

Becoming A Fair Fighter:

Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts

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Introduction

You can learn to be a skillful fair fighter and successfully deal with life's inevitable disagreements with others. It is usually a good idea to take action as soon as you feel an issue building. There are three essential elements that are mandatory for you to understand, embrace and utilize.

1. Power, Control & Intimacy Issues: In all human interactions there are power and control issues. In personal or intimate relationships, there are also intimacy issues. The more intense the relationship, the more potential there is for conflict.
2. Personal Insight: You must commit yourself to gain insight about your part in conflicts. It is not humanly possible for you to play no role in conflicts. If you don't accept this reality, a positive outcome is very unlikely. If you are the one with the insight, you must take action
3. Structure: The structure that you will use for communicating, clarifying, and resolving issues, problems, and concerns will make all the difference. Without this resource, relationships will be more difficult.

The Three Steps

First - you need to know what outcome or solution you want. Then you need to act in ways that will move you and the others towards that outcome. Observe your thoughts and behaviors in order to make adjustments as necessary.

Second - you must be able to observe and accurately evaluate the status of the situation. What is current reality?

Third - what is the structure that you will use to accomplish your desired outcome? That structure will lead you from where you are into your desired future.

Fair Fighting Structure

Learning to fight fairly will be most useful in a committed, romantic relationship, yet it can also be useful in friendships and working relationships. For most people, dealing with a personal issue is emotionally difficult. Using a structure that is understood, controlled, and a contract between the parties will make conflicts easier.

The structure of Fair Fighting is made up of solution-oriented attitudes, practical behaviors, and controlled emotions. The negotiated and agreed upon guidelines must be heartfully enforced. Remember, your structure creates your outcome.

Stages of verbal fighting are:

1. Setting-up or acknowledgment of the structure
2. Sharing of positions/opinions
3. Talking about the various aspects
4. Agree and disagree, negotiate, resolve, or agree to disagree

Fair Fight Elements: In a negotiation, all parties must agree on the approach, yet if one party has an emotionally or fear-based issue, additional consideration (time, etc.) needs to be given.

Agreement: Get an agreement for 1) a certain time and place, and 2) a certain issue.

Hopefully you will have an agreeable outcome, even if it is to disagree.

Approach: Start with something like: “I have a problem and I hope that you will help me with a solution. Would you be willing you do that?” “*Yes!*” “Would now be an acceptable time to start?” “*No, how about in one hour?*” “*Okay, good!*”

Asking: (This does not mean expecting or demanding disguised as asking for something.) If you are really asking, you are open to hearing “no” or to a negotiation about the how and when the person will respond.

Assertiveness: The ability to present an issue, repetitively if necessary, with confidence and respectfulness, yet not aggressive.

Body Language/Gestures, Position: Your body language needs to be neutral and open (vs. closed - such as arms folded), maintaining eye contact; no behaviors such as sighs, rolling of the eyes, or distractive behaviors; position: standing or sitting.

Boundaries:

Physical: Physical distance between participants: Consider being 3 to 10 feet apart.

Emotional: Being open and available to discussion, rather than closed and unavailable

Breathing: Slow, deep breathing is extremely helpful.

Carefrontation is the confronting of issues, problems or concerns involving others in a caring, kind and empathic manner.

Cognitive Distortions are inaccurate ways are thinking and speaking. See Cognitive Distortions in “Writings.”

Communication: Be kind, yet state your truth. Use “I” statements: I wonder, I notice, I suspect, I believe, I am scared, I am embarrassed, I regret, I am puzzled, I am frustrated, I am hurt and I resent, I hope, I appreciate, I want, I need.

No Verbal Abuse: No swearing, belittling, bullying, contempt, criticizing, denunciation, discounting, guilt tripping, obscenities, sarcasm or taunting. No Violence!

Only two people interact at a time; all others do not join in.

Control: Generally, you have control over your behavior and others do not. If you choose to give that control away, usually that will cause problems. At the foundation of quality Fair Fighting is the assumption that you embrace your power and self-control, and that others respect this and do the same. This is difficult aspect and may take time and or professional help.

Criticism is judgment of what is wrong or bad about somebody or something. Criticism is the number one killer of relationships. When criticism is used it can start or escalate an argument. Criticism causes others to defend, resist and leave, rather than open up, engage and grow. You can “Win the battle and lose the war.” Criticism might work in an adversarial relationship, but it will not work in a cooperative one.

