



## HOW TO STOP A FIGHT BEFORE IT STARTS (‘CONFLICT RESOLUTION’)

These are the steps two or more people can take before a conflict starts or gets completely out of control. To improve the chances of success it is best if all involved know the steps and can go over them together.

Make a point of discussing in a quieter moment how you would like to handle differences before they turn into a shouting match or a stand-off. This will help those involved know how to respond in kind. It will also allow them to recognise an attempt to sort things out sensibly when they see one.

1. Look for EARLY WARNING SIGNALS of conflict in yourself (this is the ideal) or in others. These are: Increase in VOLUME AND PACE of speech.

Increase in INTERRUPTIONS AND TALKING OVER OTHERS.

The discussion turns to COMMON TROUBLE SPOTS.

Make a list of and PREPARE FOR the times (e.g. when either are tired or busy), situations (e.g. the other is late, either have been drinking) and issues that frequently lead to conflict. Common topics that spark conflict among couples are: money/expensive purchases, insensitive comments, frequency of sexual intercourse and undone chores. Watch and listen for them **before** you get to that feeling of "Here we go again! Why do we always end up arguing like this?!"

HEED THESE 'RED FLAGS'. The moment you see one *back off, slow down, lower the tone or lighten-up*. Perhaps use self-effacing humour that recognises that you are part of the problem too. It shows you don't take yourself too seriously. Appropriate humour can defuse an "I'm-right-and-you're-wrong" argument.

The best way to manage conflict is to STOP THE FIGHT BEFORE IT STARTS. Change how you typically react and see what happens. 'Circuit breakers' can give yourselves some breathing space for new perspectives on how to settle the dispute and create a positive relationship.

2. If conflict looms PUT THE BRAKES ON it.

Work out a script and do dummy runs until all involved are comfortable with it. Rehearsal is at the core of developing or improving any person-to-person skills!

A beginning might be something like (use your own language):

"Hold it a minute. I'm getting angry here (or, you look like you're getting angry. Am I right?) I'd like to stop the discussion for a minute."

Focus on HOW you were talking NOT WHAT was being discussed.

Another possibility:

"Let's back-up a bit. I was losing my cool there."

(This is an effort to get back to basic good communication, assertiveness or collaborative problem-solving. The other person needs to recognise this and ease up too if this applies.) If the discussion has got on to topics miles away from the original track ('kitchen-sinking') draw the discussion to one topic by saying something like:

"How about we start again and stick to one problem at a time?"

If it is likely that there will be further escalation that will hurt the problem-solving process, relationships and self-esteem perhaps you will need to say either:

"I am too upset to go on right now"

or:

"Are you too upset to go on right now?"

TO STOP A FIGHT from developing any further take TIME-OUT from the discussion. Try saying:

"I'm too upset (or, you're too upset) for this discussion to go anywhere useful now.

I would like to take 1/2 an hour to cool down. Agreed?"

Note well: You are making a time to return. You are not walking out or backing down. You are not implying: "you're not worth talking to". Instead this strategy implies: "I want to work this problem out with you but not by fighting, so let's take time to cool down."

By making a time to return you don't leave the other person wondering if and when you will come back.

If the other person does not cooperate with a 'time-out' and persists or pursues aggressively, use 'broken record/repeated assertion':

"I'll talk to you when you stop yelling at me"

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If you leave the room, the house or building DON'T DRIVE. Many accidents happen when people are emotionally charged. Walk if you have to leave the area on your own. Use this 'cooling off' time to WORK OUT A CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH to the issue.

- DON'T STEW in your feelings or fan your anger now. Use a CALMING STRATEGY. Very slow breaths are a suggested start. Try talking sense to yourself: "I am letting some old emotional buttons get pushed here. When have I been, or seen something, like this before? Do I really want to repeat or slavishly copy old habits? Have they worked in the past? If not, or the price was too high, I may as well try something new. If nothing else I will at least know that I tried to improve the situation and handle it like a fair and reasonable person."

Or: "Anger can be a blinding emotion. What am I not seeing in myself, the other or the situation? What are the short and long range consequences? Is staying mad worth the risks or the mess it makes?" Link these realistic but complex new perspectives to a simple phrase with a few repetitions now ("cool, calm and collected...cool and calm") And/or tie them while angry to a cue like a clenched fist that slowly relaxes and unfurls as calming thoughts fade in and eclipse your unwanted emotion. Deliberately tense and relax your fist when you go back if anger rises. Slow breathing, repeating a short phrase and the gesture, by association, will replace the raw emotion with calming reactions.

- Plan an assertive approach (a quietly persistent one that expresses your reasonable ideas blended with respect, flexibility and sensitivity to the other's rights) for when you go back.

4. RECYCLE these steps as often as necessary. Despite the time it takes it will leave everyone feeling better and with more genuine commitment to the final decisions.

5. If you are still angry as you discuss the issue EXPRESS YOUR ANGER ASSERTIVELY. That is QUIETLY but persistently sticking to your point while saying things that show you know what the others are feeling, can validate those feelings (that is, communicate that even though you may not share their feelings, you acknowledge that it is O.K. for them to feel that way) and specifically recognising their point of view. If the issue is a feeling or opinion: "Let's agree to disagree. You're entitled to your view as much as I am mine." is an example of this.

6. If a change in the way things are done and not just a difference in ideas is at stake and if all concerned are coming from a rightful position then NEGOTIATION is called for. Ask: "What would be a FAIR arrangement here?" If this cannot be agreed on by the interested parties, then decide on a mutually acceptable way of determining what is fair. E.g. "Let's agree to what the boss or counsellor says is fair. O.K.?" Be slow to ask friends or family to arbitrate. The potential for feelings of resentment is very great. If you leave the situation still angry about what happened BEWARE OF DUMPING your feelings later on to an uninvolved person.