

FAIR FIGHTING

From the book: Messages (1995) McKay, Davis, & Fanning

It was once believed that venting anger was good. However, this was disproved by Carol Tavris (1989) in her book titled “Anger-The Misunderstood Emotion.” She found, through scientific research, that ventilating your anger tends to **INCREASE** angry feelings, build pressure, damage relationships, and destroy emotional balance. Don’t buy it, try this:

Timmy is 8 years old. He and his mother are going into Wal-Mart to get a few things. As they walk past the toy aisle, Timmy’s heart starts to pound, his palms get all sweaty, and his eyes are as big as cantaloupes, because he knows the G.I. Joe with Kung-Fu grip is just down there, calling to him. Timmy turns to walk down the aisle to get his G.I. Joe with Kung-Fu grip. His mother turns and sees Timmy going down the aisle, her heart starts to pound, her palms get all sweaty, and her eyes are as big as cantaloupes. She quickly moves to grab Timmy. Timmy aware of the routine, dodges mom. She reaches again, this time grabbing his arm. Timmy now starts to cry and pull his arm from her grip. Mom is tugged and tugged. Timmy is now screaming “I want it!!! I want it!!!” Mom raises her hand and slaps Timmy on the arm, Timmy screams louder, now from the pain and the uncontrollable desire to have G.I. Joe with the Kung-Fu grip. Mom raises her hand for another shot, she makes contact and hits Tommy on the shoulder. This one stung and got Tommy’s attention. His body goes soft. He falls to the ground crying loudly. His quest for G.I. Joe with the Kung-Fu grip has been stopped. He sits on the floor crying loudly, other customers are looking at them both. Mom in her embarrassment, grabs Timmy and says “No crying. If you don’t stop now I will really give you something to cry about!” They move on to finish their shopping.

Does this sound familiar? We’ve all seen this play out. Is mom better and more relaxed because she hit Tommy and vented her aggression?

What is Unfair Fighting?

Unfair Fighting is the loud, bitter, harmful, unproductive, and sometimes violent kind. It normally comes from some combination of the following:

1. *Conflict is awful.* We must avoid conflict as long as possible. We should want the same things. We should agree.

2. *My needs are more valid than yours.* Only what I want is really important. What you want is meaningless or stupid. I’m right and you’re wrong. I’m good and you’re bad.

3. *Only one can win.* If one of use gets what he/she wants, the other cannot. A winner implies a loser. Therefore, I better attack first, seize the high ground, and make sure the winner is me.

Identifying Unfair Fighting Styles:

Read and identify which of the styles below you have used.

1. **Bad Timing.** One person forces his/her agenda on the other, often insisting on discussing something at an inappropriate time-when it's late, when you're tired, when you're rushing to get somewhere. When you're busy with something else, when there are other people around you don't want to hear, etc.

Example: Alyssa insisted that her boyfriend Jason make a decision about whether or not he would spend the holidays with her and her family. Jason was late for work and didn't have time to talk. When she kept pressuring him, he exploded and said, "I don't have time for this." He slammed the door so hard on his way out that he broke the window.

Write down an example from your life when you've used bad timing: _____

2. **Blaming.** The dangerous assumption that "I'm right and you're wrong" makes you blame the other person for the whole problem. Blaming can take the form of name calling, accusing, exaggerating, assuming evil intentions, raking up past failures (keeping score), etc. "You" statements are common and "I" statements are rare.

Example: Karen said to Wanda, "What do you mean you forgot our agreement for me to use the microwave first! You aren't that great, who do you think you are. You promised me you would let me go first, you betrayed our agreement and just cut in front of me. And you have the nerve to lie to me and say you 'forgot about the agreement.'" Karen is blaming Wanda for being disorganized, untruthful, and untrustworthy.

Write down an example from your life when you've used blaming: _____

3. **Too many issues.** When you're angry, you tend to use any ammunition you can think of, dragging up issue after issue to support how good you are and how bad the other person is.

Example: Sara and Rick were fighting about when to go the store to go shopping for groceries. Rick got mad and started recalling Sara's inconsistency about meeting times and being late for work, movies, etc. "Why even bother going shopping with you? You must not care too much about anything. Remember going to see Star Wars, you left me waiting in line for 20 minutes? Remember your doctors appointment you were 15 minutes late for and had to schedule? Remember my mother's birthday, you were 30 minutes late and we all waited for you. You are all about yourself." He continued to attack her on other times she'd been late, but never mentioned her continued car troubles and his reluctance to pick her up or help fix her car.

Write down an example from your life when you've used too many issues: _____

4. Covering feelings with anger. In unfair fights, anger is usually the only emotion expressed. It drowns out any underlying fear, sadness, guilt, envy, disappointment, etc.

