

Ground Rules for Conflict

If you don't learn conflict skills, you will use what you learned as a child and you will likely argue like a child or like your parents. But it doesn't have to be that way; you can learn skills to make conflict with your partner useful and productive. A great place to start is having a list of rules that you and your partner agree on.

Would you play a sport without rules? Why do we assume that we don't need rules for conflict?

Remember that arguments or fights (verbal, not physical) are normal. They will happen in any relationship and they don't mean that the relationship is over. Arguments can be useful to clear the air on issues as long as you decide (preferably, ahead of time) what's ok and not ok. In my experience, couples usually fall into patterns of fighting that either work or don't. Few people actually negotiate rules for their fights.

It can be helpful to post your list of Rules in a room designated for your fights, such as the kitchen, so it's there for quick reference. Some people have rules on their lists about limiting fights to certain rooms or avoiding others.

Below are some ideas for your list of ground rules. Please discuss together and decide what to keep and what to delete, and add anything that you feel needs to be on the list.

- Is it ok for either person to take a time-out? For how long?
- What is your time-out / safe word?
- Is it ok to agree to disagree?
- Is it ok to fight in (or not fight in) certain rooms?
- Should fights be limited in time? Should they be limited in time of day such as not right before work or after 10PM?
- Yelling is not allowed.
- Take turns and each person gets 5 minutes.
- Name calling is not allowed.
- Nothing physical.

- No fighting while driving.
- Is it ok to ask permission to take your partner's hand or hug your partner?
- Limit fights to a single issue.
- Don't bring up issues from previous fights.
- Start statements with "I feel..." rather than "You..."

Sometimes it can be helpful to put reminders at the top of the list such as:

- Our relationship is solid.
- Our relationship is stronger than this fight.
- Just because my partner is mad doesn't mean they don't love me.
- This is just a fight.
- Arguments are normal and healthy.
- We're fighting because we're afraid.
- We're a team.
- We're on the same side.
- My partner has good intentions.
- My partner is trying to help.

Some other things to think about:

- Experiment! Try out different things and see what works. When do you find that arguments don't happen? What did you do differently?
- Consider a different venue. Some clients tell me that serious conversations are less likely to become arguments when they're taking a walk.
- When in doubt, reflect. Summarize what you're hearing and ask your partner if you're understanding. Don't try to fix and don't defend yourself.

- Ask your partner what would be helpful to them in the conversation.
“Would you like me to listen? Would you like suggestions? Would you like me to comfort you?”