



How To Have FIGHTS
That Bring You Closer
Together.

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Introduction: About Fighting

Nearly every couple that ever lived has, at one time or another, fought. The fights may range from a few angry words exchanged to drawn-out shouting matches that rattle the windows and frighten the dog. By the same token, some couples fight only once a month, while others fight several times a week.

Very few people enjoy fighting with their partners. In fact, marital satisfaction drops considerably when there are numerous fights. One study lists frequent conflict as the cause of divorce in more than half of the respondents.

To be clear, by fighting, we mean a disagreement characterized by anger on one or both sides, a discussion marked by hostility. What we don't mean is either physical or verbal abuse. Fighting may be normal, abuse is not, and should not be tolerated.

So why do disagreements turn hostile? We become angry when we are frustrated, when our goals conflict with our partner's, when we feel attacked, and when we are frightened. It may not be obvious why fear is a trigger for anger, but our brains are hard-wired that way. Anger is part of the fight-flight response, an ancient survival mechanism. The biochemistry of the two responses is identical. We are programmed to either run from danger or fight it to the death.

So paradoxically, it often happens that in a fight, one partner becomes frightened that the other one is pulling away and is going to leave them. That dread becomes expressed as anger, and the greater the fear, the greater the hostility.

We can feel attacked on any number of levels, including physically, emotionally, and in our core values, which form an important part of who we are. The brain is wired in such a way that ideas and symbols can signal an attack as that feels as real as a pouncing tiger

To use a trivial example, supposing you come home from a frustrating day at work. When you walk into the bathroom, you see that the toothpaste is lying on the counter, and the cap is off. A small amount of white paste is already oozing from the top onto the sink. This has been an ongoing issue between you and your partner for months. You have asked him repeatedly to remember to replace the cap on the toothpaste, and every time, he promises to do so in the future. But once again, he has forgotten.

Almost before you are aware of it, you have reached a conclusion. The absent cap shows that he does not care about what you say. He has ignored his promise to you, and even though he knows how important it is to you that the sink counter is neat, he hasn't bothered to keep it that way.

If it hadn't been a hard day at work, you might not be reacting so intensely but you came home carrying the frustration of the day with you. And so you rush to the living room, where your husband is watching the news, and say, "You are a slob!"

And the fight is on.

The toothpaste cap was an assault on your sense of neatness and order, but the real trigger, the attack, came from your conclusion that your husband did not care about your needs.

Later, when you have both cooled off and reconnected after the fight, you may find yourself wondering how such a heated battle could have begun around something as tiny as a toothpaste cap.

Many angry and hurtful fights begin over things that are just as insignificant. Of course, others are much deeper and more significant. In both cases, though, when both parties are angry, the issues are rarely resolved.

In this report, I am going to show you a way of fighting that can lead to resolution and improved understanding. It calls for both parties knowing and agreeing to the guidelines for a "fair fight." Sometimes, it will be a slightly different form, a "deferred fight."

When you follow this plan, you'll find that:

- Once insoluble problems finally get resolved.
- The disagreements that remain bother you much less.
- You and your partner gain a new understanding of each other.
- Your ability to communicate with each other increases steadily.
- That lingering hurt and resentment after fighting diminishes or disappears.
- You both feel a new sense of trust in your partner and your relationship.
- Your relationship feels stronger than ever.

In this short report, you'll discover everything necessary to understand why you fight, and how to transform those clashes from battles into collaborations. It's a lot to take in. If it were being presented in our coaching work, it would emerge naturally over several sessions. In print, it probably will take several reading sessions to get through. You may find it useful to print it out so that you can highlight important points and make notes.

Like any set of new skills, this program will require practice, but once you master it, your relationship will never be the same. And if you run into difficulties, don't worry, help is at hand. See the last chapter.

One final note to the reader: in the example used throughout this report, I have used the convention that the "you" referred to is a female involved in a heterosexual married relationship and that her partner is male.

That choice was made for simplicity's sake and was not intended to indicate a bias towards heterosexuality, or towards married relationships. It is also not intended to suggest that males are usually the problem.

Clearly (at least to me) the example is equally applicable if the sexes are reversed, or if both parties are of the same sex, and whether referring to marriage, living together or any other type of long-term relationship.

