



fight club

Are you and your mate fighting well or fighting foul? Find out if the way you argue is helping or harming your relationship – and what you can do to change your scrapping ways. BY KATE RAE

We've all heard the couple that says "Oh, we never fight" as proof that their relationship is flawless. But the truth is, fighting can be an important part of a healthy relationship – if it's done right. Resolving conflict lets you express your needs, vent your frustrations and strengthen your relationship. "Fair fighting is part of a normal, healthy relationship," says Dr. Michal Regev, a registered psychologist and marriage and family therapist in Vancouver. So, get to the bottom of your fighting style and learn how to make your next tiff a productive one.

same old, same old

Ever feel like you're having the same fight over and over again? "Experts in the field say that 69 percent of the issues that couples fight about are unsolvable, or perpetual, issues," says Patrick Keelan, a Calgary psychologist and couples therapist. "A perpetual issue is one that is rooted in underlying differences in background or personality." So, if you're an extrovert who wants to go out all the time and your partner is a dedicated homebody, that's OK. You need to first understand and accept your differences – and then, says Keelan, you need to find ways to honour them.

HOW WE FIGHT

"Many times, our fighting style develops from what we witnessed as children," says Regev. It's not as simple as mirroring what you saw, though. For example, if you grew up with a mother who was a yeller, it's possible that your current fighting style is similar, but it's just as likely that you're an avoid-a-fight-at-all-costs person, having been frightened by it when you were younger.

And since our early experiences vary, the end result can be one couple with two very different fighting styles. "One person can be from a loud family that yelled a lot and it was no big deal, while the other may have come from a quiet family and considers any contradiction or loud voice a fight," says Regev.

So, what do couples fight about most? "Sex – especially frequency – money, different spending strategies, household chores and personal habits," she says.

SIGNS OF A BAD FIGHT

Studies have shown that what you're fighting about has little bearing on whether your relationship will succeed; it's *how* you fight that's more telling. The biggest sign of an unfair fight is when one

or both partners use weapons, says Regev. "Weapons are words or gestures that are used to deliberately hurt your partner, such as harsh put-downs and name-calling," she says.

Other signs of unhealthy fighting include lacking compromise, dismissing everything your partner says (even if it has merit) and making no attempts to soothe yourself or your partner when things escalate, says Patrick Keelan, a Calgary psychologist and couples therapist. He also cites the appearance of the following "four horsemen of the apocalypse" as red flags of an unfair fight.

1. CRITICISM

"Rather than discussing the issue in a constructive way, you make references to negative characteristics of your partner," says Keelan. So, instead of saying "I really wish you'd pick up around the house a little more – I'd really appreciate that," you say, "God, you're such a disgusting pig."

2. CONTEMPT

"This is an attitude of superiority toward your partner," says Keelan. Signs include eye-rolling and sarcasm and statements like, "You're an idiot." "This is a serious one to watch for," says Keelan. "It's really

predictive of a relationship headed in a downward direction."

3. DEFENSIVENESS

You're being defensive if you deny responsibility and make a counterattack whenever your partner brings up an issue – even if his concerns are legit.

4. STONEWALLING

Tuning out your partner and being totally unresponsive – either verbally or non-verbally – is another red flag. "This indicates a lack of emotional engagement," says Keelan. "It's usually a sign that the friendship part of the relationship is dead."

HOW CAN YOU FIGHT WELL?

If you're committed to fixing the way you fight, the most important thing to do is put away your scorecard. Healthy fighting doesn't mean winning a fight; it's about resolving an issue, says Regev. Here are some tips for resolving conflicts.

- **Put away the blazing guns.** Instead of letting loose the minute your partner walks in the door, practice a "soft start-up," says Keelan.
- **Present the issue.** Use "I" statements and express yourself assertively. There's a big difference between "I would really like for us to start saving money for retirement" and "You spend all of our money and we're going to end up eating cat food."
- **Listen to your partner.** Listen to your significant other in an effort to truly understand what he's saying – and not just to prepare your counter-argument. "Listen with curiosity, not defensiveness," says Regev.
- **Make amends.** If you find yourself be-

What are couples fighting about? Sex and money.

ing unfairly critical of your partner, apologize right away, says Keelan.

- **Learn to de-escalate.** Learn to watch for signs of escalation in the heat of your arguments (heavy breathing, louder voices, swearing) and try to take it down a notch. "Humour is a wonderful way to de-escalate an argument," says Regev. Just make sure that your joke isn't at your partner's expense.
- **Look for the horsemen.** "If you see any of them, you'll want to catch them right away before they cause too much damage," says Keelan.

WHEN IS IT TIME FOR THERAPY?

John Gottman, founder of The Gottman Institute and considered by many to be the granddaddy of couples therapy, found that the formula for a successful relationship was one-to-five negative versus positive exchanges. "Many couples who come to see me are surprised when they hear that because, for them, the opposite is true," says Regev. Just remember that, while therapy can help you understand your fights better and learn some new strategies, it isn't an episode of *The People's Court*. "A lot of people who come to me look at me as a judge," says Regev.

never go to bed angry: true or false?

Both. While you will ideally solve your issues in a timely matter, sometimes it's hard to wrap it all up in a neat and tidy bow before bedtime – and it's OK to take a well-needed time out to get some rest. Just be sure that both of you understand that you're going to revisit the issue the next day. "There's a big difference between going to bed angry and taking a conscious break," says Dr. Michal Regev, a registered psychologist and marriage and family therapist in Vancouver.

"I have to make it clear that I am there for both partners equally, not to prove that he's wrong and you're right."

A good couples therapist will assess your relationship (what's working and what isn't) and help identify patterns in your fighting. Before you can see a positive change, though, both parties have to agree to put down their weapons, says Regev. "You have to have a ceasefire before you can have peace," she says. ☺

when fighting becomes abuse

Yes, fighting is a normal part of a relationship, but abuse is not. Here are some signs that your partner isn't just fighting unfairly but being abusive.

- He humiliates you – either in public or in private.
- He tells you that you're worthless.
- He degrades you.
- You feel nervous about your physical safety.
- You're walking on eggshells to avoid setting off another fight.

what kind of fighter are you? find out at glow.ca/fighter