

Unfair Fighting

Unfair fighting is the loud, bitter, harmful, unproductive, and sometimes violent kind. It usually springs from some combination of these three dangerous assumptions:

1. ***Conflict is awful.*** We must avoid it as long as possible. We should want the same things. We should agree. We should be nice.
2. ***My needs are more valid than yours.*** Only what I want is really important. What you want is trivial or stupid. I'm right and you're wrong. I'm good and you're bad.
3. ***Only one can win.*** If one of us gets what he or she wants, the other can't. A winner implies a loser. Therefore, I'd better attack first, seize the high ground, and make sure the winner is me.

Identifying Unfair Fighting Styles

1. **Bad timing.** One person forces his or her agenda on the other, often insisting on discussing something at an inappropriate time – when it's late and you're tired, when you're rushing to get somewhere, when you're busy with something else, when you've been drinking, when there are other people around whom you don't want to hear you fighting, and so on.
2. **Blaming.** The dangerous assumption that "I'm right and you're wrong" makes you blame the other person for the whole problem. Blaming can take the form of name calling, accusing, exaggerating, assuming evil intentions, raking up past failures, and so on. "You" statements are common and "I" statements are rare.
3. **Too many issues.** When you're angry and tend to use any ammunition you can think of, dragging up issue after issue to support how good you are and how bad the other person is.
4. **Covering other feelings with anger.** In unfair fights, anger is usually the only emotion expressed. It drowns out my underlying fear, sadness, guilt, envy, disappointment, and so on.
5. **Impossible demands.** Unfair fights often include vague, abstract demands like "be more considerate" or "stop being so picky." These are really impossible demands. They require the other person read your mind at all times and judge whether they are about to do is sufficiently "considerate" or overly "picky." Demanding global changes in attitude or feelings never works. People just don't change their personalities quickly or easily.
6. **Threats and ultimatums.** Impossible demands are often backed up with excessive threats and ultimatums: I'll move out. I'll withdraw my support. I'll hit. I'll take the kids. I'll tell on you. I'll destroy something. I won't love you anymore.

7. **Escalation.** Unfair fights tend to escalate from quiet disagreements to loud arguments, from arguing to shouting and screaming matches, from shouting to breaking things, from breaking to throwing increasingly dangerous objects, from throwing to hitting, and so on.
8. **Unhappy endings.** Unfair fights end in violence, withdrawal, or tears and apologies. They don't end in mutually satisfactory solutions. In fact, unfair fights don't really end at all – there's just a temporary cease fire until the next round.

Adapted From...

Messages: The Communication Book - by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning.
Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995.