



## Put Up a Healthy Fight

Just like a toddler's tantrums, arguments with your partner can be caused by feelings lurking beneath the surface. It's good to get them out—then take steps to repair and reconnect.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.**

**WE'VE ALL** been there. You need to bring up an issue with your partner. Maybe he leaves his stuff lying around, or you have to agree on a way to get your toddler to sleep through the night. You start off calmly and reasonably, but things escalate, and before you know it, what you're saying is critical and even mean. One of you storms out of the room, and perhaps you go to bed without even exchanging another word.

If you find yourself in this pattern, you know how painful it is. Arguments go unresolved, and over time you become more distant. As individuals, you'll always have your differences, and as parents, you'll have to compromise and collaborate. But, like couples who come to me for therapy, you may find yourself lamenting, "It's easier to just do it myself!" because trying to agree so often leads to a fight.

Before we consider what fighting well might look like, it's important to recognize that not all disagreements are fights. In my practice, I notice that sometimes a wife will raise an issue, and then her husband will say she's "never happy." Or a husband will disagree with his wife and she'll say he's "starting a fight." Some people are allergic to any kind of tension, so it's hard for them to tolerate even necessary conflict.

Family life hands us one complicated problem after another, and couples have to be able to withstand some friction in order to solve them. To handle conflict skillfully, you need to cultivate what I call the three C's: curiosity, compassion, and (self-) control. When you listen to what your partner is trying to say, empathize with his feelings, and express yourself respectfully, you can hash out tough issues without arguing.

Consider a couple I saw in therapy, Amy and Liam. Amy worked at home in the mornings and spent afternoons with their sons, 5 and 2. Liam commuted into the city and arrived home exhausted. Lately, their older son had begun to wet his bed, and Amy had to change his sheets and was losing sleep as a result. Both of them were loving parents and concerned about why their toilet-trained son was now bedwetting.

One night when Liam arrived home from work, Amy complained about how taxing the day had been and said that from now on they had to put their 5-year-old in a night diaper in order to save her sanity. Liam said he thought the diaper would embarrass their son and listed some reasons why he might be bedwetting (a new school, a new babysitter).

Amy responded, “Okay, if you don’t want to use the diaper, then you wash the sheets.” Liam became angry and hurt, and retorted with sarcastic commentary about how Amy was so “put upon.” Amy ended up in tears.

At any point in this painful back-and-forth, either Amy or Liam could have taken a small action to slow the downward spiral and limit the destructive impact of their fight. Psychologists have researched and validated the surprisingly powerful methods couples can use to do just that.

### → Repair early and often.

This is an effort to put on the brakes. When Amy griped about her day, Liam could have said, “That sounds hard.” When Amy told Liam he could change their son’s sheets himself, he could have

said, “The way you said that hurts my feelings,” and she could have responded, “Sorry, I’m just so tired.” Any comment that reflects on what’s happening—“That came out wrong” or “Can I take that back?”—helps to cool things down.

After a fight, repair means acknowledging your own part (“I’m sorry I said that”) and expressing some warmth. In my therapy practice, the least hopeful couples are those who can’t repair. They are too ashamed or defensive to admit their basic human fallibility. They are more invested in being right than in being close.

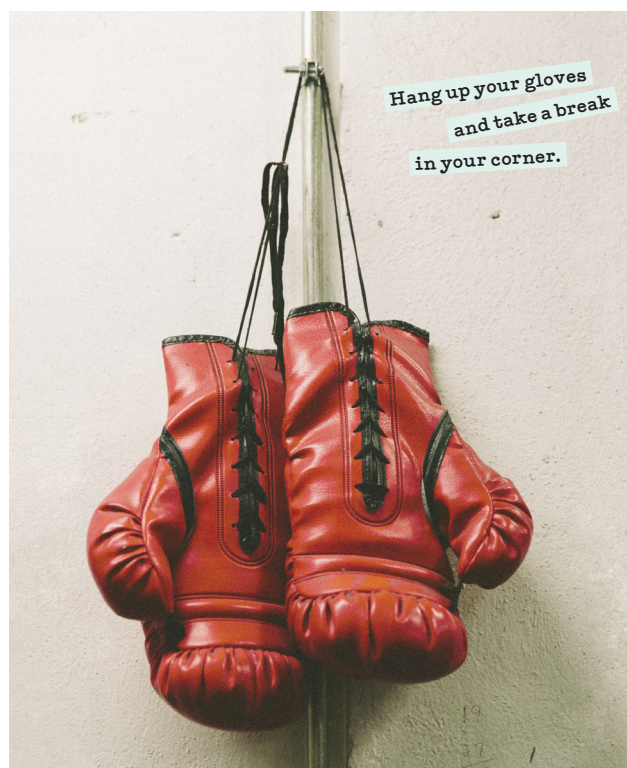
### → Soothe yourself, soothe each other.

Repair attempts go unnoticed because people literally can’t hear them. That’s because their adrenaline is pumping and their heart is racing. Agree to the ground rule that either of you can take a

breather. Physiologically, it takes 20 minutes to calm down as long as you are not mentally rehearsing your grievances. After you’ve taken this break, come back together and start over. If the topic is still too heated, talk about the experience of getting flooded with emotion itself and how you might bring up issues differently next time. Keep in mind that fights are sometimes dysfunctional ways of asking for comfort or support. If Amy or Liam had been able to say, “I need a hug before we talk; it’s been a rough day,” they could have avoided their cascade of misunderstanding.

### → Fight fair.

Study after study reveals that certain actions literally poison a relationship, with aftereffects that outlive the fight itself. Name-calling, insults, and physical threats are obviously off-limits. But



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research has also shown that a recurrent pattern of four specific behaviors—global criticism (“You never ...”), contempt, defensiveness (“It’s not me, it’s you”), and tuning out—can do irreparable damage. Amy got upset because she felt Liam had gotten “ugly.” When we discussed it, he said that his temper flared because Amy devalued him by implying he wasn’t already doing enough.

“Just don’t do it” should be your motto. If you find that impossible, try to figure out why. Do you have anger-management problems? Anxiety or depression? Partners do sometimes need to make specific complaints, but if your fights result in chronic put-downs and withdrawal, you may need professional help.

Fighting well depends on being able to hold on to two things in the heat of the moment: concern for your partner’s feelings and some awareness of your own behavior. Amy learned to tell Liam, “I was tired, and that distorted everything,” and Liam was able to say, “I’m sorry I was so harsh; I was feeling attacked myself.” Taking time at a calmer moment to understand each other’s triggers and fears will be worth its weight in gold the next time you find yourself getting fired up. ✖