Chapter One – Fighting Fair

Anger happens quickly – in the blink of an eye. In part, this is because the part of the brain that controls the "fight or flight" response – the amygdala – responds more rapidly than the "thinking" part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex. As we become angry, the body is flooded with stress hormones as it prepares to take action. Our muscles tighten, our heart rate increases, and we are prepared to run from a tiger or grab a spear and battle it to the death.

In the usual fight, voices are raised, accusations are flung, and often, hurtful words are spoken. The fight ends either when one party grows tired of it and leaves, or one of the couple surrenders, not because they are convinced, but merely to bring peace.

A fair fight, on the other hand, aims at understanding and resolution. It could be called “conscious fighting,” as opposed to “reflexive fighting,” because you remain observing and aware of what is going on throughout the fight, rather than becoming lost in the flood of anger.

Guidelines for a Fair Fight

Having a “fair fight” means maintaining some control over our angry impulses, something that some find difficult. The first step is designed to help with that.

If you or your partner have been drinking, defer the fight.

Alcohol can fuel anger, particularly in people who tend to be angry anyway. This alcohol-fueled anger is usually out of proportion to the event that triggered it and can turn violent. Moreover, drinking lowers inhibitions, including inhibitions towards expressing anger. It can also impair

judgment. This is not the state of mind you want to be in when trying to have a fair fight. If either of you has been drinking, make a date to carry on the discussion when you are both clear-headed.

Step One

Recognize that you are angry. Tell yourself "Right now, I am angry." That phrase accomplishes two things. One, it helps you get back in contact with the rational part of your mind, the observing "I", that can reflect on your feelings and actions. By saying "right now," you are also grounding the feeling in time. It reminds your brain that this is a feeling that will pass.

By identifying the emotion, you achieve some distance from it and are more able to remain aware of your actions.

This is also an opportunity to decide if you are too angry to have a "fair fight," If you see that you are focused on punishing your partner, on "letting him have it," then this is not the time to seek resolution. When that is the case, acknowledge what's going on and make a date to talk about it later. You might say something like, "I'm too angry to talk about this now. Let's talk about it in an hour when we're both calmer." If your partner is unable to stay with the guidelines of a fair fight, you can say something similar.

The structure of a postponed fight is slightly different from one that occurs at the time and will be described later in the report.

Step Two: No raised voices.

This may take some practice, but it is part of the process of standing back from your anger. The minute one person raises their voice, it signals an attack to the other and immediately raises the tension level. By staying in a conversational voice tone, you lower the general tension level and allow real dialogue to emerge.

Step Three – Avoid personal attacks and criticism.

That means no name-calling or labeling. It also means to try to keep your statements limited to the behaviors that upset you, not the person.

This can be hard to do in the midst of a fight. In the heat of the moment, we often speak to inflict injury on our partner. We see that in children, who angrily tell their parents, "I hate you. I wish you were dead," even though that is an idea that under normal circumstances would strike terror in their hearts. Often, we do the same as adults, hurling insults that we would never say under normal circumstances.

By avoiding personal attacks, we remain free to address the real issue – the behavior that led to the fight.

Going back to our earlier example, try to keep your comments centered on the uncapped toothpaste, rather than telling your partner that he is a slob.

Anger provokes anger. When we are the target of anger, we become defensive, and our brains usually operate with the principle that the best defense is an offense. With both parties responding to the other's anger, it is easy for a fight to escalate until unforgivable words are being shouted. Those statements can linger, poisoning the relationship, long after the heat of the argument. It's important to keep the argument from getting to that point, and if it is headed in that direction, you can exit from the fight in the way described above.

Step Four – Try not to fight in front of the children.

In a small apartment, or with very young children, this may be difficult, but not impossible. When parents fight, it can be frightening and confusing, especially for younger children. Since they are children, they will not understand what the fight is about. Instead, they may make up explanations for the fight, which include assuming that it is somehow their fault. They may also feel forced to take sides between their parents. At the very least, the fight will disturb their feeling that home is a safe and secure place. If you must fight within the children's hearing, the fairer the fight, the better.

Step Five – Take turns in speaking and no interrupting.

Allow the partner who begins to finish their statement. Listen to what they have to say, if possible, with friendly interest. Don't rehearse how you will respond, even if you think they are being unfair. Realize that they are reporting the situation *as it seems to them*. You probably have a very different view of it, and that's completely normal. We all see events from our own perspectives. As your partner speaks, try to understand without judgment how the situation seems from their point of view.

Step Six – Speak to build understanding.

