Fair Fighting Rules

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Before you begin, ask yourself why you feel upset.

Are you truly angry because your partner left the mustard on the counter? Or are you upset because you feel like you're doing an uneven share of the housework, and this is just one more piece of evidence? Take time to think about your own feelings before starting an argument.

Discuss one issue at a time.

"You shouldn't be spending so much money without talking to me" can quickly turn into "You don't care about our family". Now you need to resolve two problems instead of one. Plus, when an argument starts to get off topic, it can easily become about everything a person has ever done wrong. We've all done a lot wrong, so this can be especially cumbersome.

No degrading language.

Discuss the issue, not the person. No put-downs, swearing, or name-calling. Degrading language is an attempt to express negative feelings while making sure your partner feels just as bad. This will just lead to more character attacks while the original issue is forgotten.

Express your feelings with I-statements and take responsibility for them.

"I feel angry." "I feel hurt when you ignore my phone calls." "I feel scared when you yell." These are good ways to express how you feel, and take responsibility for your feelings. Not what your partner feels, wants, or believes.

Take turns talking.

This can be tough, but be careful not to interrupt. Try setting a timer allowing 1 minute for each person to speak without interruption. Don't spend your partner's minute thinking about what you want to say. Listen!

No stonewalling.

Sometimes, the easiest way to respond to an argument is to retreat into your shell and refuse to speak. This refusal to communicate is called stonewalling. You might feel better temporarily, but the original issue will remain unresolved and your partner will feel more upset. If you absolutely cannot go on, tell your partner you need to take a time-out. Agree to resume the discussion later.

No yelling.

Sometimes arguments are "won" by being the loudest, but the problem only gets worse. If it feels like yelling to your spouse, it probably is.

Take a time-out if things get too heated.

In a perfect world we would all follow these rules 100% of the time, but it just doesn't work like that. If an argument starts to become personal or heated, take a time-out. Agree on a time to come back and discuss the problem after everyone has cooled down.

Attempt to come to a compromise or an understanding.

There isn't always a perfect answer to an argument. Life is just too messy for that. Do your best to come to a compromise (this will mean some give and take from both sides). If you can't come to a compromise, merely understanding can help soothe negative feelings.

No blaming.

It's pointless to blame each other. Blaming your spouse distracts you from solving the problem at hand. It invites your spouse to be defensive and it escalates the argument.

No use of force.

Including pushing, shoving, grabbing, hitting, punching, slapping, restraining, damaging property, and throwing/breaking things. Each of us has a right to be safe & free of abuse.

No talk of divorce.

In the heat of an argument, threatening to leave the relationship is manipulative and hurtful. It makes the problems in your relationship seem much bigger than they need to be.