the other person to do something, approaching him or her directly and straightforwardly is usually the best policy. If one's partner is just "letting off steam," it's usually best to say and do nothing and let the other person cool down. ¹⁹ "If necessary, say, 'I need a little time,' and specify a time that you'll agree to come together to calmly discuss your conflict." ²⁰ It is important to establish exactly what the issue in question is, ²¹ so that unnecessary arguing over agreed-upon points is avoided. Arguing over "semantics" when each partner essentially agrees in principle with the concepts expressed by the other is much more common than we might think. Getting each other's terms straight takes a little time, but it is ultimately very worthwhile. In this process of clarification, "be specific ... avoid broad generalizations," which tend to unfairly attack the other person's character, as opposed to disagreeing with a particular action, incident, attitude or stated belief. ²² "Don't let little things that bother you build up." ²³ When explaining how you feel to your spouse, "try to use 'I' sentences instead of 'you' sentences." ²⁴

11. When you are wrong, admit it. And

"graciously accept the other's admission of guilt or wrong-doing." ²⁵ Defensiveness, accusations, assigning or shifting blame is never helpful to resolving conflicts in a healthy and loving way. At the same time, "don't take the moral high ground" ²⁶ or assume a self-righteous posture. Assume an equal share of responsibility for miscommunication and for allowing arguments to drag on. Once again, veering off the subject at hand can easily and quickly spiral into an unwinnable debate over who is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Linaman

²¹ Stritof and Stritof

²² *Saying I Do*, p. 33

²³ Stritof and Stritof

²⁴ Ibid.; *Saying I Do*, p. 33

²⁵ *Perspectives on Marriage* (with Catholic Wedding Ceremony). Ed., Gregory F. Augustine Pierce (ACTA Publications, 1998), p. 9.

²⁶ Simring, Simring and Busnar

"morally superior." ²⁷ "Effective conflict resolution only comes from an attitude of Christ-like humility and servanthood [Philippians 2:3]." ²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Linaman

12. Don't make a scene.²⁹ "Never deliberately embarrass each other"³⁰ or others (innocent bystanders) by arguing in public. Keep your arguments private. Avoid bringing in "third parties," like siblings and relatives.³¹ Also, avoid the creation of factions between families and friends. You may trust the advice of your mother or best friend, but respect that your spouse also has confidantes whom he/she trusts. Ultimately, each couple has to work out their conflicts together. Supportive and sympathetic friends and family members cannot become arbitrators in your marriage.

13. Listen to your partner. "Seek first to understand your partner before being understood"³² (Prayer of St. Francis). Marital conflict is not likely to go away any time soon, in any lasting marriage. The important thing is to grow in your understanding of your partner's values, preferences, beliefs and feelings, as well as to be able to effectively communicate your own.³³ Give each other the opportunity to speak and don't dominate the discussion.³⁴ Be aware that most communication is non-verbal, including "body language," so be honest in your words, because your posture and demeanor can easily give you away, and your spouse will know the difference.³⁵ Try to maintain eye contact during an argument; it testifies that you are truly "present" to your spouse. Also, don't interrupt your spouse.³⁶

14. Listen with your heart. Forget logic and believe in the goodness of your lover. Remember ... no issue is more important than your relationship and the vows you made as a gift to your beloved, the gift of fortitude in commitment and a belief in the permanency of marriage.³⁷ Playing the expert, the 'dime-store psychologist,' or otherwise trying "to fix your partner" undermines the unconditional love, respect, and trust that is necessary in developing and maintaining good conflict resolution habits.³⁸ Marital disagreements can be a healthy building block for a strong, lasting and ultimately satisfying marriage when the goal of effective

²⁹ *Perspectives*, p. 9

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Stritof and Stritof

³² *Perspectives*, p. 9

³³ Linaman

³⁴ *Perspectives*, p. 9

³⁵ Stritof and Stritof

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Perspectives*, p. 9

³⁸ Simring, Simring and Busnar

resolution is achieved through care and communication.³⁹ Partners can often feel very vulnerable when seeking resolution, which makes "genuine feelings and honest thoughts" absolutely crucial for "real communication." Taking the 'risk' of making ourselves "transparent" to our spouses can, on the one hand, present the other with the opportunity to capitalize on our "hurt, resentment, fear or insecurity."⁴⁰ This is many people's greatest fear, and it can cause us to be reluctant in opening up. However, 1 John 4:18 reads, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love." Seeking the grace of God in prayer to overcome our fears is essential to perfecting our marital love and commitment, such that we can face the inevitable conflicts of marriage and family life with courage, charity and faith. "Learning a new pattern [of communication] takes time - look for progress, not perfection!"⁴¹