Emotions are a valuable feedback system. Without your ability to feel, you would not be able to make decisions. When someone shares their feelings, acknowledge them by saying something like, “I’m glad that you can tell me how you feel. This is how I feel...”

Environment: Choose a setting that will be quiet and where you won’t be disturbed.

Evaluation: An evaluation is a statement of the value, quality, importance, extent or condition of something. Your evaluation may be positive, neutral or negative, but hopefully accurate and not a disguise for criticism.

Handicaps: If one person is less skilled or in any way at a disadvantage, find a way to balance out the situation. Example: If one person has superior verbal skills, they might have less time to speak.

Issues: Focus on one issue at a time and stay in present time; if unable to find a solution, set it aside and decide when you will return to it, or agree to disagree. If you can agree, set up a structure to implement; who will do what and the timeline, when will you revisit the decision?

Language: Your language needs to be moderate, clear, specific and brief; no offensive, derogatory, threatening or negative language.

Length of Time: The quicker the better; if you are being heard, you usually don't need very long to effectively communicate your point. The Whole Interaction: 2 to 30 minutes. Consider using a symbolic piece of flooring, to acknowledge whom is speaking or "has the floor."

Let Go: Letting go of the issue, the sooner the better. You can let go fully or partially by thinking or talking it through or carefronting the person(s) involved. As soon as you feel an issue building, take action.

Listener Style: Listen carefully, feel what they are saying; no interrupting; be respectful. Create a picture as they are talking. If you aren't getting a clear picture, ask for clarification, and if you can get a picture, paraphrase (restate in your own words) and get feedback. Be very careful not to defend. If you are thinking of a comeback rather than just thinking—you are defending.

Observation: Observe the situation. What's happening? Are you behaving the way that pleases you? What are others doing right? What would be the most constructive way to communicate your concerns?

Outcome: What outcome is best for all involved? Make the decision to create that outcome. If you later are dissatisfied with the decision, renegotiate. If you can't settle an issue, agree to disagree and table it for a later, specific and agreed-upon time. If you do decide to continue the discussion later, what will each of you do, and on what timeline.

Appropriate outcomes are: wanting to understand, wanting to be understood or wanting agreement on an issue. Inappropriate outcomes are: wanting to make your point, to prove that you are right, or to win the argument.

Role Modeling: Where did your role models for conflict resolution come from -- your parents, the movies, friends' parents? How did your parents resolve conflicts? If you don't remember them arguing, maybe they always argued behind closed doors. That could give you no information on conflict resolution.

Pick Your Fights: Decide what's important enough to fight for. If you fight for everything, the constant battling may become a negative habit. It will drain your (and other's) time, space, and energy, and leave little time/energy for positive interactions. Sometimes you can win the battles and lose the war, and the relationship dies.

Self-First: You are the only person who has control over you. Others have influence, not control. If you want your outcome, you must behave in a manner that will influence that outcome. Start by taking responsibility for your attitudes, behaviors and

issues that are part of the conflict. State “I have a problem and I need your help...” Use "I" Statements. Example are: I am afraid, I am frustrated, I am happier, I am hurt, I am puzzled, I appreciate, I believe, I expect, I hope, I notice, I realize, I regret, I suspect, I want, I wonder, I resent, etc.

But or Yes, But is an extremely common defensive response. The word “but” usually is a denial of what has just been said. Catch yourself and replace it with “and.”

Sharing: You sometimes have an opinion about another person’s behavior or situation that does not directly affect you. You may want to offer your opinion whether or not the other person(s) asked for it. Before you do, get their agreement. When you have an opinion about another person’s behavior or situation that directly affects you, you may choose to tell them, whether or not they want to hear it. Be accurate, truthful and as kind as you can be.

Symbolic Communication: During an interpersonal conflict, it is very important to have an agreed-upon way to communicate important information or an issue in a very effective manner. If someone breaks a rule, have an acknowledgement signal like “foul.”

White Flag: The most important situation to be aware of is when a conflict is escalating, and to know when to back off (De-escalating the conflict). The use of the symbol “White Flag” is very helpful in this situation. The common “truce” meaning of While Flag can be expanded to mean:

- STOP! No further communication
- Walk away for _____ minutes
- While away, breathe and calm yourself down, and think about your part in the situation, and refocus on a solution.
- When you return: Acknowledge your negative attitudes and behavior(s) and offer a positive verbal or behavioral contribution, such as a heartfelt apology, or an action that you will commit to do in the near future.

