

# YOUR TIME

## Everyone wins by Fighting fair



Say what you really feel, but play by the rules, writes **KAMAHL COGDON**

**A** GOOD argument can be just what your relationship needs — if you do it right. Experts agree it's better to air frustration, hurt, anger and resentment than to let them simmer below the surface.

"Ongoing unresolved conflict is unhealthy physically, mentally and emotionally, and can cause a major disconnect within a relationship," warns Cheryl Dakis, education manager at LifeWorks Relationship Counselling and Education Services.

"Resentment can build and become a festering wound within the relationship. It can slowly kill the love, respect and trust which are the glue that holds the relationship together."

US research has also found partners who suppress their anger when one attacks the other are twice as likely to die early than couples who express their anger and resolve a conflict.

The key, the experts say, is knowing how to fight fair.

"A good argument can and should build greater respect and help clear the 'rubble' out of your relationship," relationships expert Heather Yelland says.

So what are the rules of engagement when it comes to romantic warfare?

### Rules of engagement

- Do**
- Listen
  - Express your feelings honestly
  - Check to see if your message is heard and understood
  - Speak for yourself
  - Stick to the issue at hand
  - Aim for a win-win solution

- Don't**
- Interrupt
  - Change the subject
  - Become defensive
  - Criticise, be sarcastic, cruel or roll your eyes
  - Stonewall or withdraw
  - Sulk, pout, throw tantrums or give the silent treatment
  - Leave arguments unfinished



other with respect," she says. ■ **EXPRESS** your feelings and thoughts honestly, but with care and consideration.

■ **LISTEN** to what the other person is saying without interrupting. Don't be planning your next comeback or attack while they're speaking.

■ **STICK** to the topic at hand. Don't drag out out every concern your partner has ever caused you. "Women are particularly bad at this," Yelland warns.

■ **BE PREPARED** to show your vulnerability. Don't hide your feelings behind anger or distance.

■ **SPEAK** for yourself. Use "I" and not "we" or "everyone".

■ **EXPLAIN** your feelings without blaming, accusing or attacking your partner. It's not about point-scoring or who is going to come out on top.

■ **DON'T** resort to manipulative behaviours like temper tantrums, silent treatment, running away or false crying. ■ **AVOID** physical fighting of any kind.

■ **DON'T** hit below the belt. Name-calling and belittling are off-limits. Don't attack each other's character and personality by using phrases such as "you always ..." or "you're the

type of person who ..." rather than addressing the actual issue.

■ **DON'T** be defensive and protective. Making excuses, denying responsibility or launching a counter complaint or criticism isn't helpful.

■ **NEVER** leave an argument unfinished. If you can't reach a reasonable solution at the time, negotiate a time to return to the discussion.

■ **BE MINDFUL** of how you fight in front of your children. They will model their own approach to conflict resolution on you.

Dakis says problem avoidance is one of the biggest mistakes couples make. Both partners will often avoid confrontation for the sake of keeping the immediate peace or one partner might want to tackle a problem, while the other wants to ignore it.

Not listening to each other and attacking in the heat of the moment are other common mistakes, Dakis says. "This can mean that quite hurtful and damaging comments can be made and issues can easily become exaggerated or distorted," she warns.

She says it's vital that issues not be raised before each person has had time to cool down.

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