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Your Fiance

why FIGHTING can be GOOD for your relationship

Fair or foul, fighting is something all couples do. But for an argument to be effective (rather than destructive) it pays to know what's behind the ire. So, in your corners...

by Hope Winsborough

Anne Russ, a marketing consultant in Boston, and Skip Lentz, a computer software executive, never had a single fight - until, that is, they got engaged. 'Our first big blow-up was about the wedding itself,' Anne recalls. 'I didn't want a traditional wedding, and Skip did. I would have preferred to just elope. I didn't want a diamond ring, either.' Once Anne stopped yelling, Skip explained to her that, since this was also going to be the happiest day of his life, he wanted to get married in front of his friends and family. 'He said, 'How can you not want that?'' Anne recalls. 'He also told me that part of the reason he really wanted to get me a diamond was because he was proud that he could afford it. Once I understood how important these things were to him, I had to compromise.' But, she laughs, 'I kept my name. That was his side of the compromise.'

Most people who are in love fight. Not us, you're saying? Give it time: Chances are serious disagreements will pop up eventually. It could be that you and your partner are in the midst of a prolonged infatuation period, wherein little about your mate bothers you enough to hash it out - yet. Or it might be that you're assiduously avoiding conflict, afraid it means something is terribly wrong with your relationship. According to Greg Godek, author of [Love: The Course They Forgot to Teach You in School](#) (Sourcebooks, 1997) many couples become distraught over knock-down, drag-out fights that they can't resolve quickly and neatly - and so they sidestep them.

'Don't think that just because you can't tie up the loose ends in a half hour like the couples in TV sitcoms, you've got a problem,' says Godek. 'Arguments are all about gray areas. In many cases there never will be a real answer, and that's okay.' Believe it or not, according to the experts, such heated arguments can actually be a strong sign that your marriage is on the right track. 'I don't think there's really a reason to fight until you're committed,' says Anne Russ today. 'Once Skip and I knew we were in this forever,' she explains, 'fights took on new meaning; they were something we had to figure out.'

What Makes Couples' Fights Different

In the context of a committed relationship, fights provide a way for couples to reconnect, according to Greg Godek. 'Although fighting is never fun or nice when you're in the middle of it, the outcome can be positive. In the midst of a fight you're miserable. In a way, it's like exercising. Is working out always fun? No. But it deals with your weak spots.' And in a committed relationship, he adds, weak spots are the ones we most need to concentrate on.

Fights with the one we love are truly different, he explains, because the purpose of the fight is different. 'In the 'outside world,' it's all about winning and losing,' says Godek. But that's not true of squabbles with your spouse (or future spouse). Here, the purpose is more often to blow off the steam and/or to express an emotion - even if you don't know quite what that emotion is or what's

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behind your need to emote.

Fights can work like a psychological pressure-relief valve, helping you to reestablish emotional equilibrium. The problem, Godek says, is that we've all been conditioned to believe fighting can only be a win-lose proposition. 'Most of us shift into a win-lose mode in an argument,' he says. 'Because we subconsciously expect an argument to have a clear winner and loser, we line up all of our 'evidence' as though we're going before a jury. We focus on the idea of winning the fight.'

Understanding the Arguing Process

To complicate matters further, most couples' arguments typically center on immediate, concrete issues - say, one partner's habit of leaving socks on the floor, or another partner forgetting to fill the car's tank with gas. Nevertheless, explains Godek, 'what you think you're arguing about is rarely the underlying reason for the fight.' Take the socks-on-the-floor argument: It's more likely about respect, space, or power issues than it is about neatness.

But why do we use such inconsequential issues as socks on the floor to get at the real reasons we're moved to argue? Because, says Godek, human beings are complex. 'We don't always make common sense - we make emotional sense, or try to. If I feel a certain way, I don't always need a reason.' Nor, sometimes, do we even know the reason ourselves.

That said, Godek offers guidelines to help pinpoint the emotions that lurk behind common arguments. It may vary for the two of you or be different at different times, but these are often on the mark: Arguing about money is rarely about money; it's about power. Arguing about sex is rarely about sexuality; it's about intimacy. Arguing about chores is rarely about the chores; it's about fairness. Arguing about jealousy is rarely about fidelity; it's about maturity. Arguing about work is rarely about the work; it's about time. Arguing about relatives is rarely about them. It's about expectations. But since arguing is by its nature a logical process, he notes, it breaks down when we apply it to emotional issues. That's why many of us are more comfortable shouting about the socks than confronting deep-seated issues of fairness, responsibility, power, or control.

Of course, emotional outbursts go nowhere, although they refuse to die. The key, says Godek, is to get at the underlying emotions. Pinpointing feelings is devilishly difficult, he says, 'but that's what can ultimately make fighting rewarding.' Anne and Skip are living proof. Today, after a year and a half of marriage, they've weathered - and benefited from - many heated discussions since that first big fight. Recently, Anne wanted to hire a housekeeper to stay on top of cleaning chores - but Skip refused for economic reasons. 'I had always spent my money the way I wanted to,' says Anne. 'But in our marriage, Skip was more in control of the purse strings. When I tried to tell him I didn't feel like I had an equal say in how we spent our money, he told me I was silly, and we fought.'

Once Skip understood the emotional issues behind their argument, it clicked as to why it was so important to Anne. In this case, a heated argument paved a way to grasp the emotional issues underlying their fight - and to recommit to making joint spending decisions. Now, they've agreed to hire a housekeeper on an occasional basis.

The trick, obviously, is for both members of the couple to understand and express their emotions. And that's not always easy in the heat of the moment. 'The real skill is to determine the purpose of the fight,' explains Godek. 'Then you can really deal with it.' And what if one partner is more even-tempered than the other? 'That's fine,' says Godek. 'As long as both styles of fighting are accepted.' For example, he says, say a hot-tempered woman marries a calm, placid man. During arguments, the even-tempered husband should not assume that his feisty bride is in need of advice or calming down when her emotions flare. 'It's not fair for one person to put the other in too tight a straightjacket,' he says. Nor is it right for the emotional partner to eschew the value of logic. Both

parties must believe that emotions are just as valid - if not more so - as logic when they fight.