Note: If you haven’t been able to calm down and shift into a positive mental state, acknowledge that and postpone any further interaction, and state that you will approach the person(s) when you are ready to restart. You need to reconnect ASAP, ideally within 24 hours. If you can’t do so within one or two weeks, consider getting professional help.

Types of Fair Fighting: There are two types of fair fighting.

1. Trimming: Trimming is used when one or more persons are upset with another person(s). The upset person carefronts the alleged offender about their behavior.

2. Venting: Venting is used when one person is upset with someone or something and wants to vent at someone who has nothing to do with the situation.

Note: Research shows that venting alone doesn't help a person to grow and learn to handle conflicts; however, approaches such as empathizing, reframing, and letting go do work to permanently change your experience.

Solution: Breathe, mentally and/or physically step back, emotionally disconnect and ask yourself honestly, "What can I do to get this process back on track?" If you can't come up with an answer, table the session for now, and decide on the next meeting time. Reread this handout and/or seek outside help.

Value Conflicts: There are some value-based, deal-breaker issues that the parties involved must negotiate and agree on. Take a look at what meaning the value has to you, as well as why you have the value, and how you got the value.

Voice: The volume of voices should be low to moderate, unless all parties can agree to a somewhat louder volume; even with agreement, loud talking, yelling or screaming is unacceptable.

The Process:

Breathe, stay relaxed and open, and keep eye contact throughout the process.

Hold to the outcome that you have in mind.

Approach the person(s) and present your desire to process the issue, and which task will be involved (Trim or Vent); get agreement to discuss and when.

You (all parties) need to decide on the outcome that you want.

Decide on or (re)commit to the structure:

The issue to be discussed

Length of time each will talk, acceptable language and voice volume

Physical boundaries, minimum/maximum distance, body positions and mannerisms

Handicaps, if any

Symbolic communicators: White Flag, etc.

Engage in the Conflict Process

1st person shares their issue for ___ minutes; 2nd person listens only.

Share your thoughts and your feelings using "I" statements.

Use the model: "When you _____ I feel _____, because _____."

2nd person gathers their thoughts and responds; 1st person listens only.

Share your thoughts and your feelings, use "I" statements.

Use the model: "When you _____ I feel _____, because _____."

(If you get stuck, breathe take a big emotional step back and focus on what you could do to express your inner, emotional truth.)

Appropriately discuss the issues. Respectfully acknowledge the other person's point of view (this does not necessarily mean that you are agreeing with it.). How can everyone's needs be fulfilled, hopefully to an acceptable level.

Make decisions.

Create a positive ending.

Getting Stuck

There are three ways that people can get stuck and fight unfairly and counterproductively:

Note: Consider taping (video-tape or audio) your sessions. This offers excellent feedback about what is happening, which may motivate you to improve your behavior.

1. Getting caught up in complaining, criticizing, blaming (vs. responsibility), defending, etc., usually resulting in cycles of repetition and leading to further problems.
2. Focusing on other's attitudes, behaviors or character, rather than yourself.
3. Assumptions about the motivations of the others: self-serving, hurtful or wrong.

Trouble Shooting: If the person(s) you are interacting with goes outside of the structure, it is necessary to carefront them. Ask a neutral question such as "What's going on?" or "Are you aware that you are not staying within our agreement?" You could use symbolic communication like "Volume," "Distance" or "White Flag."

Finding a solution is often about perspective. If you look at the situation from a bigger (or the other person's) point of view, that will expand the way you look at the issue and the solution. Consider that your way may not be the only way or the best way. Mentally move far enough back so that you see the big picture. Trade positions and argue the other person's position. Hurting a person with whom you want to be in a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship, is not worth winning or being right, especially over a small issue. You can agree to disagree.

Conclusion

If you want the conflicted relationship to work, you must find a way to resolve conflicts. Your behavior is the reality of what you believe and want. If you want the relationship to work, you must be active, constructive and supportive. Becoming good Fair Fighters is worth the effort. It will help create a quality bond and solid partnership.

The NUMBER ONE predictor of the future of a relationship is based on how you end your fighting/conflicts. Attempt to end your interaction in a positive manner. Saying something like, "Let's agree to disagree for now and focus on (a known positive activity)." Or "It's unfortunate that we are having this disagreement; I love you even if I disagree with you."

If you have had several failed attempts or even one disaster, consider going to a trained professional for help. They can help you go through the process, step by step.

“Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.”
Benjamin Franklin

Resources

50 Activities for Conflict Resolution

www.business-marketing.com/store/gender.html#2063?OVRAW=Helen%20Fisher&OVKEY=helen%20fisher&OVMTTC=standard