

MidWeek

Fighting Fair In A Relationship

May 02, 2007
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Tired of getting into fights with your partner that lead nowhere? Do you find yourself saying hurtful things you don't really mean, but can't seem to stop yourself from saying? Do your fights continue to escalate to the point where you can't even remember how they got so heated in the first place?

If this sounds like you, then you might want to read on, because you and your significant other may have a problem with fighting fairly.

"Eighty percent of the differences that couples argue about are actually never going to be resolved," explains Dr. Brad Klontz, a clinical psychologist and president elect of the Hawaii Psychological Association. "We will continue to maintain different viewpoints about a situation. The goal, then, in successful relationships is to learn how to manage those differences."

Klontz says that many people fall into the trap that they have to be on the same page on every issue in order for a relationship to work.

"I think it helps when people realize it's normal to not see eye-to-eye on every issue," he says. "But a lot of us do fight about the same issues, trying to convince the other person to look at it our way."

Klontz says he believes if someone feels a particular way about a particular matter, that feeling is inarguable. You can't tell the person, "How can you feel that way?" because it will only make them defensive.

"You don't have to understand why it makes the person feel bad; you just have to accept that it does and modify your own behavior," he explains.

A big problem in many relationships has to do with something Klontz calls "emotional flooding."

"In a fight, when someone starts to get really upset, your cortex shuts down and the more primitive part of your brain, the limbic system, takes over," he says. "You can't think rationally. It's that fight/flight response. That's when couples find themselves doing and saying things that they regret, and it takes a good 20 minutes for your brain to go back to normal."

So you and/or your partner are already so wound up you can't think rationally, and yet you continue to argue, just hoping that you can beat your point of view into the other person. You think if you talk long and loudly enough, you can make them understand.

That's not going to happen. "When couples keep going, this is when some of the most intense damage to a relationship is done," says Klontz. "Couples have to know when to disengage when they're emotionally flooded."

Klontz also has some suggestions for how to be fair when you're fighting:

* Develop an agreed-upon language for arguments so when you are going to talk about something controversial, you know ahead of time what's OK to say and what's not OK. Words are emotional triggers. So agree not to say, "You're just like your mother," or, "You always do this ..."

* Have a "thought start-up." Instead of your partner walking in the door and you laying into them, say, "Is now an OK time to talk?" Give that person a chance to say "yes" or "no." If they say no, it is then that person's job to return within 12 to 24 hours to address the issues.

* Practice reflective listening. "We're all struggling to be heard," says Klontz. "That's why we start getting loud. Very often in conflicts, neither person feels they're being heard. For many people, when the other person is talking, most of us aren't listening, we're formulating our rebuttal." So Klontz says your job, when the other person talks, is to listen intently and then say, "This is what I'm hearing you say. Is this correct?" Then take turns so both people feel they get a chance to be heard.

* Take a time out. When you are being emotionally flooded, either person should be able to say, "I need a time out." But you pre-arrange how much time that means so no one is left feeling anxious waiting for the other person. And then, says Klontz, your job during that time out is to think about your part in the conflict, not to brood over what the other person is doing. "I'm a firm believer that for any particular conflict you're having with your partner, 50 percent of the responsibility is yours," he says. "It's never 98 percent the other person and 2 percent you."

The bottom line is, you can spend a lot of time going around in circles about who said what in an argument and never get anywhere. Any couple has to learn to accept each other's differences, fight fair and leave room to renegotiate anything that isn't working in your communication with each other. Continuing to fight or disagree unfairly will only tear down the great parts of your relationship - and those are the things you want to cherish.

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