

HITTING BELOW THE BELT: “Dirty Fighting” Strategies That Will Always Undermine Effective Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is an important skill in a relationship since there is absolutely no way to completely avoid disagreement when you're truly close to others. Unfortunately, at times, we all lapse into unhealthy and destructive patterns of relating to our partners during conflict. Take a look at the list below and note how many of these patterns seem to fit for you when you are arguing with someone else. Then start thinking about changing these behaviors so that conflict resolution in your relationships can be a growth-producing and relationship-enhancing process rather than a damaging and destructive one.

BLAMING: Placing all the responsibility for the argument or problem on your partner and refusing to acknowledge any part in the current issue. A portion of a blaming attitude is being clear that you won't change and nothing will improve until the other person changes first.

- e.g. Saying *“I never would have yelled at you if you hadn't said that to me first,” “You're the one who's always starting these damn arguments,”* or *“You're the real problem in this relationship.”*

MINIMIZING: Trying to make your partner's thoughts and feelings about an issue less important than what they really are to them.

- e.g. Saying *“Come on, honey, it's not that big a deal. You're blowing this whole thing way out of proportion... why can't you just let it go (move on)?”*

JUSTIFYING: Offering reasons and excuses for your behavior rather than working to actively listen to try to understand what your partner thinks and feels about it.

- e.g. Saying *“I just said that because I was tired,” “You let your ex-husband treat you that way. Why shouldn't I be able to?,”* or *“I'm just acting like this because I've got too much pressure on me at work these days.”*

DENYING: Completely refusing to recognize the reality of what you have said or done or what has happened in a situation. This can also include knowingly being dishonest as a way to make a partner feel “off-balance” in your interaction with them which will generally create a confusing and often “crazy-making” atmosphere where “competing realities” make it impossible to move forward in a positive way on the issue or in the relationship.

- e.g. Saying *“I never said(did) that to you”* when you know that you actually did but don't want to admit it to the other person because it could “weaken” your position in the argument about what really happened

IGNORING: Turning your attention inside and withdrawing when your partner is attempting to talk about or work through an issue with you.

- e.g. “tuning a partner out” when they are trying to talk to you; withdrawing into silence and sulking or pouting; pretending to fall asleep or actually doing this to avoid talking; watching the TV, focusing on the computer, your cell phone, your tablet, or reading a book, a magazine, or the newspaper rather than connecting with your partner when they want or need to talk with you

FORGETTING: “Not remembering” what you have said or done as a means to avoid taking any responsibility in a conflict. Often, chemical use or explosive anger are used as excuses for “forgetting” what has actually happened.

- e.g. Saying “*I don’t recall saying anything like that at the party last night*” or “*I was too drunk (‘pissed off’) to remember what I did.*”

“TIT FOR TAT:” Responding immediately to any issue that your partner raises with an issue of your own that may or may not relate to what has just been brought up to change the focus from what they have brought up.

- e.g. Saying “*If you’re so hurt about what happened last night, how about the way you treated me just last week?*”

BEING SARCASTIC: Devious, ambiguous, and hostile comments made about your partner or their behavior that communicates strong feelings without having to take any responsibility for what you are trying to say and moves the focus from the original issue.

- e.g. Saying “*I’m really sure you know what you’re talking about.*” “*Why don’t you just get a life?*” “*I guess you’re Miss Perfect, aren’t you?*” “*Who made you king of the world?*”

“UP THE ANTE:” Moving as quickly as possible from the issue being discussed to questioning your partner’s worth as a person and then questioning whether you should even stay in the relationship. This often involves actively choosing to interpret your partner’s shortcomings as concrete evidence of their inadequacy and their lack of real commitment to the relationship with you.

- e.g. Saying “*You always treat me like ‘dirt’ and being with you just isn’t worth the hassle!*”

INTERROGATING: Continually asking questions that are meant to keep your partner “off balance” and “on the defensive” so that you won’t have to speak for yourself and take any personal emotional risks in the argument.

- e.g. Asking over and over again “*How could you say (do) something like that?*” or “*Where the hell were you last night?*”

GETTING PERSONAL: Making negative and disrespectful statements about your partner to trigger defensiveness and to keep the focus away from the issue really getting addressed and resolved.

- e.g. Saying “*You are really a loser (idiot, dummy) when it comes to handling money.*”

VIOLATING CONFIDENCES: Using personal and intimate sharing that your partner has done with you in the past as “ammunition” in a current argument to hurt and demean them and “throw them off-balance.”

