

## How to Stop Fighting: Tips for Married Couples

Experts share suggestions for defusing marital disputes.

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WebMD Feature

Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

Becky Robbins says she and her husband, Neil -- married for eight years -- rarely fight.

That doesn't mean that there isn't conflict for the Berrien Springs, Mich., couple. It's just that she screams "kind of like the queen in *Alice in Wonderland*," uttering phrases reminiscent of "off with their heads." And her husband responds like most guys in [marriage](#) fighting. He hides in "the bedroom playing video games."

This isn't what we envisioned as we clutched hands as newlyweds and sneered at those older couples who ate in silence at the Waffle House. But the reality is, you're probably going to have marital disputes. And each of us have our own style of fighting, stepping into the ring ready for a knock-out over the [toothpaste](#) in the sink, wrinkled laundry in the dryer or appropriate television for the [toddlers](#).

"Everyone in a relationship argues," says Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*. "However, how loudly you scream or how frequently you fight does not predict the outcome of your marriage."

What qualifies as fighting fair in marriage essentially comes down to how each partner feels when they leave the ring. If both are hearty "boxers," who love a few rounds in the ring and then are ready for some make-up sex, the marriage is probably fine.

But if people leave the ring angry, bitter, and resentful, perhaps it's time to re-evaluate, either together or with the help of a therapist or psychologist.

And what if a careful, logical analysis of your fights still doesn't stop your anger about dishes left in the family room? What's some real-life advice for couples who might experience more marriage disagreements during these trying economic times?

### Suggestions for Keeping the Peace

Experts of wedded bliss -- some with the pedigree of education, and others with the scars of experience -- have these suggestions:

**Go to bed angry.** Several therapists and couples said forget that adage about always resolving anger before turning in -- and let someone [sleep](#) on the couch. "We've found that going to bed angry is often the best choice," said Lisa Earle McLeod, an author and 23-year marriage veteran. "It allows partners to clear their thoughts, get some sleep, and make a date to resume the fight (which might seem less important in the light of day)."

**Take a break.** Even a 30-second break can help a couple push the reset button on a fight, says Timothy Warneka, a licensed clinical counselor. "Stop, step out of the room, and reconnect when everyone's a little calmer."

**Own up to your part of the fight.** Melody Brooke, a licensed marriage and family therapist, says two things derail intense fights: admitting what you did to get your partner ticked off, and expressing empathy toward your partner. Brooke, author of *The Blame Game*, says this can be difficult but typically is extremely successful. "Letting down our defenses in the heat of battle, seems counterintuitive, but is actually very effective with couples."

**Find the humor.** Pamela Bodley and her husband, of Yonkers, N.Y., have also been married 23 years, "and Lord knows it [wasn't] easy in the early years ... but it's much, much better now. We have a great sense of humor." Her husband, Paul, has kept the mood light by always saying he knows women keep skillet in their purse. So when he does something wrong, Bodley says, "I just pretend to hit him over the head with a skillet and say, 'TING!'"

**Shut up and touch.** Brooke says there's a point where discussing the matter doesn't help. So couples need to just hold each other when nothing else seems to be working. "Reconnecting through touch is very important."

**Ban the "but."** Couples often derail a resolution when they try to acknowledge the other partner's position, but then add a "but" in their next breath and reaffirm their position, says Jane Straus, author of *Enough is Enough! Stop Enduring and Start Living Your Extraordinary Life*. An example: I can understand why you didn't pick up the dishes in the family room, but why do you think I'm the maid?

**Remember what's important.** "We soon realized that we don't have two beings in a marriage, we actually have three: me, my husband, and the marriage. And we have to take good care of all three of us," says Jacqueline Freeman of Battle Ground, Wash. "So if we've been arguing about whose fault it is that the house is so messy, I might defend myself saying I was busy working a project that will bring in more income, and he might say he was busy fixing something on the house that was broken. ... We used to be able to carry a conversation like this for quite some time, but over the years, we seem to have developed a 15-minute timer for arguing ... when one of us will suddenly remember the key question: What's best for the marriage?"

### Suggestions for Keeping the Peace continued...

And therapists also say that it's important to realize that no marriage is perfect and that fighting is often part of the ebb and flow of compromise.

"I have come to realize that we are not normal," Robbins says. "But as they say, 'Normal is just a cycle on the washing machine.'"

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