

# Rules of Engagement

Adapted by Jim Merhaut from [10 Rules for Friendly Fighting for Couples](#)

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<http://psychcentral.com/lib/10-rules-for-friendly-fighting-for-couples>

1. **Put Friendship First.** Your relationship is more important than the issues you disagree upon. Building your friendship on a daily basis creates a foundation upon which conflict can be dealt with in healthy and productive ways.
2. **Embrace conflict.** There is no need to fear it. Conflict is normal, even healthy. Differences between the two of you mean that there are things you can learn from each other. Conflict often shows us where we are called to grow. When your partner disagrees with you, you have an opportunity to expand your horizons.
3. **Go after the issue, not each other.** Friendly fighters stick with the issue. Neither party resorts to name calling or character assassination. It's enough to deal with the problem without adding the new problem of hurting each other's feelings. Avoid statements like, "If you were more \_\_\_\_\_ or less \_\_\_\_\_, we wouldn't have this problem!"
4. **Listen respectfully.** When people feel strongly about something, it's only fair to hear them out. It's also an opportunity to learn something very important about your partner. Respectful listening means acknowledging their feelings, either verbally or through focused attention. It means never telling someone that he or she "shouldn't" feel that way. It means saving your point of view until after you understand your partner's point of view and you've let the other person know you understand why they feel intensely about the subject, even if you don't feel the same or agree with the point of view being expressed.
5. **Talk softly.** The louder someone yells, the less likely they are to be heard. Even if your partner yells, there's no need to yell back. Taking the volume down makes it possible for people to start focusing on the issues instead of reacting to the noise. If the volume doesn't come down, take a break from the conversation. Taking a break is easier if you name this as a general rule for your discussions. The rule is, "We will not engage in heated discussions." As soon as a discussion becomes heated, the discussion stops until both parties calm down, and either person has the right to determine when a conversation has become heated.
6. **Get curious, not defensive.** Defending yourself escalates the fight, whether by vehemently arguing for your innocence or rightness, or by turning the tables and attacking. Instead of upping the ante, ask for more information, details, and examples. As with rule #3, don't express your position until you understand your partner's. There is usually some basis for the other person's complaint. When you meet a complaint with curiosity rather than defense, you make room for understanding. Remember, your goal is not to win, your goal is to understand.
7. **Ask for specifics.** Negative global statements that include the words "always" and "never" almost always get you nowhere and are almost never true. Avoid statements like, "You are always late!" or "You never have a kind word to say!" When your partner has complaints, ask to move from global comments of exasperation to specific examples so you can understand exactly what he or she is talking about. It is better to say, "We were

late for our appointment because we didn't communicate well about what we had to accomplish before the appointment. How can we avoid this happening next Sunday?" or "I was hurt when you said \_\_\_\_\_. I really need you to avoid that word/phrase in the future." When you have complaints, do your best to give your partner examples to work with. Identify specific behaviors, express how you feel, and work together toward solutions that will make both of you happy.

8. **Find points of agreement.** There almost always are parts of a conflict that can be points of agreement. Finding common ground, even if it's agreeing that there is a problem, is an important start to finding a common solution. Another helpful rule for negotiations is that you will not move forward as a couple with any decision until both of you agree that it is the best option for you as a couple. It's not about getting his way or her way; rather, it is about getting OUR way.
9. **Look for options.** Fighting ends when cooperation begins. Brainstorm multiple possible solutions to every problem. When you brainstorm, make it a rule that no idea is too crazy for consideration. Crazy ideas sometimes lead couples to creative solutions that they might have missed without a crazy idea to point them in a new direction. Asking politely for suggestions or alternatives invites collaboration. Careful consideration of options shows respect. Offering multiple alternatives of your own shows that you also are willing to try something new and that you are not stuck on your idea.
10. **Make concessions.** Small concessions can be helpful, but giving in is not. Small concessions are a sign of care. It shows that you are willing to stretch a little to be open to a new experience. It can help you find a solution that is workable for both of you. It's important to distinguish between a small concession and "giving in" in order to keep the peace. You can push yourself a little to do something that isn't your first choice if it is something that will work for both of you, but you should never give in just to end the discussion. You will end up resenting your partner if giving in becomes a habit.
11. **Make peace.** Peace is a worthy goal. One elderly couple agreed from the outset of their marriage that the relationship is more important than winning arguments. When conflict arose, they would not be satisfied until they came to a workable compromise that they both liked. You can't have peace when there is a winner and a loser. Both partners have to feel like the solution is a win. These folks still love each other after 68 years of the inevitable conflicts that come with living with another person.