

Fight Right Solutions for Conflict Resolution



Many experts agree the number one predictor of a long, content marriage is how people treat each other when they are in conflict. How do you and your significant other fight? Do you fight nice? Or do you fight with a dose of vinegar and a poke in the eye?

John and Leah Grant of Green Bay aren't the perfect couple. [I know this because my mother told me that perfect relationships only exist in fairy tales.] They do, however, get along remarkably well . . . even when they fight.

Leah said that in nine years of marriage, they have rarely had a blow-out fight. John backed her up. "Our arguments don't usually involve raising our voices or storming away," he said. "Sometimes we have heated disagreements, yes, but we both recognize the need to resolve things before they get worse."

Bob Johnson, family therapist and director for the American Foundation of Counseling Services in Green Bay said, "Fighting is actually not a bad thing. The goal isn't to avoid it, but to do it in a way that adds quality to your life rather than harm."

Johnson, who has been married for 39 years and counseling couples for 33, said his number one rule for fighting is "Do no harm."

"Every time we say something that is hurtful and harmful, we take a little piece of the soul of our marriage and we pull it away. You can't put that back. You can't go back later and say, 'Gee, I didn't mean that.'"

Johnson explained the "bowling principle."

"Being kind to your partner, saying nice things and being considerate is really, really important. Each time you do that, it's like setting up a bowling pin. But one harmful behavior is like a bowling ball. And one bowling ball can

knock over all sorts of pins."

So, to live by the rule of "do no harm," Johnson suggests the following: **Avoid absolutes.** These are words like always, never, and ever. Johnson said, "Those are bad fighting words because all they do is invite people to defend themselves." We tend to use those when we're really frustrated, so Johnson added, it's better to say, "I'm really frustrated because . . ."

Avoid questions that are really statements. When you say, "How could you think that?," you aren't seeking information, so it's not a question. It's a way of being sarcastic or curt.

Don't call names or use swear words. These seem like little things, but ones you have total control over. Name calling and swearing are escalators. Johnson said, "It's like pouring gas on a campfire."

Don't compare your partner to your mother, father, ex-husband, sister or even neighbor. Comparisons are not good.

Set term limits on previous events. Johnson said we're most likely to bring up our partner's past wrongdoings when we feel like we're losing the fight. He suggests having a conversation about this when things are going well. Set some limits on how far back you can reasonably go. He suggests six months or less.

Admittedly, the Grants have a leg up over the rest of us; they both have Master's degrees in psychology. So, they're pretty savvy about the dos and don'ts of effective communication.

Leah said they use a lot of "I feel . . ." statements at their house. In fact, even their 7- and 5-year-old daughters are starting to pick up on the terminology, proving that anyone can learn to fight right.

Recipe for fighting right

According to Bob Johnson, family therapist and director for the American Foundation of Counseling Services in Green Bay, here are suggestions for "fighting right."

State the issue clearly. Don't hint, suggest, hope or assume. Be honest, direct, calm and non-judgmental. Take ownership of the problem.

Seek understanding—ask clarification questions, walk in their shoes and try to understand their point of view.

Negotiate a solution—it's ideal if you can compromise. If that's impossible, honestly ask yourselves, "For whom is this most important?"

Don't keep score—just because your husband "won" the last three arguments doesn't mean it's your turn. If you look at marriage as a long event, this almost always balances itself out.

Follow through on the agreed solution, and only promise that which you can do and then do what you promise. If follow-through fails, start over!