

How To Win Every Fight

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Imagine you decide to run a marathon for the first time. You're excited as you click to submit your application to join the run. Now the nervousness kicks in. "I can't even run a mile how am I going to run over 26? I don't even know where to begin!" So, you start to comb through articles and how to's to come up with a plan for how to get yourself into shape in time.

You learn that the smartest strategy you could employ in this situation is preparation, preparation in understanding how the body works and functions, your stamina, and your endurance. Should you arrive to the marathon without this preparation, you will likely hurt your body and the chances of enjoying and finishing the race don't look too promising. To get the best results, you start practicing some of the exercises you've read. You set a consistent time to walk three times a week and you plan to increase the length of time and speed of your gait from week to week. This is how you run a marathon.

Marriage is much like running a marathon. From the moment a couple decides to get engaged they are committing to a long-term endeavor that can be incredibly overwhelming while simultaneously exciting. The best thing they can do for this marathon relationship is prepare - prepare in the areas of knowledge, stamina, and endurance. We prepare our knowledge-base for marriage by reading, consulting with experts and people we trust, and learning the unique

nuances of our spouses' personalities. We can then grow our stamina and endurance by developing and improving essential relationship skills such as applying tools of self-care, communication, and conflict resolution.

Let's face it, though, learning communication tools usually makes its way to the bottom of our wedding to do lists; after all, we have our whole lives to figure that out but only a few weeks to get the caterer and photographer. Even post wedding, there are thank you cards to write, school work to tend to, and jobs to maintain. Some of us really do want to learn the tools, but we just don't have the time or energy needed to obtain them. Others think we can just enjoy the ride of our marriages, make decisions based on our past relationship experiences, and figure the rest out as we go along.

The thing is, when we let our very real responsibilities or "wing-it" mentalities take precedent over learning what to say and how to act in a fight, it's akin to running a marathon with no training. Those fundamental communications skills are what allows us to sustain and enjoy a longstanding, healthy marriage. And, when we invest our time and efforts into training for marriage, we also find that we have the stamina and endurance to fulfill all our other responsibilities. There is nothing more invigorating and energy-boosting than being in a relationship where we feel heard, loved, and known.

So how do we cultivate these communication skills? The first step to working on communication is to understand that fights happen, and they are normal, even beneficial. Fights point us in the direction of the kinks in our relationships and once the kinks are addressed, we can have a beautiful relationship. The key to working out the kinks is to literally work them out; we work through them, talking about them, processing them, until like a knot in our backs, they are fully massaged out.

Here is a process of six steps to help you fight well, resolve conflict, feel heard, and get closer.

1 – Have the Goal in Mind. It is very easy when we have disagreements with our spouses to get caught up in our emotions and opinions, and the fact that our spouses are "crazy" to think and feel the way they do about an issue. When we engage in healthy fights, it is crucial to remember that the priority of the fight is to create understanding and connection. As aforementioned, a disagreement is an opportunity to get closer to our spouses as when we resolve conflict well, we create a deeper understanding of each other and a stronger bond. It can help us tremendously to remind ourselves that our goal for the conversation is to achieve more understanding and build a stronger connection. We can remind ourselves and each other, pause mid-conversation to take the other person's hand, or share that although the conversation is hard, we love each other and want to figure it out together.

2 - "You go first."

When couples discuss what I like to call hot topics in my office, it is normal for each person to feel intensity and some level of tension. It is challenging to calmly talk about matters that are important and meaningful to us, especially with someone who may feel differently than we do. A strong act of kindness we can extend to our spouses when starting these discussions is to offer that they share their perspective first. Typically, each person is eager to share his or her opinion.

Offering to hear the other person's opinion before sharing your own shows a willingness and openness to alternative perspectives and demonstrates tremendous patience. This gesture can help lower your spouse's defenses and sets a tone of graciousness and peace for the rest of the conversation.

3 – Listen.

They say G-d created man with one mouth and two ears so that he listens twice as much as he speaks. When we fight with our spouses, it is essential to resolving the conflict and to subsequent connecting with them to openly, patiently, and lovingly listen to what they share with us.

When it's our spouse's turn to speak, we let them speak. It can be hard to do but listening without interruption is paramount. Listening does not just mean keeping quiet and not interrupting, it also means that while they are talking, we are not formulating our own thoughts and responses to what they are sharing. True listening means we are present for all the verbal and nonverbal information that our spouses entrust to us.

4 – Show Appreciation for Their Vulnerability and Validate.

It takes vulnerability for our spouses to share their thoughts and feelings with us. If our ultimate goal of the conversation is connection, the best way to get closer to this goal is by respecting our spouse's vulnerability and opening ourselves up to hearing what they have to say. It requires humility on our parts to be open to another person's perspective, but the payoff is worth it. We don't have to agree with their viewpoint, but we can express understanding as to how or why they may have come to their conclusion. When we validate our spouses, we are essentially telling them that they are not evil or crazy or stupid; we tell them that if we were exactly in their position, we would likely feel and think the same way.

5 – Share Your Perspective.

Once our spouses feel heard and validated, then it's our time to share our perspective. It is at this point in the conversation where it's easy for things to take a bad turn because we often can use our turn to defend ourselves, criticize our partners, vent about the issue, and/or bring up similar issues while we're at it. To transform the disagreement into a productive conversation, we take a deep breath and then use the format of situation and feeling statements, meaning we say that "when _____ happens, I feel _____ feeling." It is here where we can get deep and express deep-seated fears we may have about the issue or concern.

Then, we share what we might need or want to see happen in the future so that the issue isn't repeated, and we get our needs met. It is important to note that when we share our needs with our spouses we are asking not demanding, and they have a right to say no and explain why. If this is the case, then we can repeat steps three through five until we come to some resolution or an agreement to disagree. When we share our viewpoints, the more vulnerable we can be, the more our spouses are likely to respond with empathy and tenderness.

6 – Talk About the Talk.

The final step to winning every fight as a team is talking about our conversations. This part is the most important step because it will dictate how future conversations are handled. In this step,

we process as a couple how the conversation went for each person. We ask each other questions like “what would you want more or less of next time we engage in a challenging conversation,” “what is the best way I can tell you that I disagree with your standpoint,” and “is there anything I can do to show you more understanding.” Taking the knowledge from these conversations to our next fights will ensure that each person will feel safer and calmer. With a profound sense of closeness and a victory under our belts, we can then move on to our next win.