

Rules of engagement for conflict in marriage

Just as no two people are alike, no two relationships are the same.

Relationships come in all types and people have many ways of dealing with differences with their partners.

If we are to have strong relationships and don't want them to veer towards separation, we need to learn conflict resolution skills.

Some people like to argue and niggle. These relationships are quite conflictual, but when they work well there's lots of passion and fire. The partners can be very connected even though to outsiders they appear argumentative.

The positive side to this sort of partnership is it's really lively. However, if the conflict turns sour, it's usually because the partners lose sight of the importance of their connection, and go all out to win.

This allows a crack to develop in the relationship through which the less noble elements of human character enter, and the dirty fighting starts.

Each partner can hit below the belt and undermine the other with nasty comments.

This kind of conflict can go on for years, and if children observe it they'll learn that when you strike problems, you should just yell and scream - like a three-year-old throwing a tantrum.

Children are often wiser than adults when they see this kind of conflict, they will try everything to break up the argument because they know it's destructive. They fear it will end in divorce and the loss of "family" as they know it.

Unfortunately, their parents are caught up in the battle and often unaware of the effect their fighting is having on the kids.

The classic marital-fight film *The War of the Roses* is being re-created in reality.

Of course, for detached observers, if two children behaved like this they would be given time out to think about their bad behaviour.

But for adults, time out won't help on its own, because they are too bound up in their emotions to think rationally.

They spend their time revving themselves up and preparing ammunition for the next round.

If any of this resonates with you, know it's possible to change your habits. You need to learn the rules of fair fighting before it is too late.

The first rule is to avoid saying "you did" this or that, because it sounds like an attack and that leads to either a counter-attack or a retreat from your partner.

Instead, use the "I" word. Say how the situation looks to you, because no one can deny your right to have a view.

Even if your partner has a different view, it is still your position and it needs to be heard.

Of course, the corollary to this, if you want to be heard, is that you have to be prepared to listen. That's fair fighting rule No.2.

Rule No.3 is never bring in others to back your argument. The argument is between two

individuals, not all the others you want to quote as a virtual support team.

Never resort to verbal abuse, put-downs and labels. Don't dismiss your partner by telling them they are mad, just like their mother, or a tyrant, just like their father.

Remember, though there may appear to be a winner and a loser at the end of a fight, in reality both people lose, because they lose their connection to each other.

It's far healthier to find a way of sorting things out that ends in a solution that is the best fit for both. This means that sometimes one person will get their way, and sometimes the other will get the better of the deal, but overall there is a balance whereby each partner "wins" sometimes.

And the real winner is your relationship, because its chances of survival have increased

Survival tips

- Stay away from the "you always" syndrome – try using "I feel" to state your case
- If you want to be heard, be prepared to listen
- Fight fairly and don't resort to verbal abuse.