15. Always complete the argument. You should neither storm out to end the confrontation prematurely, nor should you 'counter-attack' when your partner calls you a name or otherwise "verbally attacks" you.⁴² This only invites unnecessary escalation and can lead to a 'snowball' effect (issue gets bigger as it rolls along through time, unless it is dealt with while it is still manageable). "Completing" an argument does not mean "winning." Who "wins" a snowball fight? "Remember to not fight to win, but fight for your [marriage]."⁴³ Sometimes, the best resolution at that moment is to set a time to return to the issue when cooler heads can prevail *within 24 hours*⁴⁴ ... but stick to the "appointment;" don't let the lack of resolution fester.⁴⁵

16. Make up and mean it.⁴⁶ Forgive and seek forgiveness, even when it seems impossible. More than your feelings will be hurt when forgiveness is overlooked. The repercussions throughout one's marriage can eventually become lasting and irreparable.⁴⁷ Don't be bitter or carry a grudge. Relationships which lack the essential element of forgiveness become closed off to the

³⁹ Linaman

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² *Saying I Do*, p. 33

⁴³ Stritof and Stritof

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Perspectives*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Stritof and Stritof

"caring attitude that is needed for resolution."⁴⁸ Anything over 48 hours old is a forgivable / forgiven issue. Resentment only builds with unresolved conflicts.⁴⁹ One approach says, "Always give in."⁵⁰ Another approach says, "Look for ways to bend without breaking."⁵¹ The latter approach claims that in a successful marriage, compromise and negotiation are required, even if the "middle ground" often eludes us.⁵² However, "each partner's wishes are considered and applied to the extent that an agreement can be reached."⁵³ Both partners must consider "what's at stake" for each person. The spouse whose needs are greater than the other should be given greater "share" - the most leniency, the most preference, etc. No one should walk away with a sense of just having "won" or "lost." The sacrifices made in any given situation will likely not be equal. Inevitably, someone gives in or gives up more than the other receives. Is the 'recipient' grateful? Did the 'giver' give without condition or were "strings attached?" Bullying, manipulation, and competition to be "right" or to "win" a marital dispute only damages the marriage, leading to anger and resentment, which build up over time. Eventually, small resentments can cause a marriage to die the "death of 1000 needles."⁵⁴ Mutual trust and a shared sense of being 'invested' in the relationship are both necessary ingredients for working toward "effective resolution." When trust runs in short supply in a relationship, risking to trust or risking to be trustworthy might require a leap of faith that one or the other partner may just as easily decide to forego, leading only to more unsettled disputes and less over-all marital harmony.⁵⁵ Patience is key, because well-rooted behaviors (habits) and relationship patterns take time and determination to change.⁵⁶ One of the hardest patterns to break is how we confront conflict with someone so enmeshed in our lives as our spouse, a child or even a parent or close friend.

17. Seek professional help when needed.

Consulting a marital therapist can be the best way to prevent an "ongoing pattern" of arguments followed by

⁴⁸ Linaman

⁴⁹ *Perspectives*, p. 9

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Simring, Simring and Busnar

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Linaman

⁵⁶ *Saying I Do*, p. 33

resentment from becoming an unstoppable force of destruction to your relationship.⁵⁷ All too often, couples wait until it is practically too late for counseling to help save their marriage.

Some Helpful Steps in Resolving Conflict⁵⁸

1. Identify and define the conflict
2. Agree to work through the conflict until resolution is reached
3. Explore your feelings about the issue
4. Identify what you want
5. Generate options and possible solutions
6. Choose actions that you will both take
7. Evaluate the outcome and make changes if necessary
8. The critical component of forgiveness –
Ephesians 4:31-32: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

⁵⁷ Simring, Simring and Busnar

⁵⁸ Linaman

"ABCD" Analysis (for after an argument)⁵⁹

- **A**ntecedents = What outstanding issues came together to create the argument that just occurred?
- **B**ehaviors = How did each partner react appropriately or inappropriately to the situation?
- **C**onsequences = How did each person's behavior lead to prolonging, escalating, or resolving the conflict?
- **D**o differently = What can each person do differently next time to avoid the same mistakes and establish healthier patterns of reconciliation?

⁵⁹ *Saying I Do*, p. 33-34