One of the most important goals of a fair fight is having both partners understand what the problem is from the other's perspective. A good way of beginning is by explaining how you reacted to the behavior that bothered you. The more you can explain it, the better.

Try to be open about your part in the problem. If certain things are a trigger for you, acknowledge it. Being willing to be vulnerable signals your good intentions, and reduces the likelihood of either of you falling back into old patterns of blaming and attack.

Going back to the toothpaste example, you might say, "When I saw that you had not replaced the cap on the toothpaste, I also noticed that toothpaste was starting to seep out onto the sink counter. It really upset me. It's really important to me that the house be neat. It probably goes back to when my mother was sick when I was young. The house would become chaotic, and it frightened me because it felt like there was no grownup in charge. Anyway, after I saw the toothpaste, I thought about the way we had talked about it in the past, and you had promised me that you would try to

remember to put the cap back on. I guess it felt like you didn't care about your promise, or about the way it upsets me. Like you didn't care about me or the house."

Step Seven. Don't Go Into History.

Don't bring up other examples from the past. First, it confuses the discussion. The intention is to resolve the problem that just happened. There is no need to reinforce it with past examples, and to do so can easily sound like an exercise in blaming, which will lead to defensiveness. Going into the past nearly always derails the direction of the conversation by getting caught up in details. If you have explained why what happened bothered you, you do not need more evidence.

Step Eight: Avoid generalizations.

The most frequent are "you always," or "you never" statements. The natural reaction is to defend against them by bringing up counter-examples. This is another way of derailing the conversation and is likely to raise the anger level. Generalizations are accusations and making accusations works against finding a resolution.

Step Eight: Stick with one issue.

When anger floods our brain, often other things that angered us will come to mind. As tempting as it may be, don't bring them up. Remember that your goal is to reach understanding and resolution of the current problem.

Step Nine: Be specific about what you need and want from your partner.

The change in your partner's behavior that you desire may seem obvious to you, but you cannot assume it will be to him. Be clear and specific about how you would like him to respond, and what changes you want in his behavior.

You may need to do some self-examination to be clear on what you really want.

Returning to the toothpaste cap example, it may seem obvious that what you want is for your partner to put the cap on the toothpaste after every use. That's certainly one outcome you desire. But what about the feeling that he does not care about what you say? Wouldn't a resolution involve addressing that?

It may turn out that what you also want from your partner is not just another promise that he will put the cap back on the toothpaste. You also want him to reassure you that he cares about what you say. You will need to state that need very clearly.

Step Ten: Don't Threaten.

Some use the threat of leaving or divorce as a way of emphasizing that an issue is important to them. Don't do it. It increases the tension level, can lead to heightened anger, and work against reaching any kind of resolution.

If divorce is a serious option for you, it calls for a different conversation. Hopefully, the object of that discussion will be getting an agreement to start couple coaching or counseling. It is a conversation that is best held when both partners are relatively calm.

Other kinds of threats, for example, withholding sex, are equally undesirable. Threats turn the dialogue into a power struggle and are antithetical to reaching a resolution.

Step Eleven: Offer to help

When you specify the change in behavior or position you are hoping for, offer to help your partner in carrying it out. For example, in our toothpaste example, you might ask whether he would find it helpful if you posted a sign reminding him to replace the cap.

But consider a more complex example. Your fight is around the fact that sometimes, your partner seems to bully the children into obeying him. You tell him that at those times, he reminds you of a charging rhinoceros. When you discuss how he might change his behavior, you ask if it would be helpful if you just say the word "rhinoceros" when he behaves that way.

Notice that when you offer a suggestion, you always are asking whether he would find it helpful. Unwanted help can seem intrusive and controlling.

If you do not have any idea how you might be helpful, you can always ask.

By its nature, asking for a change in your partner's behavior can seem controlling. By offering to help, you are further reinforcing the idea that this is a shared problem, and that you do not expect him to do all the work.

The Response

The response to your partner's initial statement should also be conducted in a conversational voice tone, without criticism or personal attacks, and following the other guidelines laid out above. As with the initial statement, the goal of the response is to seek mutual understanding and resolution.

Whenever you are responding to a partner's statement, start by restating what they have said, using your own words. For example, "If I understood you correctly, you are saying that..."

Miscommunication happens frequently. Sometimes, the person speaking has not actually said what they thought they had, and sometimes, the listener has missed an important nuance or has heard something other than what was intended. By restating what you have heard, you create an

opportunity to correct misunderstandings and ensure that you are both operating with the same information.

