

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Fighting Fair

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,**

**Board Certified
Psychiatrist**

Medical Director

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**

3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

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Come On, Let's Fight Fair

Some time ago, we addressed the issue of dealing with conflict and how conflict will occur at some point in all our relationships, whether it is at work, at home, at school, or in any other setting in which we interact with others. In this month's newsletter, I would specifically like to look at some principles for constructive "fair fighting," and, even more specifically, as it applies to marriages and relationships with loved ones.

1. There is to be absolutely no physical violence allowed. Unless this possibility is taken off of the table, there can be no constructive interaction as long as one individual is afraid of the other. By the way, this does not always imply a wife being afraid of a husband, as at times the wife may be the abuser and play the role of the "intimidator."
2. There is to be no emotional "hitting below the belt." Loved ones frequently know the areas of deepest sensitivity and insecurity of their partner, and in dealing with a particular area of conflict it is not fair fighting to try and strike at these areas in order to gain an advantage. Frequently this occurs as one feels that they are beginning to "lose the argument," and they are trying to regain some sense of control or power in the discussion.
3. Stick to the current issue being addressed and avoid dragging in past issues, which will only tend to confuse the issue rather than help resolve it.
4. Say what you mean honestly and clearly, but it also is important to do this with tact and respect with regard to the other person. Remember that the relationship will hopefully be continuing on into the future for a very long time, whereas most issues that create conflict are generally of a more short-term nature. This is why so often it is important to pick and choose one's battles carefully, whether it is with our spouse or our children.
5. Deal with one issue at a time rather than tending to lump together a number of issues. When we tend to bring out the "gunny sack full of complaints" and dump them all at the feet of our partner at one time, it generally is difficult to address any one of them with success.
6. Stay involved in the "fight" until it is resolved, or at least until that particular "round" is done. At times, it makes sense to take a break from the discussion, as long as both agree and are willing to pick it up at a later time.
7. Agree to have this "fight" at an appropriate place and time that is mutually acceptable to both parties. It often helps to even make an "appointment" with regard to when and where the discussion will take place.
8. Both parties need to be sure to take the time to give enough information to clearly explain her view and her feelings. If we examine our communications, particularly with loved ones, we often assume that they know and understand what we feel, even if we have not fully explained it. Beware of making the assumption that they can "read your mind" and should know how you feel or what you want from them.
9. Be ready to listen as well as talk. If we are honest about it, frequently in a discussion we are already thinking ahead as to what we want to say to win the argument rather than truly listening to the other person. Listen first, reevaluate your position based upon the input from the other person, and then speak.
10. One aspect of "active listening," which might also be termed accurate listening, is to try and clarify and restate in your own words what the other person has said just to make sure that you understood. If the other individual maintains that you do not understand what they have been saying, take that at face value and ask them to again explain what they are feeling or thinking.
11. Stick to realistic and justifiable complaints. Like most other things in life, "what you see is what you get." If you married someone who tends to be strong-willed, the chances are pretty good that they are going to remain strong-willed, even if they are willing to try and work to smooth off some of the rough edges of their personality. One of the biggest mistakes often made is when one gets married with the idea of somehow changing the other after the marriage ceremony into



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- what they really want in a partner.
12. Observe peace between "rounds." If both of you agree to put aside the discussion for awhile, then truly put it aside until you take it back up again.
 13. During the "fight," focus on realistic alternatives for change rather than on what you would consider the ideal, but which may not be achievable.
 14. Use humor for relief when needed, although never at the expense of the other person. Also beware of sarcasm, which you may see as being humorous, but your loved one involved in the "fight" may see as a putdown.
 15. Maintain eye contact as much as possible. For a more formal "fight" relating to a significant issue that needs to be resolved, at times it is helpful to sit in two chairs facing each other "knee to knee."
 16. Avoid bringing in third parties, either literally or figuratively. Do not go to others to support your argument, such as the children, another loved one who might be living with you, et cetera. Also, avoid bringing in individuals and their opinions who are not actually there, e.g. "Your mother says..." Yes, her mother may have said that, but she may also be off somewhere in Nebraska and really has nothing to do with your current discussion.
 17. Try to deal with a specific problem or issue rather than having many issues lumped together into a general complaint. Specifics can be addressed and frequently steps can be taken to resolve them. General complaints frequently result in there being more general complaints.
 18. Avoid bringing in extraneous issues that have nothing directly to do with the topic at hand. Frequently these are introduced as distractions when one person feels that they are losing the argument. Some individuals can become quite adept at doing this to the point that the other one frequently finds it easier to either give in or else take the position that they don't care enough about the issue to continue the fight. The one bringing in the distractions may feel that they have one, while the other feels resentful. In reality, no one wins, and nothing gets resolved.
 19. Negotiate and offer options and alternatives with regard to potential solutions, but clearly express preferences to each other. The ideal resolution should be considered a "win-win" for both.
 20. Be honest with yourself first and then with your partner. You need to first examine whether the issue being discussed is a true issue that really matters, or whether it is a trivial matter that is actually representative of a deeper issue that is being avoided.
 21. Take turns in presenting views and opinions, and do so without interruption. For couples who tend to frequently interrupt each other, it may be necessary to use a kitchen timer to give each other 3-5 minutes of uninterrupted time to express their view, and then have the other express theirs in the same manner.

Things to avoid...

1. Avoid withdrawal, walking out on the discussion, silence, and pouting.
2. Avoid using sarcasm, put downs and belittling, and exaggerations.
3. Avoid attacking known areas of sensitivity (see #2 above).
4. Avoid stereotyping the other person or name-calling. Swearing and cursing at the other person should be outlawed, as this can at times be almost as destructive as physical violence.
5. Avoid character analysis, "diagnosing" the other person or trying to label them somehow as pathological, and interpretation of motives. Assume that their motives are just as "pure" as are yours.
6. Avoid trying to place blame as a substitute for resolving the issue.

If you and your loved one are having conflict and are not sure how to work it out, I would encourage you to sit down and go over some of these guidelines together. Discuss how you might apply them to your particular situation and relationship, and then begin practicing them. Remember that they are skills that will improve with use, and, in the long run, learning to "fight fair" can improve any relationship, as disagreements will occur whether they are addressed fairly or not.



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