

Stop Fighting

by Susan Piver

Want to stop those petty squabbles before they start? Trade conflict for open-hearted compassion

In close relationships, there are fights and there are *fights*. Some spring from watershed issues: how to save or spend money, how to raise the kids, how to honor religious beliefs (or not) during the holidays. But this isn't what couples fight about most of the time. Instead, we argue over loading the dishwasher properly, cutting toenails on the coffee table, and cleaning the cat box when it's your turn. While the offenses may seem minor enough, these garden-variety arguments can cause tremendous stress, contributing to general wear-and-tear on a relationship. If they're left unaddressed, even small things can morph into big power issues over time, making a trivial annoyance, like dirty socks on the floor, seem like a slap in the face.

Since these kinds of fights often spring up spontaneously, they tend to prompt knee-jerk reactions that only make matters worse. But when you stop reacting and start responding with compassion, you defuse silly squabbles and help strengthen your bond. Someone once told me that all arguments are only about one thing: Who's going to listen to whom first?

SKIP THE TIFF
Tune in to your partner in a new way—and keep a pointless fight from starting.

inner growth

Giving your attention first (instead of demanding it) has magical curative properties. So bring your full attention to these critical moments and know that you are also offering love, no matter how upset you are. This way, petty arguments can become a chance to cultivate compassion.

The following strategies for three common arguments will help quell the heat—rather than fan the fire.

TIFF TYPE: The Hair Trigger

Red flag A benign, often innocent mistake causes your partner to become disproportionately infuriated. (“How could you forget soap? I specifically asked for soap!”)

Knee-jerk reaction What’s his problem? What did I do to deserve that? He doesn’t appreciate me.

Strategy *See his side.* In Tibetan Buddhist thought, there are 12 antidotes to anger; number one is patience. Usual-

ly, instead of trying to understand what exactly is so upsetting, we become angry, too—which only escalates the battle. In place of vitriol or a harsh reaction, try responding with openness and curiosity. In other words, relax your defenses.

Put compassion into action by taking the focus off yourself. Try writing a letter to yourself from him in which you imagine how he might explain the reason for his earlier outbreak. It may occur to you, for instance, that he relies on you to take care of weekly grocery shopping while he handles all the yard work. So when it seems as if you’re not holding up your end of the bargain, he panics, thinking he has to do it all. Or he may feel that forgetting the soap proves you don’t appreciate what he’s doing on his end. The point of this exercise is to broaden your perspective beyond your own feelings. It’s the very definition of compassion,

What’s Your Fighting Style?

We each have our own way of tackling an argument. Which of these has you written all over it?

The Pleaser

Your biggest fear is losing someone’s affection; as a result, you end up giving in to a fault.
Try to Express your own needs—and say no once in a while.
Your mantra *I matter.*

The Champ

A tenacious fighter, you keep it up until the other person drops from exhaustion—or defeat.
Try to Consider the other person’s point of view; cultivate compassion.
Your mantra *You matter.*

The Dodger

You avoid conflict at all costs. By the time a disagreement surfaces, you’re already two states away.
Try to Stay put; hash it out. Relationships are worth fighting for.
Your mantra *We matter.*

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and it immediately begins to restore balance. (Plus, it's incredibly courageous and noble.)

TIFF TYPE: The Cold War

Red flag The person you snuggled with this morning has turned into Mr. Remote (Control) this evening and seems not the least bit responsive.

Knee-jerk reaction He's mad at me. I did something wrong. He's met someone else and doesn't love me anymore.

Strategy Step back. Temporary withdrawal has its place. When we feel someone has withdrawn from us emotionally, it's natural to worry; but nagging or prodding him for reassurance that he loves you only makes things worse. Instead, try to get away for a while: Take a walk, go out for a cup of coffee, visit a friend. Don't meet his chilly front by storming out the door; simply separate yourself from the situation for a while, giving him some

space and time alone. If you can find a way to meet his bad mood with a peaceful mind and warm heart, whatever's really going on will become clear—or, more likely, pass over.

TIFF TYPE: The Rerun

Red flag You've argued the same point a thousand times before. He's lost his keys and needs you to leave work to drop off a spare. He's made plans without checking with you first. With a long sigh, you launch into, "Why do you *always* ..." and "You *never* ..."

Knee-jerk reaction Why can't he do what I ask him to? He doesn't care about me. He's so selfish.

Strategy Give up trying to win. We all have our weaknesses and pet peeves, but they're rarely if ever resolved when someone one-ups the other. Late sleepers never turn into early birds, slow drivers don't speed up, key-losers don't become key-keepers. By giving

up on winning, I don't mean to accept blame or give in to despair. What you can do, however, is stop anticipating and creating the circumstances for conflict when the situation comes up again (which it will).

Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche teaches that transcendental patience means adjusting our expectations. If you expect each time that your partner will be on time or never lose his keys, you're likely to be disappointed, over and over. But when you relax those expectations, you can ride the tides of emotion (hostility, remorse, hopefulness, boredom) like breath, wave after wave. Eventually, circumstances shift and the path to happiness reappears.

SUSAN PIVER is a Buddhist meditation teacher, practitioner, and author. Her latest book is *How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life*. Visit her at susanpiver.com.

*What good is healthy food
if nobody wants to eat it?*

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