

Clash of the Couples

When Meg and Brett used to fight, the tension was so thick that it frequently took two days for them to recover. "At the time of the fight it felt good to let every thought and emotion fly, but a day or two later when the other person was still damaged and hurt, you wished you could take everything back," says Meg, 32, from Boston.

After one particularly harrowing battle, they realized it wasn't worth it and decided on a strategy to keep their fights more sane: whoever was the least upset would stop arguing and start listening. "So if Brett was hysterical, I would basically agree to work through his point of view on the topic. And if I was the one who was insane, he'd agree not to try to prove that his point of view was the right one," says Meg. After the emotions simmered down, usually a day later, the other person would explain their side of the story.

Meg and Brett discovered key principle of a happy marriage: Fighting to win gets you nowhere. The purpose of a "good" fight is to build mutual understanding and come to a resolution that suits both parties. "The key question to ask yourself after a fight is, 'Do we feel closer or more distant?'" says Pat Love, EdD, and author of *The Truth About Love: The Highs, the Lows, and How You Can Make It Last Forever* (Fire-side, 2001). "An argument isn't productive if it makes you feel more distant."

But fighting well is not the same as the same as "being nice." According to research by University of Washington psychologist John Gottman, PhD, who has studied married couples for 30 years, couples in healthy relationships often show anger in arguments.

Fighting the Good Fight

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However, they don't lace their frustration with criticism or contempt for their mate. They also don't stonewall -- which often comes in the form of a seemingly peaceful gesture. Rachel, 43, from New York City, frequently feels this when her boyfriend apologizes to her. "He'll apologize to me when he sees that I'm upset, but he doesn't know why I'm upset. So he says 'I'm sorry' but he's not really sorry. He just wants me to shut up," says Rachel.

10 Tips for Better Battles

According to Gottman's research, the way a couple fights is one of the most accurate indicators of whether they'll stay together. Couples who are good at de-escalating arguments with humor and compliments are in good shape. Those who shut each other out or jab each other with sarcasm and insults are headed for trouble. Fortunately, anyone can learn the tools of relationship-friendly fights. Below, our experts weigh in with their advice on how to argue happily ever after:

Surrender the need to be right. We fight because we believe that we're right, and we want the other person to understand that. But Love suggests you ask yourself one important question: Would you rather be right or happy? "Focus on a solution that would be right for everyone, rather than worry about who's right and who's wrong," says Love.

Stay on topic. If you're fighting about the fact that he drank too much at your sister's wedding, then stick to that grievance. This is not a good time to throw in that he was late picking you up last week and never puts his empty bottles in the recycling bin. "Bringing up all the past hurts and done-wrongs will put your partner on the defensive. Sticking to your point will keep your mate from getting confused, impatient, and even angrier," says Lew Moore, PhD, chair of the marriage and family therapy program at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas.