



# Solutions for Life

from **Solutions Counseling & EAP**  
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## Letting Go of Unfair Fighting

So here we are: month 11 of my “Letting Go Of” series. This past month, I feel I have seen so many couples who are arguing more and more. Usually it’s because of increased stress in other areas of life: the job, aging parents, issues with children, money woes, etc. And when we are stressed, who do we take it out on? Why, the person we supposedly love the most – our partner!

Conflict within relationships is to be expected. You come from different backgrounds, and the families you grew up in had different rules. Differences and diversity, while very important and good, often breed conflict. It’s normal. Frankly, when I have a couple who tells me they never argue or disagree, I get worried. One thing I know is that when you care about something or someone, conflict will arise. I worry that couples who are not disagreeing have grown apathetic – and that is much harder to work with than the couples who argue all the time.

Once you accept that conflict is normal within relationships, you can begin to deal with it more effectively. As long as you freak out whenever there is a disagreement (because in your mind, “good” relationships don’t involve arguing), you will never be able to resolve things in a healthy way.

Here are some tips for dealing with conflict (or fighting fair) in a healthy way:

### 1. Commit to dealing with the issues.

I see so many couples where one person avoids conflict like it’s the plague. So the other person reacts by confronting in bigger ways (louder, angrier, etc.). And still nothing gets resolved – because now the couple is arguing

about why one never wants to deal with anything and the other makes such a big deal about everything.

The first step is to agree that if something is bothering one of you, that person will bring it up appropriately to the other person. The key word here is “appropriately.” No yelling, no sulking, no weeks of silent treatment.

### 2. Create the right environment.

Make sure you have enough time and enough privacy to deal with things. If there are kids running around and you only have 5 minutes, I can guarantee it won’t work. If, due to your busy lives, it won’t happen spontaneously, schedule time to discuss important things.

Location is important too. Choose a neutral, pleasant place to have difficult discussions. Weather permitting, a walk outside is great. Many people are uncomfortable looking face-to-face at the person they are unhappy with. Walking beside that person will increase their likelihood to engage. Holding hands is even better!

Another aspect of creating the right environment involves sharing with each other the things that would increase the likelihood of successfully addressing issues as they arise. Maybe it’s a “no yelling” rule, or maybe it’s the right to call “time out” if things are getting too tense (with the agreement to reconvene at a certain time). Fair fighting includes agreeing upon the rules of engagement.

### 3. Speak for yourself!

Remember to use “I” statements – a way of communicating that does not blame, but focuses on you taking responsibility for your feelings. Avoid using the word “you” as much as possible. “You handled

that terribly!” becomes “I feel irritated when things are handled that way.” Read both of the proceeding statements out loud and you will undoubtedly hear that the second sentence is much less accusatory. When the person you’re speaking to doesn’t feel accused (which leads them to feel defensive), they will be much more able to focus on resolving the issue. Remember, the goal is to solve the problem, not make the other person feel bad.

**4. Repeat, then respond.** Most people don’t listen to their partner very well when the partner is upset. Oh, they get the general idea that he/she is angry, but they lose the details. Additionally, most people are so focused on their own response that they tune out on what the other person is saying. This guarantees the argument will continue because the person speaking never feels truly heard. I suggest, instead, that you both adopt a new rule: repeat back what your partner has said to you before you respond. This accomplishes two things: one, you truly understand what the issue is; two, your partner feels heard and understood (which is more important than you understanding, trust me). When you repeat what you’ve heard, give your partner a minute to confirm or tweak what you’ve said. I am always amazed at the number of arguments where the couple doesn’t even really know what they are arguing about!

Now, let’s get ready to rumble (in only the nicest and healthiest way, of course)!