

Ten Steps to Fair Fighting

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Use the following ten steps to replace old, ineffective arguments with an effective fair fighting session:

1. Fight to resolve an issue or solve a problem.
2. Identify the problem to be solved.
3. Take turns stating your case, using I messages.
4. Practice active listening.
5. Generate possible solutions.
6. Compromise on a solution.
7. Develop a plan for enacting your solution.
8. Enact your solution.
9. Get back together to evaluate how well it is working.
10. If it is working, keep doing it. If not, start over.

When you set out to fight to solve a problem rather than winning a battle, triumphing over the other person, or gaining some victory, you are half way there. Whenever you start to get derailed, or want to fight dirty, keep coming back to number one. It is a way of de-escalating and staying on task.

In order to solve a problem, you must identify the problem to be solved. Make sure that you are working on the same problem. Couples are often handicapped in their attempts to problem solve because they start out believing that they are working on the same issue, when in fact, they are not.

Couples often communicate on different levels at the same time. A common example is one I have previously used - taking out the trash. One person may believe that s/he is actually talking about the logistical issue of taking out the trash and the other partner is only superficially talking about the trash. S/he is concerned about the relationship issue underlying taking out the trash. While that partner may be saying something like "you always have to be reminded several time to take out the trash, and then you make a mess with it". The real issue may be something like this "When you don't take out the trash after I have told you how important it is to me, and how much easier it makes housekeeping when you do it, I feel unimportant, unloved, and frustrated". "When I remind you several times about the trash, I think that you don't care how I feel, and then I feel sad, hurt, and unloved." Make sure that you are communicating on the same level.

When stating your case, it is important to take turns. You cannot hear while speaking. If you wait until the other person has stated their case to state yours, you will not feel so compelled to present a defense or an argument about their position or their case. Use I messages and keep your case about you.

Practicing [active listening](#) helps you stay on task. With active listening, you reflect back what you heard the other person say (i.e., "what I hear you saying is....."). You are letting the other person know that you were listening and that you actually heard what they said. This is not a time for editorial comments or interpretations. This is not a time to refute their perception of events. Any two people viewing or participating in the same event, will, by nature of their histories and experience, have a different perception of that event. Fortunately, it is not necessary that you see things the same way in order to be able to problem solve. Simply agree that you disagree on what happened, how it happened, etc. Neither is more right or more wrong. You just don't see it the same way.

Generate possible solutions together. Partners will often problem solve on their own, then come together to try to sell their own solution to the other person. The more invested in their own solution, the more difficult it is to see that other solutions are possible. Often in discussing possible solutions many new, novel solutions will present themselves.

In compromising on a solution, remember to go back to #1, fighting to solve a problem or resolve an issue. The solution that you decide on should not be coerced. Both people should feel that they have gained or will gain something in the solution. Neither should feel that they have "lost". The solution should generate a commitment to enact that solution from both partners.

The next step is developing a plan to enact your solution. This should include timetables. It is important to have an idea about how long it should take to realize a difference or accomplish a goal. It is also helpful for having a timetable to get back together to see if you are on course and if your solution is working.

You then go about enacting your plan of action. My example of this process is one of deciding to buy a boat. We anticipate that the boat we want will cost a certain amount of money. Our plan is to save a certain amount of money over the fall, winter, and spring and buy the boat in early summer. That is our time frame. We have agreed to get back together in mid-winter to see if we are on track with our savings plan. That's our time frame for evaluating our plan. So, we enact our plan.

We get back together at the agreed upon time to see if it is working. If we are where we think we should be in progress, we keep doing it. If not, we start over. We would start over at the place that it makes the most sense to start at. In the example of buying a boat, we would not start at the beginning, we would start at setting our time table or adjusting the amount of money that we are saving to accommodate our needs to better accomplish our goal.

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Sometimes when your solution is not working, it is because you have incorrectly identified the problem at the very beginning. Remember to make sure that you are problem solving on the same level.

This whole problem solving model holds together with two important concepts-1) fighting to solve a problem, 2) [de-escalating](#) as needed. You cannot solve a problem when the emotions are running so high that you feel compelled to use dirty fight tactics, or feel compelled to be "understood". You must bring the emotional level down so that you can communicate rationally and be heard. You can do that with well-placed "I" messages to get back on track. You can do that with stepping back a couple of paces with active listening, (i.e., "Wait; let me make sure that I am hearing you correctly. What I heard you say was"). When all else fails, take a time-out with an agreed upon time-back-in. It takes at least fifteen minutes for your breathing to return to normal, for you to wind down emotionally and physiologically to be able to listen once again. I recommend an hour time-out (at least). It is crucial that when you request a time-out that you suggest an interval for a time-back-in. Otherwise, you do not return to finish problem solving and it becomes one more failed communication experience, which makes it more difficult the next time that you try to problem solve on this issue. Say something like this, "I am going to take a time-out to calm down. I am going to the store (or walking around the block). I'll be back in one hour to finish talking about this."

When you feel compelled to make the other person stay and finish the discussion, which is a very strong indicator that you also need a time-out. It is crucial that any time-out request is honored. If you have a history of unfinished discussions, that may need to be worked out with a fair fight session of its own. See Also ["Fair Fight Tactics - Refrigerator List"](#) .

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