Example: Matt was hurt and jealous when his wife, Gloria, announced that she wanted to spend a weekend Christmas shopping in the big city with her old friends and leave him home with the kids. His feelings were hurt. He felt envious of her friendship. These feelings were covered by his angry outburst about Gloria's "selfishness" and "irresponsibility."

Write down an example from your life when you've used covering feelings with anger: _____

5. Impossible demands. Unfair fights often include vague, abstract demands like "be more considerate" or "stop being so picky." These are really impossible demands. They require the other person to read your mind at all times and judge whether what they are about to do is sufficiently "considerate" or overly "picky." Demanding global (general) changes in attitude or feelings never works. People just don't change their personalities quickly or easily.

Example: Sandra told her son Jerome to clean up his room. Jerome ignored her. Sandra raised her voice. Jerome started to cry. Sandra's husband, Malcolm, started a fight with Sandra about her lousy parenting style. He wanted her to be more "understanding" about Jerome's feelings and to "exercise patience." She should have demanded some specific changes in behavior that Jerome could more easily remember and perform.

Write down an example from your life when you've used impossible demands: _____

6. Threats and ultimatums. Impossible demands are often backed up with excessive threats and ultimatums: I'll move out. I'll withdraw my support. You'll be out of this house. I'll hit. I'll take the kids. I'll tell on you. I'll destroy something. I won't love you anymore.

Example: Wendy told Peter that if he didn't stop staying up all night in front of the computer, she was going to throw it out the window. At the moment she felt like she meant it, but later she realized it was a dangerous tactic: if she did it, they would be out thousands of dollars, and the fight would escalate. If she didn't do it, she would be making empty threats.

Write down an example from your life when you've used threats and ultimatums: _____

7. **Escalation.** Unfair fights tend to escalate from quiet disagreements to loud arguments, from arguing to shouting and screaming matches, from shouting to breaking things, from breaking to throwing increasingly dangerous objects, from throwing to hitting, and so on.

Example: Don and Rita's fights followed a familiar pattern. She would forget to pick him up at the gym or meet him for lunch. Later, his brooding silence would prompt her nervous apologies. He would start to lecture her about "getting her stuff together." She would get defensive. He would raise his voice and start pacing around, waving his arms for emphasis/ She would tell him to calm down. That would trigger his final outburst-tipping things over, kicking the cat, knocking magazines to the floor, throwing

Write down an example from your life when you've used escalation: _____

8. **Unhappy endings.** Unfair fights end in tears and apologies, withdrawal, violence, or even worse. They don't end in mutually satisfying solutions. In fact, unfair fights don't really end at all-there's just a temporary cease fire until the next round.

Example: Don would always calm down and come home and apologize, often bearing a flower, a new book, or a can of Rita's favorite candy. Rita would tearfully forgive him and promise to "be less scattered." Don would resolve to "be more patient" and "control his temper." Until the next episode.

What is Fair Fighting?

Fair fighting is a frank and open discussion of differences, without shouting or violence. It follows strict rules to keep the exchange fair and peaceful. Ideally, a fair fight ends by reaching a mutually agreeable solution. Fair fighting comes from three key attitudes:

1. *Conflict is inevitable.* Partner's in intimate relationships always want different things. There's no avoiding it, and it's okay. You need to acknowledge that each of you is an individual, with your own needs, desires, opinions, tastes, preferences, fears, and goals.
2. *Our needs are equally valid.* We both want things that are natural, reasonable, and understandable. Just because we want different things doesn't mean that either one's needs are more important or significant than the other's. Your need for rest and privacy is just as important as my need for entertainment and companionship.
3. *We can both win.* Working together, we will come up with compromise solutions to our problems. We can each get a good measure of what we want without depriving or taking advantage of the other.

Fair Fighting Rules:

1. **Set a time.** Secure your partner's agreement to have a serious discussion. If your partner doesn't want to fight right now, you should set a time in the very near future. At first you may encounter resistance and may have to be very persistent to set aside a definite time.

Example: After Jason avoided her twice, Alyssa had to say, "Look, this is important to me. I've been thinking about it awhile, it hasn't gone away, and I can see it won't go away until I can talk it out with you. How about tonight after work?"

2. **State the problem.** Say what your partner does or doesn't do that you don't like. By describing the facts of your partner's behavior, you can avoid blaming.

Example: Karen was very angry at Wanda for not keeping her agreement to allow her to use the microwave first. Karen held back her first impulse to use provocative labels like "cheat" or "liar." She clearly stated the facts: "You told me you would let me use the microwave first and then you cut in front of me."

3. **Stick to one issue.** You can only solve one problem at a time. When you're arguing, it's very tempting to change the subject or rake up the past. Resist the impulse and confine yourself to a single issue, in the present.

Example: Sara reminded her husband, Rick: "Look, it doesn't matter whose fault it is that we're often late for things. The issue right now is when can we find time to go to the grocery store today? Let's stick to that."