It is important to respond to your partner without defensiveness. We become defensive when we feel attacked, criticized, guilty, ashamed or frightened. It can lead to some unhelpful ways of responding, including angry or sarcastic attacks, blaming, denial, and the silent treatment.

About Apologies

Part of your response may be an apology. Some people find apologizing difficult. It can be hard on our self-image to admit that we did something upsetting or hurtful to another, but it is an essential to reconnecting with the person who feels wronged by our actions.

An apology is a way of acknowledging that we wronged another. It may have been inadvertent, and if so, you can say that But when it is called for, expressing regret is not optional. Going to our toothpaste example, here's one possible way you might state it: "I'm sorry I keep leaving the cap off the toothpaste. I have no excuse for it. As I think about it, it just seems to be a bad habit that I will have to unlearn."

Beyond the Response

The issue may be resolved in the first round, but it is more likely that although you both have a greater understanding of the other, the central issue remains unresolved.

If that is the case, you can go on to another round in which your partner speaks, and you respond. The same applies throughout the conversation.

You continue the dialogue until the issue is resolved or until you feel you have gone as far as you can go in the conversation. When the two of you only seem to be repeating the same things, it is time to stop the conversation. Do not continue it to the point of frustration and anger.

What if things get heated?

You may find that, despite your good intentions, the conversation starts to veer away from being a fair fight. Voices become raised, personal attacks are thrown, and old hurts and resentments are brought up.

The first thing to do when that occurs is to call for a "time out." When things have quieted down, begin by identifying what is going on. Then try to ask the following questions: of yourself and your partner:

1. When did things change from a controlled dialogue to an angry fight? What was the triggering event?
2. Why did it happen? Did one of you feel attacked or criticized? Was it the way that something was said?

Try to use this “time out” to get insight into what triggers you and your partner's anger, and how to avoid it.

If one or both of you remain too angry to continue with a fair fight, stop the dialogue and plan a time to resume discussion, using the guidelines for a "deferred fight."

End with Acknowledging

Whether or not you have resolved the issues, as you end the conversation, take the time to acknowledge the effort the two of you have expended in trying to reach a resolution. Thank each other for sticking with the guidelines and for the hard work you have done in trying to resolve the issue, whether a solution has been found or not.

Acknowledgment and gratitude is an important part of a relationship. It is normal to want the things we do for those we love to be acknowledged. We may cook their favorite meal or massage their aching muscles out of love, but it is also important to us to know that these efforts have been noticed and appreciated. All too often, these efforts are taken for granted. That is unfortunate. Showing appreciation helps to nurture a couple's connection. It shows your partner that you see them and value them, and reinforces your words of love.

By working to find another, better way of communicating when anger and disagreement disrupt your relationship, the two of you are taking steps toward deepening your connection. That calls for conscious effort in changing your old ways of fighting, and you both deserve to be appreciated for doing that, even if you are not completely successful at first.

Chapter Two – The Deferred Fight

A fight is deferred when you realize that you or your partner are too angry to have a fair fight, or when other things get in the way, such as making dinner for children or leaving for work. Since you have taken the opportunity to defer the fight, you can put the intervening time to good use in preparing for the discussion.

Understanding Your Anger

First, you can use it to understand the anger you were feeling towards your partner. Anger is a normal human emotion, and as mentioned earlier, it often arises before we have had time to think about why we are angry. This is an opportunity to learn more about it.

Some people use the expression "You (or he or she) made me angry." This is a very misleading statement. Of course, we are affected by external events, but we are the ones who choose how we respond to them. That choice is often not conscious, but that does not mean that we did not choose it.

As we look into ourselves, we can try to understand more about our anger. As a start, we can ask what it was that led to our becoming angry. Can we pinpoint the event or, even better, the thought that triggered our response?

In our example, you may come to realize that the first trigger was the sight of the toothpaste leaking out of the neck of the tube towards the sink counter. But the second trigger, the one that really made you angry, was the thought that he didn't care about what you said, or his promise to you.

Now for the next step. Having identified the triggers for your anger, ask yourself what about that trigger led you to feel angry. Here are some common reasons we become angry:

1. **We feel attacked.** If so, what was being attacked? Was it your identity? Your self-esteem? An important core value you hold?

