



Rules for Fair Fighting

# MASTER LEVEL *Marriage*

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Fighting in your marriage, or you could say *conflict*, this sounds nicer, is inevitable! Some will say, *"Don't fight in your marriage; Fight for your marriage."* I totally agree with fighting for your marriage. But let's get real, there will be times when you and your mate will **NOT** agree, and you will engage in some good ole' conflict. Since this is going to happen at some point, I want to teach you to **FIGHT FAIR**. Some might say that I should not teach couples how to fight. *"You need to teach them to get along and love instead of fight."* This all sounds so good and so sweet, but come on, there is going to come a day when you will disagree with the one you love and you will engage in a fight.

**I want to give you 10 things to do when you are in the heat of the battle that will keep your conflict from turning into a mess. I have seen couples who didn't follow these RULES, and things did not turn out well. So, start applying these rules the next time you and your mate put on the verbal boxing gloves.**

## **Set the right time and place**

There is a right time and place to confront your mate. But, how many times do we just start in when we get the first opportunity. Just because it is the right time for you, it might not be the right place. Have you ever been in a restaurant and saw a couple at a table near you in the heat of a battle? She is giving him the *"what for."* You've probably thought, *"Take it somewhere else! Nobody wants to hear or see all of this!"*

Well, you would be right, this is not the place. When emotions are out of the roof, bringing it up in public is just not fair.

I grew up in an extremely religious, stanch, and traditional pastor's home and I can remember hearing sermons from preachers during that era speaking to couples about arguing and anger. They would quote, out of the Old English King James Version, mind you, the Scripture found in Ephesians 4:26, ***"Let not the sun go down upon your wrath!"*** Wow, I just had a quick flashback there for a moment of the fist beating the pulpit, the growling voice of the minister, spit coming out of his mouth, and the verse ringing out in more syllables in one sentence than you could ever think possible. Sorry, I digressed there for a moment.

Their thought behind this passage was that a couple should never go to bed in a fight; they should resolve it before they say, "Night, night!" Oh, if it were that easy. Sometimes the conflict is more complicated than that and it takes quite a bit more time. It is unfair to keep each other up all night in a battle and get very little sleep before hitting the floor early for work. Getting good sleep is necessary to have a sound mind and clear thoughts, so go to bed, get some good sleep, and take it back up when there is more time to talk through the problem. By the way, the bed is not a good place to fight, the bed should be used for sleep and, well, I'll just leave it at that. Choose the time and place wisely.

## Don't interrupt your mate

One of my biggest problems and hang-ups is that when my wife and I are in a conflict and she is talking, I have a tendency to think about what I'm going to say instead of listening. Then, when I hear something that I don't agree with, I **interrupt**. What I have to say is important, right? Well, my voice is important, but so is hers and I need to wait my turn.

Resolving problems is not one sided; both individuals need to be heard and understood. Interruptions block what the other is saying and you never hear fully what is said. You've probably heard your parents say this when you were a kid growing up, "*Take turns.*" We really do need to take turns when we are fighting. We don't have to agree with everything we hear; just hear and understand your mate. Listening is part of the conversation.

## Use a soft approach

Sometimes the hardest part of confronting your mate during conflict, is presenting the problem with a soft approach. When a person is upset and emotions are high, the tendency is to aggressively attack. This is where it takes intentionality to do the right thing.

A tough conversation that confronts the problem needs to take place as soon as possible. The speed of a hard conversation determines the intensity of the emotions. The longer you wait to address the problem, emotions can go through the roof. High levels of emotion make it extremely difficult to begin with a soft approach and keeping the conflict unexposed, causes tension to build, fester and eventually, the issue will surface in an unhealthy way.

Master-level marriages confront conflicts as soon as possible. Normally, it's not the hard conversation that causes the most problems, it is the way the conflict is presented. A quick response to conflict and a soft approach stimulates resolution.

## Stick to the ONE conflict

One of the problems couples have when they are in an argument is, they go into a defensive mode. Hey, we all do. Why, because we think we are right and our mate is wrong. If we didn't think we were right, we wouldn't be in the argument to begin with. I like to say, "*There is his truth, her truth, and the real truth.*" So, who is right? Well, both are right in a sense, unless there are concrete facts. However, most arguments deal with thoughts and opinions, not facts.

Each person's view is right, to him or her, but it may not be the *real* truth. In this case, the idea is to discover the truth and resolve it, together. The way this is accomplished is through conversation and negotiation, or you could say, mutual understanding. If couples can hear and understand each other's truth, most will see the real truth.

To resolve an issue and move on, it takes sticking to the **ONE** problem and working through the details without any distractions. When couples get into the heat of the conflict, they seem to bring up issues that were never resolved. I call this **conflict stacking**. Bringing up past conflict that should have been resolved is **UNFAIR FIGHTING**! This leads to the next rule.

## Don't bring up the past

Bringing up your mate's past only complicates the issue and causes resentment. We all have said and done things in our past that was stupid or regretful. Having the one that you love and trust bring up your past in the heat of conflict can drive wedges in the relationship that are difficult to forget and can stay in one's thoughts for a long time.

