

Fight lovingly – yes it is possible

When couples get into conflict, it can soon become a divorce creating event. Each wonders how and why love has been replaced by hurt, resentment, defensiveness and anger. Here are some tips that will help you avoid acrimonious disagreements.

Rule 1:

Treat your partner as if you love them, especially when the conflict is raging. Sounds bizarre doesn't it, but if you choose to try and stay loving and respectful of the other, you may slowly move towards recognizing that the other person is different to you, but not necessarily therefore wrong, bad or dysfunctional. Keep the conflict clean. Avoid nasty comments. Attempt to honour, hear and understand a viewpoint very different from your own. A major mistake is to assume that "I am right", "My way is the right way", or "Your ideas don't make sense."

The Beatles suggested that you "Try and see it my way" but even more importantly, "May I try to see it your way also." This is what love would do. But there's a problem. Frequently we cannot manage to see it "your way" because that way seems so flawed. This isn't surprising, because our way is different, and for many people, this either means "You are right" or "I am right". Guess which one of these most people choose?

No matter which you do choose, neither option is going to help your relationship.

Rule 2: Know that in order to stay accepting and loving of your spouse, you must come to understand and accept the way their personality works, and yours. Now, this is easier said than done, because most people don't even know much about their own functioning style let alone that of their partner. I talk about personality styles at length in the article "Conflict Styles" (<http://couplescounselling4u.co.nz/conflict-styles.html>), but you can work out each other's style simply by noticing who does what and when. For example, do you pursue your partner when stressed or there's conflict, or do you withdraw, maybe tune out, and give yourself some space? Do you find yourself feeling hurt, scared, confused, defensive, resentful, and maybe eventually angry? And what do you do with these feelings? Eagerly seek to have them heard and understood, or do you distract yourself in some way until they just seem to seep away?

It is essential that you discuss and discover what each of you does when under duress, and that you learn what needs are behind these patterns.

Rule 3: Know your needs and express these. It may seem hard to believe, but the main reason we struggle in relationships, is because we are unable to express our need adequately. Typical needs ignoring behaviours would include:

- pleasing others repeatedly at one's own expense,
- not asking for help when we could do with it,
- helping others in ways that we would not take the time to do for ourselves,
- working too hard and for too long and therefore compromising a life of balance,
- ignoring our feelings and what these are asking us to do for ourselves,
- anaesthetizing our feelings by taking drugs (including cigarettes), alcohol, gambling, having unwise sexual liaisons, over-eating, being a workaholic, and so on.

Whenever we overlook our needs, we repeat patterns of childhood when we first learned to do this. However, as adults, we will not take kindly to having our needs ignored, even if we are doing this to ourselves. When it does happen, something inside of us will snap. If we don't attend to this, we will very likely seek someone 'out there' who seems to be the offender preventing us from getting our needs met. However, this culprit is more often 'in here' where we have learned to overlook the message from our feelings that something has to be done in support of self.

Rule 4: Establish a time after the emotional outbursts to process feelings and needs.

Once the drama is over yet again, and you've given it plenty of time to settle, your rational mind will return and you will now be able to talk with your beloved. Don't do this until both have settled their emotions though, otherwise you'll trigger a re-run of the earlier drama. At this point, follow the following guideline which I've taken from the course **Cooperative, Caring, Compassionate Communication, Spiritual Relationship Mastery 102** which is a videotaped, purchasable course:

1. Set aside time to talk. Treat this as a No. 1 priority. Use I messages and active listening to work out a way of meeting each other's needs while also getting your own met.
2. Ask what needs the other had which lead to the comment that pushed your buttons. Do this with compassion and the desire to understand the other.
3. Accept that the other is different. **Don't expect** them to be like you, or the way you want them to be!! Be sure to find out what the other **really** means.
4. Spend time asking your partner the most important question of all - "What am I like to live with?" Don't beat yourself up with the answers. Just use them to see how s/he is experiencing the world of your actions.
5. View conflict as a way to learn about yourself. Ignoring these lessons will cost you dearly!! Don't blame the other person. That NEVER helped any relationship, and will simply help you avoid finding out why you reacted.
6. Know that conflict has probably caused your offensive or defensive patterns to appear. Be aware of these, & notice how they affect the health of the relationship. Consider some constructive alternatives.

For further ideas on how you can rescue your marriage, let me suggest a very helpful resource which also takes the approach I have taken here. I recommend **Hold Me Tight** by **Dr Sue Johnson** which can be purchased from the **Emotionally Focused Therapy** website <http://www.iceft.com/home.htm>