2. **We feel ignored, as though what we say does not matter.** This can also be an attack on our sense of self-worth.
3. **We feel as though a core value is being challenged.** This can be an assault on our sense of identity as well.
4. **Our partner is in direct opposition to our doing or getting something important to us.** Again, if we dig deeper, this can end up being an attack on our identity or values.

Now, ask yourself what you assumed your partner's intentions were when they took the action that angered you. Do you assume he was being selfish, mean, withholding, even cruel? Given what you know of your partner, is that assumption likely to be true?

Once you have identified your assumption, ask yourself whether there might be another explanation for their behavior. To go back to our toothpaste cap example, you may find that you assumed your partner was being oppositional, showing you that you could not control him. Now, in looking for an alternative explanation, you might decide that it is also possible that he was simply acting habitually, without thinking about it. With that idea, you might find that your anger diminishes to irritation.

Planning the Discussion

Now that you understand your anger, it's time for you to do a little planning for the upcoming discussion. The most important way you can prepare is to ask yourself what you want to come out of it. What outcome would you like to see from the dialogue?

You may find that a part of you wants your partner to suffer. That is, you want to punish them. The urge to punish is one that often first appears in childhood. The logic is, "you hurt me, so I want you to hurt as much as I hurt," a kind of "tit for tat." But is your partner's suffering what you *really* want as an outcome? Probably not.

If you go into the upcoming discussion with a desire to punish, you will almost certainly find it difficult to hold to the guidelines for a fair fight. Punishing your partner will probably lead to their hurt and defensive anger. It will be very unlikely to lead to their having a sense of remorse, or a decision to change their behavior. And it will almost certainly not lead to a better relationship at the end of the discussion.

Perhaps your desire to punish is based on the outmoded idea that punishment is the best way to change behavior. This may be successful when one person has power over the other, but at best, it leads to change based on fear. Ask yourself whether you want your future relationship with your partner to be based on fear. If you are like most of us, your answer will be a resounding no.

In short, you will need to let go of the desire to punish if you want the upcoming discussion to lead to a different outcome than any other fight.

If you do not want to punish your partner, then what, exactly, would be the ideal outcome of this discussion? Try to be very clear about how your partner's behavior would change if you had the

outcome you desire. Be specific about what actions or changed behavior you hope to see as a result of this discussion.

In our toothpaste example, you have two desired outcomes. You want him to replace the cap on the toothpaste after he uses it. You also want his reassurance that what you say matters. Most disagreements are more complex.

Understanding what outcome you want from the discussion will help you to remain focused during it, and will serve as a guide to help you get back on track if you find yourself or your partner straying off-topic.

The Deferred Fight

By the time this dialogue begins, anger on both sides has probably diminished considerably, especially if you have both been doing the above exercises.

You and your partner will need to agree on who will make the opening statement. Usually, this will be the person who felt wronged or has a complaint. In the toothpaste example, it would be you, since it was you who was upset by your partner's behavior.

When you make the opening statement, you will approach it in a somewhat different way from the “fight in the moment” discussed in the previous chapter.

Begin with the premise that the purpose of this discussion is for you and your partner to find a solution to a problem in the relationship, not to complain about his behavior. In fact, you are going to ask for his help in finding a solution to a problem that affects you both.

It might sound something like this: “I need your help in finding a solution to a problem. I hope we can find one that works for both of us. Here's the problem: When you leave the cap off the toothpaste, it really bothers me...” and you go on to explain how that behavior is a problem for you.

Before you end your initial statement, you will say, “So, how do we go about solving this problem? Is there some way I can help you in remembering to put the cap back on the toothpaste?”

By beginning in this way, you've made it clear that you are not out to complain about him, or to rub his nose in his shortcomings. By asking for his help in finding a solution, you are completely shifting the focus of the discussion from adversarial, like most fights, to collaborative. You are asking him to partner with you.

If either of you should stray into blaming or criticizing, take the opportunity to restate the idea that this is a shared problem on which you are working together to find a solution.

Other than this, all the guidelines in the previous chapter apply to the deferred fight as well. Other than the emphasis on collaboration, the response also remains the same, including restating your partner's opening statement.

Chapter Three – Change, Resolution, Compromise, and Acceptance

After the two of you have stated your understanding of the situation and responded to each other, it is time to move to the second goal of the dialogue, reaching a resolution of the problem. The first goal, you may recall, is understanding.

