

Rules for Fighting Nicely

We all have different minds, different histories, different values, and different opinions. When these pieces of ourselves come into conflict with or are challenged by someone else, especially someone we care about, it can trigger a strong emotional response in us.

Even in a healthy relationship, conflict happens. It's important to remember that the goal in the conflict is to be seen, heard, and understood. Try to remember that it's not about winning or losing, it's about compromising. In a healthy compromise, everyone leaves just a little disappointed.

So how can we fight nicely to avoid saying or doing things we might regret, and to make a safe space for healthy compromise? Below are 7 rules to fighting nicely that can be helpful.

1

Keep it in the Present

When we feel like we have been wronged, it's easy to call to mind all the times we've felt that way before, but that doesn't help the current situation. We can't change the past, all we can do is learn in the present to do better in the future.

2

The Problem is the Problem (Not the Person)

When we view the other person as the problem, it immediately pits us against each other. When we view the problem as a breakdown of the connection between us and the other person, we can be on the same team and work together to fix it.

3

Avoid "Always" and "Never"

Language like "you *always* do this" or "we *never* do that" puts limits on how much we can expect to change and erases all the exceptions to the rule. A more helpful approach is to start with "it feels like most of the time" or "I feel like we hardly ever."

4

Use "I" Statements

The "I feel __ when you __ because __ I need __" structure gives us a clear way to communicate our needs, highlight the outcome of the other person's actions, and offer a framework for getting back to good, making it easier to be on the same team.

5

Communicate to Take a Break

Big emotions can put us at the edge of choices we can't take back. When we notice that the conflict is heading towards this edge, it is best to take a break to recenter, cool down, and remember what's important. Then, we can come back and try again.

6

Communicate for Understanding

Fighting nicely isn't about winning, it's about compromise and mutual understanding. If we take the time to listen to the other person it's more likely they'll take the time to listen to us too. (See Reflect, Correct, Respond handout for tips on active listening.)

7

Help Each Other Remember the Rules

It's a lot easier to fight nicely when we're all following the same rules. Before emotions get too big, share the rules so we can help each other stay on track. This isn't a "gotcha," it's about cooperating to stay on the same team especially when it's hard.

