

Jeff Garson
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Effective Fighting: Practice Pointers for Couples

When my wife, Dale, and I started couples therapy in the mid 1990s, after 10 years of marriage and almost 50 years of living, our gifted therapist, Sunny Shulkin, described the way most couples fight. She speaks and he listens – but in a special way – carefully sifting her words for ammunition so that, when her mouth stops moving, he can fire back. And as he counter-attacks, she, in turn, is busy collecting her own ammunition so that, when he stops talking, she can return the fire.

The description was sobering, uncomfortably accurate. Over and over, Dale and I would take turns explaining why we were right and the other wrong, with our frustration and vehemence increasing with each exchange. The predictable endpoint? A complete breakdown in communication and mutual misery, followed by reconciliation – not resolution – and, in due course, a repeat performance. And years slipped by.

Why was Sunny able to describe the process of this new couple, sitting in front of her, with such eerie accuracy? Because we live in a culture where the relentless message is that successful people are winners; that good people compete, strive and, ultimately, prevail. It is utterly predictable that the values that permeate our approach at school, at work, and in our social aspirations will also show up in our intimate relationships.

It is all so sad. We know to a certainty that the great majority of our teenagers will organize their lives around a committed intimate relationship. Nevertheless, there is virtually no effort to teach them the skills needed to be an effective partner.

But a better way does exist. And for Dale and me, one of our great joys is to share what we have learned with others. In this Reflection, I offer some guidelines for effective fighting that we have teased out in our work with couples – and with each other.

In the public/political arena, these same attack/counter-attack habits are practiced with a vengeance – and with devastating consequences. In this area of living, however, the shift to effective fighting is far more difficult since key qualities that can jumpstart the process for couples – good faith, trust, and a shared desire for a better way – are in remarkably short supply. That said, one of Radical Decency's central beliefs is that, by applying a single set of values in all areas of living, their elaboration in one area will lead creative insights in other areas as well. For that reason, I invite you consider how the practice pointers for couples, described below, might be adapted and applied to our efforts to create a more decent public discourse.

Point 1: You're not fighting about what you're fighting about.

Couples bicker about chores – how to handle the children – sex – money, the list goes on and on. But when a couple shifts to fight mode, the struggle is – always – about one

thing: Each partner feels unheard and unseen and, with that, fears the loss of the safe, nurturing love that he or she longs for and depends upon. For those of us who instinctually default to the fight side of the fight/flight dichotomy, the fear is that the most important person in our life will abandon us. For those of us on the flight side, it is a fear of being overwhelmed and engulfed by our partner and his needs.

Because the substantive issue at hand has triggered your partner, it needs to be treated with respect. But don't dwell on it. Make your point about how dinner chores should be handled, listen to his, and then shift your attention to the real issue: The ways in which you and your partner, in this conversation, do not feel loved and appreciated.

Note that the practical cost in adopting this approach is actually very small since, in 90% of the cases, the outcome on the substantive issue is of no consequence. Her way of doing it is fine. But so too is his way. Either way, no babies are dying. The bottom line: Deal with your partner's emotional needs and longings – and yours – and not with the intricacies of how and when to do the laundry.

Point 2: Winning is not the goal.

When your partner yells, or goes cold and judgmental, she has not turned into an unfeeling monster. Despite appearances, she feels lousy and is at her most vulnerable and unsafe – just like you. Understanding this, it makes no sense to inflict additional pain, especially since the point you are about make with such urgency is, almost always, a point you've made many times before, in past fights.

Not falling into this habitual, reactive way of responding – in the middle of a fight – is excruciatingly difficult. But that is the holy grail of effective fighting: To replace our instinctual fight/flight reactions with loving acts and, equally, to be receptive to our partner's efforts to do the same.

When emotions escalate, job one is to tend to our physical and emotional safety and integrity. But consistent with these priorities, there are many moments, even in the middle of a fight, when loving acts are possible. Seek to understand and empathize with your partner and, importantly, share these feelings in ways that she is better able to hear. Let her know, as best you can, that you know what it feels like to be her. Equally, important, strive to warmly accept loving initiatives from her side, even when they are tinged with the residue of anger and resentment. Resist, with all the discipline and presence of mind you can muster, the urge to get in the last shot.

Point 3: Don't defend yourself.

When a fight starts, one of the first casualties is context. Despite her harsh words and cold looks, you are not an awful person. In fact, you are the most important person in her life; the person she has chosen to grow old with; the person she has stayed with for all these years; the person she trusts with her life – and with the lives of her children.

Remembering this, defending yourself is really beside the point; a non-issue. Notwithstanding her momentary annoyance about the clutter you have created in the

spare bedroom, you are and remain, in her eyes, loved and esteemed. So acknowledge what you have done, pick up the clutter and look at this cleanup work, not as an annoying chore, but as a ready-made opportunity to love her.

Point 4: Time is on your side.

When we are in the middle of a fight, we too easily think that everything has to be said – NOW. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, we have all the time in the world; with any luck, decades.

With this thought in mind, keep the conversation simple and stay focused on the issue at hand. If she complains about your getting home late for dinner, don't respond by pointing out that she is chronically late when you have plans with another couple. That is changing the subject, pure and simple. She wants to talk about dinner and, ignoring that, you have shifted to a second topic.

This is where the realization that time is on our side is so helpful. Your annoyance about the routine on Saturday night is real and needs to be dealt with. But it's best to raise it at another time – tomorrow or next week. Why? Because the alternative just doesn't work. When you change the subject and link issues, your partner – feeling unheard – is likely to do the same which will, in turn, invite further linking by you, and so on, in an escalating, difficult to interrupt cycle.

The goal should be to do less and to do it well. Then, stop and acknowledge your success, knowing that the tools you have used in this “good” fight, today, will help you to deal more effectively with the next issue – tomorrow, or next week, or next month.

Point 5: Scan for the positive.

This guideline, first offered by Terence Real, facilitates a more productive process and supports you in fighting more effectively. What gives the guideline its power is a simple, underlying truth: Your partner makes sense. Given his experiences, skills, disposition, hopes and dreams, this is how this magnificent person you have chosen as your life partner organizes her life, emotionally and practically. And she is a package deal. The stuff you love and the stuff that drives you crazy are inextricably intertwined.

So when, in the middle of a fight, your partner takes his best shot, scan for what you agree with and begin your response there. Doing so will remind you that she does, indeed, make sense and will, in this way, act as a break on your instinctual, fight/flight driven rush toward demonization and dismissive judgment. In addition, it will invite her to join with you in a shift toward the reciprocal acts of understanding and love that are the hallmark of effective fighting (see Point 2).

Point 6: Measure yourself by your successes, and not by your failures.

I close with this thought. Being a good romantic partner, always difficult, is never more challenging than when you are in the middle of a fight. As hard as you try, there will, inevitably, be many moments when you fall short. So always remember to measure your progress by your successes, and not by your failures.