4. **Express the full range of feelings.** Use "I" messages to express how you feel about what your partner does or doesn't do that you don't like. Say "I feel mad" rather than "you make me mad." Look beyond irritation and anger to describe your full range of feelings. Expressing feelings is not the same as "dumping" feelings. Dumping is when you raise your voice, blame, or make threats when you're angry. Expressing feelings is describing the feeling without a lot of emotional heat or attacking language.

Example: Matt told Gloria, "When I heard that you and your friends were planning to spend the weekend shopping in the city, I felt angry at being left here alone. I feel like I'll be lonely, with nothing to do and nobody around. I'm also feeling jealous of your friends, of the good times you have together. What if you have so much fun without me you start thinking, "why be married at all?"

5. **Propose Change.** State clearly, simply, and directly what you want your partner to do or not do. Be specific. Avoid talking in terms of attitudes, as in "I want you to be more considerate." Instead, state your objective in behavioral terms: "I want you to come right away when I say it's time for dinner and talk to me at the table instead of reading the newspaper or watching television."

Example: When Sandra wanted Malcolm to be more “patient” and “understanding” with their son Jerome, she got nowhere. Nothing changed until she proposed specific behaviors that Malcolm could perform: “I would like you to tell Jerome exactly what you want him to do, give him a deadline for doing it, and say up front what the consequences will be if he doesn’t do what you want by the deadline. I would like you to say all this in a normal, conversational tone.”

6. Describe consequences. Describe any practical, emotional, financial, health, or other benefits of the change you are proposing. For example, Wendy told Peter, “If you turn the computer off and get to bed by eleven, we can be close like we used to be. I’ll feel closer to you and you’ll get the sleep you need.”

Also include how you’ll feel and what you’ll do if the change is not made. But beware of making empty threats or predicting dire consequences out of proportion to the problem, as Wendy did when she threatened to throw the computer out the window. There’s a fine line between threats and the kind of natural negative consequences that can inspire someone to change. In Wendy’s case, she could have described a more reasonable negative consequence by saying, “If you continue to stay up late, you can’t count on me to drag you out of bed in the morning and rush around so you can make it to work on time.” In general, your partner will respond more readily to positive rather than negative consequences.

7. Prevent escalation. There are three things you can do to prevent escalation:

(1) Watch nonverbal behavior - danger signals are voices getting louder, threatening gestures, a shift from sitting to standing, pointing fingers, fast pacing, etc.

(2) Breathe deeply to slow down the pace of the exchange - when you notice yourself getting excited, stop talking and take a deep breath. Inhale deeply in your abdomen, and release the breath slowly and completely.

(3) Declare a “time out” - Here are the rules for a time out:

a) Agree in advance on a signal for time out.

b) No last words

c) Leave immediately. The person who called time out leaves immediately.

d) Always return when time’s up

e) Don’t use drugs or alcohol during time out

f) Don’t rehearse - if you practice what you’re going to say when you return this will keep you upset.

g) Check in when you get back, see if it a good time to resume the discussion.

Example: Don and Rita stopped their pattern of escalation when Rita told Don, “The next time we start arguing and you begin pacing around, getting worked up, I’m not going to keep pushing you. I’m going to give you the time out sign, say nothing, and go for a walk. I’ll be back in one hour.” That’s exactly what she did the next day, when they were arguing about whose fault it was that the alarm clock was not reset after a power failure. When she returned, they had both calmed down.

8. End in agreement, counter proposal, or postponement. Some fights end in simple agreement: You state your case, propose a change, and your partner says okay. More often, there is further discussion, and your partner makes a counter proposal for a change that is more

acceptable. You talk over the counter proposal and perhaps reach a compromise. Or perhaps not. Many successful fights end with no argument beyond the promise to fight fairly again. That's all right. There are many issues that cannot be resolved quickly. Postponement is often the only reasonable outcome. The key is to agree on a time and place to take up the issue again.

Example: when Rita returned for her time-out walk, she proposed that she take full responsibility for resetting the alarm clock when it goes out and Don take full responsibility for checking the oil in the cars. They went on to agree to split up several other chores that they often squabble over.

Your Script for Change

Perform this exercise whenever you plan to discuss a problem with your partner. It prepares you to follow the rules of fair fighting.

Pick a minor problem to start with - something that you do have trouble with, but not your biggest conflict. Prepare for fair fighting by composing a script for change.

1. Set a time to fight _____

2. State the problem accurately and factually: _____

3. Express your full range of feelings: _____

4. Propose Change: _____

5. State any negative consequences of change: _____

6. State any positive consequences of change: _____

When you have your script ready, approach your partner and try it out. Remember the remaining rules of fair fighting as you proceed: prevent escalation by watching nonverbal signals and taking time out, be prepared to consider counter proposals, and seek a clear resolution in the form of agreement, compromise, or postponement.