



Ten Commandments for
FIGHTING FAIRLY

LONNIE BARBACH AND DAVID GEISINGER

- 1—**Manage your physiology:** Avoid using contemptuous or threatening gestures, loud tones, harsh language, or disdainful facial expressions. Stay calm (breathe regularly and evenly); do not interrupt, and maintain eye contact.
- 2—**State your feelings.** A good paradigm to begin with is the sentence: “I feel _____ when you _____ because _____.” The words “I feel” should be followed directly with a word that describes a feeling such as confused, worried, lonely, unimportant, hurt. Feelings are the basis of intimate communication.
- 3—**Feelings are inherently valid.** Beware of judging, dismissing, or disregarding your partner’s feelings by indicating that s/he is overreacting; wrong to feel that way, or by rolling your eyes. Instead, try to understand how/why your partner might feel the way s/he does. Fair fighting is about understanding, not about winning.
- 4—**Beware of expressing beliefs or thoughts disguised as feelings.** Sentences that begin with the words “I feel that you” (don’t care, are angry, etc.) actually express thoughts, even though the word “feel” is used. When you can replace the word “feel” in the sentence with the word “think” or “believe,” you are expressing an idea, not a feeling. You can argue thoughts, but not feelings.
- 5—**Avoid attributive language.** When you begin a sentence with the word “you:” as in, “You think only about yourself,” or “You did that intentionally,” you are making assumptions that may be quite inaccurate. Attributions usually lead to denials, counter-attributions, misunderstandings, and other defensive reactions.
- 6—**Express the more vulnerable feelings underlying anger.** Anger is most often a secondary emotion, covering a more vulnerable feeling such as fear, hurt, embarrassment, or confusion. Anger pushes your partner away whereas expressing the hurt that triggered the anger is likely to lead your partner to being more receptive, empathic, and connected.
- 7—**Eliminate the words “always,” “never,” “only,” and “just.”** These words are absolutist, rarely accurate, and often insulting. They tend to inflame and engender defensiveness. Instead, use modifiers such as “rarely, frequently, or often.”
- 8—**In your own words, repeat back to your partner what you believe him/her to be saying.** This achieves two goals: that you understand your partner correctly and that your partner feels understood. You haven’t heard your partner accurately until s/he agrees with your interpretation.
- 9—**Presume innocence.** Start a discussion by assuming your partner is innocent rather than guilty. Give them the same benefit of the doubt that you would like. Ask questions in order to better understand your partner’s behavior from his/her point of view. Be curious, not furious.
- 10—**Express your discontent positively.** Instead of saying, “I don’t like it when you...,” say “I prefer it when you...” Instead of saying “I want you to stop...” say “I would like you to start...” In this way you will be giving your partner positive direction and s/he will feel less criticized, less defensive, and therefore more cooperative. All negative statements can be expressed positively.



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- Barbach and Geisinger

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