

Fight Fair and Keep Your Relationship (And Yourself!) Healthy

"Hey, I'm going to have to miss the recital. Totally overwhelmed here."

"Again?! Why do you always have to skip out on these things? I'm so sick of it!"

"Listen, I have to work to pay all those bills we keep racking up! Not that you seem to care!"

Conflict is Common

It can be hard for couples to stay calm and collected when a conversation gets emotional like this. Often, we tend to lash out with attacks ("Not that you care") or generalize too much ("You always...") We may not even realize what we sound like. The emotion just comes spewing out before we have time to think.

Later, we may regret what we've said, and apologize. Or, at times, this is just "the way it goes." Fights break out, words are said, and things eventually move on. (However, harm may have been done.)

If all this sounds familiar, you're not alone. But as you probably know, there are lots of reasons to try to keep a cooler head during disagreements with your spouse or significant other.

Let's be clear: conflict is totally normal. If we agreed all the time, that would be boring. And it's not healthy to walk on eggshells, either. Sometimes we need to "have it out" and discuss what's bothering us.

...But Watch How You Engage

But it's really important to try to fight fair. Experts agree: watch out for sarcasm ("Oh, sure, because you're such a genius") and contempt ("I'm so disgusted by you right now"). Both have been shown to harm relationships.

Another tip: don't charge in with "you" accusations ("You're so lazy...you never do anything around here"). Instead, express your own point of view using "I" ("I'm frustrated because I feel overwhelmed by the housework").

Also, take your time! Before you speak, imagine how it will sound. Try to keep a level head, rather than responding with fiery emotion. (Sometimes, you might need to call a "time out" and come back to the topic later.) And stay away from those not-so-helpful words: "always" and "never."

Taking Care with Conflict Pays Off

If you follow these recommendations, those unavoidable disagreements may turn out a little better, leaving the two of you with fewer regrets. Your satisfaction with your relationship is likely to be higher, and your relationship may be likelier to last.

As a matter of fact, you might even help keep you a little healthier. In a recent study, researchers found that married people who used a more rational, reasonable, "thinking" style (with lots of words like "realize" and "understand") when having a disagreement with their partners released fewer stress-related proteins afterward. (These proteins, called cytokines, increase inflammation and can make us sick.) In other words, the way you fight could actually affect your physical well-being.

It's never easy to disagree with a partner, and there are always going to be times when we feel frustrated. However, using a calmer style and keeping a cooler head can help ensure that these moments don't damage our relationships. Start practicing these skills today, and share these ideas with your spouse or significant other, too.

References:

Graham, J.E., Glaser, R., Loving, T.J., Malarkey, W.B., Stowell, J.R., & Kiecolt-Glaser, J.K. (2009). Cognitive word use during marital conflict and increases in proinflammatory cytokines. *Health Psychology, 28(5)*, 621-630.
