

## Fight Fair to Improve Your Relationship



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By Denise Schipani

If you've been in a committed [relationship](#) for any length of time, you know that fighting is part of the deal. Arguing, disagreeing, clashing mightily over issues large and small not only have their place in a relationship, but most experts also agree that couples who have regular air-clearing arguments have healthier relationships than those who keep their slings and arrows buried deep inside. That said, every fight need not be a bloody battle—here's how to keep it fair and civil. After all, "this is the person whom it's easiest to hurt, so you have to be careful with his or her feelings for the sake of your relationship," says James Córdoba, PhD, a professor at Clark University and author of *The Marriage Checkup*. Here, 10 rules that ensure your blows hit above the belt.

### 1. Fight early, fight often

The idea is to get what's bugging you off your chest *when it first bugs you*, rather than [saving up](#) hurts and slights for some giant blowup every six months or so, says Dr. Córdoba. It's about being clear and forthright.

### 2. Use "I" statements (the right way)

You've heard that "I" statements are the way to go: not "You always spend too much money!", but "I get nervous about our financial situation when you spend without telling me." But too many couples use the "I" statement as a bludgeon, says [Kim Leatherdale](#), a New Jersey-based couples counselor. "You have to go beyond the [complaint](#)—"I hate when you come home late"—and add in a *request*, like, 'I feel nervous when you're out late; can you call when you're delayed?'"

### 3. No biting! (No kidding!)

The "no biting" rule doesn't just apply to literal chomping or other forms of physical abuse. No biting means no name-calling, and no making derogatory insults about your partner's *character*, says Dr. Córdoba. If you're upset that he leaves [clothes](#) on the floor, saying "You're such a pig!" is an attack. "The only thing he can do in response is defend himself by tossing an insult back. Not productive."

### 4. No third parties

Complaining to friends and family about your partner's slights only "muddies the issues and leaves bad feelings," says Leatherdale. Sure, there are times you need a sounding [board](#), but when you are actually in an argument with your partner, yelling something like, "Well, my friend Carol thinks you're wrong, too!" won't exactly enhance harmony.

### 5. Focus!

If an argument comes up, "stop doing whatever else you're doing," says Leatherdale. That means no texting, watching TV, etc. until a [resolution](#) is met. Also, try to deal solely with the issue at hand, without bringing in other problems (you can have those fights later!).

### 6. Take a break

If either or both of you are getting super-heated, and taking a short breather hasn't done the trick, you may need a longer time-out. Just say, "I need a break," and separate for long enough to really cool down. Forty-five minutes is ideal to recover physiologically, says Dr. Córdoba. "But don't use cooldowns to retreat



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completely from the fight; you have to promise to come back to it later." When arguments reach a boiling point, we react physiologically, with increased heart rate and [blood pressure](#). "When you're physiologically wound up, it's virtually impossible to fight productively or fairly," says Dr. Córdova.

#### 7. Skip the silent treatment

Surprise: Turning a cold shoulder accomplishes nothing. "What you're doing there is expecting your partner to read your [mind](#) about what's wrong," says Leatherdale. You may think you're avoiding conflict, but you're only making things worse, creating something *else* to fight about.

#### 8. Agree to disagree sometimes

You'll never resolve every argument, so sometimes it's best to give in for the sake of your relationship. Leatherdale says a useful question to keep in mind is, "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be [married](#)?" The idea is to respectfully agree that there are things you'll never see eye-to-eye on.

#### 9. No blaming

The aim of a fair fight is for both of you to take responsibility and work together to solve a problem. "If you put blame on your partner, the burden's all on him to [fix](#) it," says Leatherdale. And, to be fair, you shouldn't place all the blame on yourself, either.

#### 10. No below-the-belt remarks

In the heat of battle, it can be tempting to say the things you *know* will twist the [knife](#) in further, says Leatherdale. Hold your tongue; saying something like "No *wonder* your old girlfriend left you!" is the kind of mean slap that's hard to take back later.

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