

Fighting Fair in Relationships

By Matt Kramer

Resistance always indicates an unmet need – Ken Cloke

What is Unfair Fighting?

We fight unfairly when we fight to win at any cost.

When winning is more important than listening, we are automatically in a situation that is doomed to failure.

Before you engage in a confrontational dialogue, have you done any of the following:

- Have you made a deep and sincere effort to fully understand why the other person feels the way they do or why they have a different point of view?
- Have you been open to the possibility that you may not have all the information necessary to take an informed position?
- Have you been open to changing or improving your position?
- Have you shared feelings, perspective and ideas with your partner in an open, non-critical and non-judgmental way?

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We fight unfairly when we are being dishonest.

When we are dishonest, we eliminate the possibility of having a fair exchange of ideas – very important as you work to create mutually acceptable solutions.

A. Dishonesty appears in different ways. Your partner might ask, “Is something wrong?” If you respond with, “Nothing’s wrong, I’m fine”, not only are you being dishonest, you are shutting down your partner’s ability to be helpful. Allowing someone to be giving is a way to empower a more active relationship. Denying them the opportunity limits the opportunity to deepen intimacy.

B. Withholding the opportunity to be helped also builds a wall that contributes to further distancing in the relationship. This is compounded when you are obviously angry or upset – sending a double message is frustrating to the partner and contributes to deterioration of the relationship.

Exaggeration can be dishonest. Excessive use of the words, “never” and “always” is a common example. When you say to your partner, “*You always act that way,*” or, “*You never help,*” your partner may remember one time when he or she didn’t do what you allege is an everyday experience. Truth having been muddled, the resulting whirlwind of conflicting counterproductive accusations will distract the focus in any relationship. Rather than remembering good times and positive feelings, attention has been focused on feelings of frustration and resentment, ingredients for further conflict.

A sneaky yet powerful example of dishonest communication is the use of selective listening. Along the same lines, emphasizing selective information is a standard tool for manipulation. This includes telling half-truths or only the part of the story that suits you. It helps to remember that memory can be mood dependent – in other words, when we’re in a bad mood, it’s hard to remember the good times.

Likewise, you are being dishonest when you quickly change the subject or shift the blame when your mistakes or misjudgments are pointed out.

We fight unfairly when we hold on to things from the past.

When someone uses an old event in a present day conflict, it can have a number of implications:

- Unresolved emotional baggage
- Seeking control (related to differences in conflict management styles)
- Seeking forgiveness (in a counter-intuitive way) A critical form of forgiveness is to forgive yourself for the failure of your own false expectations or to forgive yourself for having an imperfect past.

Does your partner have a habit that is particularly annoying to you? Leaving laundry on the floor or dishes in the sink? In the early honeymoon phase of a relationship, we tend to overlook behaviors that we normally do not tolerate. The behavior is insignificant compared to the wonderful feelings we share as we're basking in the glow. Besides, we don't want to jeopardize the new relationship.

What is happening simultaneously is that we're sending an unspoken message that these behaviors are accepted. Later, after commitment sets in and the glow has worn off, the behaviors begin to loom larger. We start to become critical and either criticize or demand that the other change their behavior.

At this point, the partner will probably feel betrayed or blindsided. Some relationships will fall apart, others, in which the fear of loneliness is greater than the fear of constant conflict, will begin building a conflict cycle that will become complex and difficult to reverse without serious self assessment or neutral, professional intervention.

How can we prevent this dynamic from happening? It almost requires a cultural shift. Growing up, most of us learned either to avoid conflict or to take control by being aggressive in the face of conflict.

Imagine the following:

A: Things have been going great between us. How do you feel about taking the relationship to the next level?

B: Great. Do you want to talk about living together?

A: There's a step prior to living together that feels important. Let's talk about how we each handle conflict so that we understand each other's boundaries and conflict management styles.

B: Good idea.

You are unfair when you personally attack your partner.

Personal attacks upon your partner with harsh words, innuendoes, exaggeration, or blame are incredibly destructive to your entire relationship. The chief problem with such attacks is that they fail to resolve anything with reference to the conflict itself. In fact, they usually only intensify your differences.

Such corrosive communication is not only swearing or foul language, it is also any words that tear someone down instead of build someone up.

Saying such things as, *"You are such a slob. I hate you," "You are so pigheaded,"* or *"If you don't like it, why don't you divorce me?"* only serves to make your partner defensive and resentful.

Such attacks are so counterproductive that you will never get around to working on the problem. What you are doing is ensuring that the conflict will return.

One solution here is to learn "Active Listening" and "I messages". There are a number of resources available for learning these tools.

In addition, understanding the nature of anger, especially your anger, will greatly help you to find alternatives to attacking your partner.

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You do have some choices when it comes to handling conflict and fighting fair. Do you want to resolve the issues or allow them to continue to fester? Do you want to discuss the problems in a collaborative manner or continue old conflict patterns that resolve nothing? It's your choice.

For those of you who say that there will always be conflict and that nothing will change, on one hand I agree.

On the other, we can create change. Can you visualize being able to discuss difficult or sensitive subjects without escalating into a fight? There are tools for doing this. While this information isn't rocket science, implementing such changes will contribute to a cultural shift in how we view and use conflict. Like fire, conflict is a force that can be used for good – as a matter of fact, it is necessary in order for change to happen – and it goes without saying, if used without skill, can have devastating consequences. We do have a choice.

What is Fighting Fair?

We fight fair when we share our fighting skills with our partner so that we can share and discuss our differing points of view on equal footing – without an imbalance of power.

One way to make this happen is to spend time sharing how you fight and what tools and language you use. You will be more successful in collaborative problem solving when you share the same tools and use the same language.

We fight fair when we are open to the outcome of the fight.

In other words, we are just as open to changing our own point of view as we are hoping our partner will change his/her point of view.

We fight fair when we maintain and express respect for our partner's point of view.