When a conflict or problem exists in a relationship, there are five possible outcomes. These are:

1. Remain a victim
2. Change the relationship.
3. Change your perspective of it.
4. Accept it.
5. Leave the relationship.

Although the example problem used throughout this report was deliberately simple, the truth is that many of the causes of fights are more not only more complex but can also be much more disruptive to the happiness and satisfaction of both partners.

Remaining a victim means tolerating the existence of a problem because one feels helpless to take any other action. People who are victims often feel resentful, angry, or depressed by their situation, and their belief that they can take no other action can lead them to feelings of low-self esteem and self-attack. Clearly, as a problem-solving mechanism, it can have very negative effects both on the individual and the relationship.

Changing the relationship is the object of fair fighting. Sometimes, it calls for one of the partners changing, while at other times, both will change.

We will be speaking later about changing your perspective on the problem and accepting it.

The final possibility is leaving the relationship. For most couples, this is the most drastic solution and is usually considered a final alternative after everything else fails. Of all the solutions, this one

can have the highest emotional cost, as well as having very real financial costs. When children are involved, their emotional well-being can suffer as well, although often, not as much as it might from the first alternative, remaining a victim.

About Change

The resolution to a “fair fight” will involve a change in the relationship, as well as in one or both of the partners, even if it is sometimes a relatively minor one.

Despite some people's beliefs to the contrary, the truth is that you cannot make another person change unless they are willing and want to.

Why would someone want to change as a result of a fair fight? There are several possible reasons:

1. After hearing their partner's view of things, they may see their position or behavior in a different light.
2. They may be motivated to change by a desire to please their partner, or as an expression of love.
3. They may be motivated to change by a desire to avoid future conflict, probably the least desirable reason because it may also give rise to resentment.
4. They may come to see that the negative effects of their behavior outweigh its value to them.
5. They may have been thinking of changing anyway, and hearing its effect on their partner provides a final impetus towards change.

The reasons not to change can be complex, but might include:

1. The behavior or position may be motivated by strong, unconscious forces.
2. The behavior or position may be an important part of their identity, and changing it may seem like giving up who they are.
3. The very fact of being asked to change may bring up strong negative emotions (often of unconscious origins.)
4. They may see the request to change as a power struggle in the relationship, and changing as losing the battle.
5. The desired change may conflict with another, stronger need.

As an example of the last reason, consider a situation in which a wife feels insulted by her mother-in-law. The fight happens when the couple return from a visit to his parent's home, where she felt her husband did not stand up for her. . During the fight, she tells him that she wants him to defend her when his mother attacks her. The husband feels torn between his love for his wife and his strong feelings about being a "good son." Instead of stepping forward to confront his mother, he suggests that his wife learn to ignore her insults, the same solution he has employed since childhood. She may leave the fight feeling unsupported and frustrated by what to her is his unwillingness to stand up for her.

Finding Resolution

Sometimes, it only takes a clear statement of why something is a problem and what change is expected to bring about a resolution to a fight.

Usually, the fights that can be easily resolved involve fairly straightforward issues, like our toothpaste example. In this scenario, both partners express their view of the situation, and a simple solution is found.

Returning to our example, after you have expressed the reason that not recapping the toothpaste is so upsetting, your partner explains that brushing his teeth is the last step in his morning and evening toilette. He is usually in a hurry, and he just forgets about the cap. It is a habit that goes back to his childhood.

He also says that he never really understood why it was so upsetting to you before now, but your explanation has made it clear, and he realizes why it is so important to you.

You ask if it would be helpful if you posted a sign on the bathroom mirror reminding him to put the cap back, and he agrees that it might be. After the discussion, you go to your computer and download a graphic of a tube of toothpaste, with a friendly reminder to replace the cap

Over the next few days, you are pleased to see that he is carrying through on his resolve, and the toothpaste is always thoroughly sealed.

Reaching a Compromise

Learning to compromise is one of the most important skills we can have in resolving conflicts of all kinds. In practice, it means giving up looking for the perfect solution and finding the “good enough” solution instead.

Compromise is nearly always involved in resolving complex problems. It involves changing your original goals in the conflict until you find a solution that is acceptable to your partner. Needless to say, it calls for flexibility in both parties.

So how do you go about compromising? The first step is one you've already done, clarifying the outcome you want from the discussion. You will probably have several goals, and it may be that some goals will be made up of several sub-goals.