## Refrain from any negativity

Negativity comes in so many different forms and a relationship can only handle so much. John Gottman states that couples who experience a 1:1 positive to negative ratio are on a trajectory to fail. The best ratio for couples to have a Master Level Marriage, is a 5:1. He actually calls these individuals *masters* and the former *disasters*.

Gottman gives four different characteristics of negativity that can cause marital failure. Stay away from these four things during conflict.

### Criticism

Criticism is much different than complaining. Most couples in an argument, probably have a legitimate complaint. Complaining attacks the issue, criticism attacks the person.

### Contempt

Contempt is mean! It is being disrespectful, mocking with sarcasm, calling each other names, eye rolling, and mimicking. Gottman states, "*While criticism attacks your partner's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them.*" Contempt must be eliminated, it could be the single greatest predictor of divorce.

## Defensiveness

Defensiveness is usually a response to *criticism*. When a couple is in a conflictual conversation or if a couple is in a rocky relationship, defensiveness is regularly present. People who feel attacked or unjustly accused will make excuses and play the innocent victim hoping that their mate will "*back off.*"

Many times, when a person gets defensive, he or she will try to reverse the blame and make it the other person's fault. To counter this negative behavior is to accept responsibility, admit faults, and understand your mate's perspective. Don't play the martyr. Come on, you know, you really don't believe it is all your fault.

It's natural to want to defend yourself during a conflict. Defense is an innate mechanism for our protection, however, the both of you are allies, not enemies. The idea is to be assertive, not passive. Both individuals should stand his or her ground, give perspective, listen with the intent of hearing and understanding, and create a win-win situation.

## Stonewalling

Stonewalling is usually a response to *contempt*. This is where the one partner withdraws, shuts down, and walks away from the conflict to never return to that subject again. In other words, "*talk to the hand.*" Actually, the first three negative communication styles become so overwhelming that the person feels the need to escape.

When a conflict escalates to this point, **escape** is the right choice, but not in the negative way stonewalling suggests. The healthy way to escape is to mutually agree to walk away to calm our emotions, cool down, and return to the conversation seeking resolution. The escape idea leads to the next point.

## Focus on a mutual resolution

Work towards resolution not towards being right. Mutual resolution might be that couples need to negotiate. It can't be "*my way or the highway*" mind-set. You are in this relationship together, so work together and compromise the solution.

## Keep others out of the conflict

I have seen many couples, and I have done this myself, attempt to find someone who will side with them in an argument. It is usually a friend, parent, sibling, or one of the kids. The bad thing about triangulating a friend into the conflict, that person is usually a mutual friend. Now, you have asked that individual to take a side and you both could possibly lose a great friend over this conflict. And, of course, most parents and siblings will take the side of their family and making the kids pick a side is completely unfair to everyone. Also, social media is not the place to air your issues in your relationship. Keep everyone out of your conflict and solve it between the two of you. Besides, not very many people have the time to get involved with your issues, they have their own.

## No mind reading

I have been in many sessions working with couples and it never fails that one or both will at some point tell me what the other one is thinking. I will usually ask, "*How do you know that is what he/she is thinking?*" They usually reply, "*I just know!*" When I look at the body language of the other person, he/she will whirl their eyes and shake their

heads as if to say, "*This is ridiculous; that is not even close to what I'm thinking.*"

Never assume you that you know what your mate is thinking; ask them. As much as you would like to think that you know your mate so well that you can know his or her thoughts, believe me, you will never figure each other out completely in a lifetime. Just ask!

## Lead with grace

Chris Hodges states, "*Truth without grace is mean. Grace without truth is meaningless. Truth and grace together are good medicine.*" You may be right, but what good does it do to force your being right and hurt your mate. You may be right but proving it might not be helpful. However, leading with grace, knowing that your mate has an opinion as well, allows the two of you to embrace your own ideas while accepting the thoughts, feelings, and wants of each other. Lead with grace, one day you may need it!

Listen, you both are truly in this together; he is not your adversary, she is not your competitor. You're on the same side. I heard a story one time of a kid who was a little smaller than most of the other boys in his class at school. There was one bigger kid that would always bully him. He would stop him on the playground, push him to the ground, and say all kinds of things hurtful. One day, the smaller kid walks on the playground just to go face-to-face with the bully once again. The smaller kid just couldn't take much more of this bullying. When the bully stepped up to him, the smaller kid looked into his eyes, took one step back, took his foot and drew a line in the dirt and said,

*"Step across this line!"* Of course, the bully stepped across the line and with meanness all over his face he positioned his nose just inches from the smaller kids face. To his surprise the smaller kid looked up at him and said, *"Now, we are on the same side!"*

You are not against each other; you are on the same side. Fight fair and remember, your goal is to be heard and understood, not to beat the other in battle.

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Reference: You can read more about the four negative communication styles at **[www.gottman.com](https://www.gottman.com)**.