These goals and sub-goals will fall into two categories. Some of them will be things that would be nice, or that you would like to happen. But others are non-negotiable. They must occur for you to feel that this has been a successful discussion.

An article in *Psychology Today*¹ lists 7 ways to compromise on a disagreement. Some of the approaches only work for certain kinds of disagreements. Nevertheless, it is a useful way of thinking about the subject. The types of compromise are as follows:

1. Let's try to find a way to split the difference or meet in the middle
2. If you'll do this for me, I'll do that for you.
3. How about this time, you do it my way (or let me have my way), and next time, I'll defer to you?
4. What if we do it my way when I'm doing it, and do it your way when you're doing it?
5. How about part of what I want with part of what you want?
6. Could you try it my way for a week or two and see how it works? And if you don't agree this way works better, or you can't comfortably with it, we'll go back to the old way.
7. Can we handle this one my way, but that one your way?

There are probably other creative ways to reconcile differences through compromise, but that list, which is fairly self-explanatory, is a good starting point.

For compromise to be successful, of course, it requires that both parties be willing to be flexible about the outcome of the discussion. But even with flexibility, some conflicts will not be resolved, at least not in a single discussion.

Sometimes, the best outcome from a discussion that can be expected is a decision to continue working on the problem. A discussion about infidelity is one example.

Infidelity is too large a topic to discuss in any detail here. Typically, this will be one of the most emotional fights a couple can have. Feelings of hurt and betrayal on one side often clash with feelings of guilt and perhaps long-unexpressed dissatisfactions on the other.

In some cases, the best outcome that can be reached will be a decision to continue discussing the problem. It may take further discussions for both parties to agree to remain together. And clearly, it may require many further discussions to rebuild trust and deal with hurt and resentment. Often, these discussions will require working with a relationship coach or therapist.

The good news is that successfully navigating through this difficult period can bring a new level of closeness and understanding to a couple. In many cases, it provides a doorway to the first real and open emotional communication for the couple, which will help allow that the relationship going forward to be stronger than ever.

Changing Perspective

Often, the new understanding that emerges from fair fights can change the way we see the problem, so that it no longer is problematic for us, or is at least easier to deal with.

1 Seltzer, Leon F, "Compromise Made Simple: 7 Handy Tips for Couples," *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201510/compromise-made-simple-7-handy-tips-couples>",

For example, Becky loves swimming, and since she and Mark live a short distance from the ocean, wants to spend as much time there as possible. Mark agrees to it, but is always irritable when they go, and wants to leave long before Becky does. When she finally brings this up, he confesses to a deep-seated body shame that makes being in a swimsuit almost unbearable for him.

As a result, Becky no longer sees his irritability and desire to leave as being annoying but realizes the effort it is taking him to be on the beach at all. In fact, she works at helping him deal with his body shame by speaking about it and reassuring him.

There are many times that our beliefs and assumptions that we bring to a situation play a large part in making it problematic for us. But because “fair fights” aim at increasing understanding rather than blaming, they allow us to have new ways of seeing these conflicts that can often profoundly shift their impact on us.

Acceptance

Despite you and your partner's best efforts, there may be conflicts that are not resolved by fair fighting, even with a willingness to compromise. In the end, the only way of dealing with these conflicts may be acceptance.

What is acceptance? It might be helpful by beginning with what acceptance is **not**. Acceptance does not mean tolerating a situation or martyring oneself to put up with it. It does not mean trying to ignore it. It does not mean burying your feelings about a situation.

True acceptance means looking at reality as what is, without resenting it, or feeling it is unfair. All other options have been considered and are either unavailable or less acceptable to you than the current situation.

When we have come to a true acceptance of a situation, we accommodate to it, without feeling defeated or crushed by it. It does not mean that we have to approve of it. But we recognize it as reality.

If a partner suffers a debilitating injury, for example, or suffers a long-term illness, that requires extensive care-taking on our part, we might choose to accept the situation, although it brings about a major change in the relationship that may also severely impact our way of life.

Acceptance is not the same as feeling like a victim. It is, rather, a deliberate choice. In the case we've just discussed, we are not helpless. We have considered, and rejected, the option of leaving the relationship, and take responsibility for our choice.

Accepting a problem in a relationship means deciding that it is how things are, and cannot be changed. We may say “this is unfair,” or “I resent this,” but having said that, we let go of the feelings and move on.

Often, reaching acceptance calls for serious self-exploration. We need to fully understand what stands between us and acceptance. Frequently, the reasons we tell ourselves that we cannot accept a situation are not the real issues. Those have to be discovered.

For example, Jane was Harry's second wife. When Harry's 12-year-old daughter from his first marriage began spending alternate weekends with them, Jane found it intolerable. She told herself it was because the girl was a reminder of Harry's ex-wife. But on examination, it developed the Jane had a younger sister. When the sister was born, she quickly became the center of attention, and Jane, only four years old, was ignored and left to fend for herself.

It became clear to Jane that her real fear was losing Harry's attention and love. The solution was that Harry consciously made time to pay attention to Jane during his daughter's visits. It didn't take much for Jane to feel reassured, especially since she understood that her anger came from the fears of her four-year-old self. With that reassurance, Jane was able to accept the situation and began to try to be a caring stepmother to the young girl.

Finally, it is important to remember that the decision to accept a situation, like most other decisions, can always be changed, particularly if the circumstances change.

Chapter Four – Conclusion and Getting Help

As you may have realized, by design, a fair fight is structured in a way that can make a couple feel closer by the end of it, whether a resolution is reached or not.

By emphasizing collaboration, refraining from attacks and criticism, and being open about one's own part in the situation, the partners engaging in the fight deepen their understanding of each other. Even though they are dealing with conflict, they are working together as partners to find a solution, rather than as adversaries. This is especially true of the deferred fight.

Let's review the guidelines for a fair fight.

1. Recognize that you are angry.
2. No personal attacks or criticism
3. No raised voices.
4. Try not to fight in front of the children.
5. Take turns speaking No interrupting
6. Speak to build understanding.
7. Don't go into history.
8. Stick with one issue
9. Be specific about what you want and need from your partner.
10. Don't threaten.
11. Offer to help.

In a deferred fight, and when the anger levels are low enough in a direct fair fight, begin by asking for help in solving a mutual problem, that is, be collaborative.

At the conclusion of both fights, acknowledge and thank each other for sticking to the guidelines and working hard to find a mutually satisfying solution, even if you have not yet found a resolution to the problem.

It bears repeating that learning to have a fair fight is a new skill for both of you, and like most new skills, it will take time to master. Don't expect to do it perfectly the first time out. If personal attacks creep in, remind yourselves that they have no place in a fair fight. And if the anger levels get too high, be prepared to stop and defer the fight until you both cool down.

Even though this has been written as a guide for couples, it may also be obvious that the principles of the fair fight can be used with other relationships besides your primary one. Many people use these ideas to change the way they handle conflicts with close friends, siblings, and even their older children.

As a result, they discover that fights that might once have led to hurt and distance now lead to increased understanding, resolution, and closeness.

Getting More Help

For many, this report will be all you need to start making important changes in your relationship. But there also will be others who prefer having more help. Not all couple problems can be resolved only using fair fighting. Also, some may prefer having the support and security of working through their difficulties with a highly-trained and experienced couples coach, rather than going it alone.

Over my forty years of helping couples, I have helped them go from antagonism and distance to warm, caring relationships.

They can achieve:

- Better communication and understanding of each other.
- Feeling closer through heightened emotional intimacy.
- A greater sense of security with their partner.
- Stronger mutual appreciation.
- An ongoing recommitment to their relationship.

Learning to fight fair can be only one part of a process of growth and change that leads them to become a true partnership with strong mutual support caring and love.

The sessions are held by phone or video, making it possible for even people with busy schedules to find time for them without worrying about getting to my office.

Important note: Many people wonder if relationship coaching can work if only one partner is engaged in it. The answer in many cases is definitely yes.

When one person in a relationship changes, it can completely transform the dynamics of the couple's interactions. So if you prefer to work alone, or your partner is unable or unwilling to participate, you may still bring about the changes you desire.

If you would like to explore working with me to transform your relationship, why not set up an appointment for a free phone consultation?

These conversations usually take about 30 minutes. In them, we can get greater clarity on the issues you are facing. We'll also have a chance to get to know each other and decide whether we are a good fit for working together.

There is no charge and, of course, no obligation.

To get started today, click on the link at the end of this report. It will take you to a page on my website where you can schedule your free consultation session. At the time of your choice, I will call you, and we can begin helping you move closer to the relationship you desire.

Click on: <https://stephendaycoaching.com/schedule> to schedule your call.