- e.g. Saying “*Who the hell are you to talk about our sex life? You let your stepfather come in and screw you every night when you were a kid (You let your last boyfriend get it anytime he wanted).*”

TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY: “Going out of your way” to interpret your partner’s words and actions as being said and done primarily to “put you down,” “pick on you,” hurt you, and humiliate you. This means personalizing whatever happens in your relationship and choosing to look at yourself as a victim and viewing your partner as an enemy and adversary rather than a supporter and a friend.

- e.g. Saying “*You’re just telling me that to try to make me mad*” or “*You’re always ‘bitching’ at me. Why don’t you get off my back?*”

PREDICTING THE FUTURE: “Catastrophizing” about what lies ahead in your relationship to avoid addressing and working on issues in the present and to protect you from having to take your own risks to really make meaningful personal changes right now.

- e.g. Saying *“I know you’ll never be able to change”* or *“Nothing will ever get any better in this damn marriage.”*

MAKING JUDGMENTS: Using disrespectful and condescending labels to describe your partner to make them the sole reason for all the relationship problems.

- e.g. Saying *“You’re crazy (a bitch, stupid, ‘messed up,’ a jerk, an asshole).”*

USING POOR TIMING: Picking inappropriate times to begin a discussion or argument so that there is no real possibility of working through the issue at that point. This can also include only being willing to talk when you “feel like it” (which, for some people, is never).

- e.g. starting an important discussion just as you or your partner is leaving for work, just before you are going over to your in-laws for dinner, late at night when both of you are tired and neither of you has any energy to talk, in a public place or at a social gathering where it may be embarrassing to your partner or others around you

“PLAYING THE TEACHER:” Acting like a “know-it-all” and taking on the role of a “instructor” whose job is to explain to your partner what they are doing “wrong” and how they should “correct” the specific problem that is occurring between the two of you or their “life issues” that are interfering with your relationship.

- e.g. Saying *“You just say those things about me because of the way you were raised. You should think about that before you open your mouth”* or *“Try not to say anything stupid about current events at the dinner party tonight. I don’t want you to embarrass me again in front of our guests.”*

GENERALIZING: Using broad and sweeping statements involving words like “always” and “never” which are likely to trigger your partner’s defensiveness and quickly move the discussion from the actual issue to your total condemnation of who they are as a person.

- e.g. Saying *“You never want to do anything that I’d like to do,”* *“You always say things like that to me,”* or *“You never see my point of view when we talk”*

AVOIDING COMPROMISE: Being unwilling to back down from your stance in a conflict and staying rigidly focused on the idea that there is only one real “winner” and one “right” answer when two people (especially you and someone else) disagree about something.

- e.g. Saying *“There’s no way I’m doing anything that you want”* or *“Why the hell would I do it your way? I’m the one who’s right about this issue.”*

“MIND-READING:” Believing that you know the **real** reason that your partner has said or done something and communicating this belief to them as a way of ending any further discussion about what might actually be going on between the two of you.

- e.g. Saying *“I know you’re just saying you’re sick tonight to get out of going to this party with my friends.”*

DISTRACTING: Changing the subject or topic of conversation to avoid responding directly to your partner about whatever you are discussing.

- e.g. Saying *“Do you know what happened to my brother yesterday?”* after your partner has asked you to commit to do something for her/him

ACTING “OUT-OF-CONTROL”/“CRAZY:” Allowing yourself to feel so escalated that you can completely justify (in your own mind) being emotionally, verbally, and perhaps even physically abusive to your partner to “make your point” or “get your way” regarding the issue that is being discussed.

- e.g. becoming explosive and volatile, swearing and cussing; grabbing, pushing, restraining, slapping, or hitting

“PULLING RANK:” Attempting to demean your partner and their perspective by telling them that, because you are older, make more money, are “more intelligent,” have more education, responsibility, and success, and are generally more “worldly wise” and experienced in whatever the issue happen to be, they have no right to express any thoughts or feelings about your current issue or conflict.

- e.g. Saying “*When you make as much money (have as many degrees, work as many hours, have as much responsibility/success) as I do, then you’ll have a right to an opinion about how things are run around here.*”

PLACATING: Acting as if you agree with your partner when you really don’t and planning, in a passive-aggressive way, to do whatever you feel like doing no matter what you have agreed to do in your discussion together.

- e.g. Saying “*Sure, honey, I’ll do the bills over the weekend*” when you really plan to go golfing with your friends and have no intention of actually getting to the bills

EXAGGERATING: Making the issue being discussed so important that it no longer stands by itself but instead indicates a significant and insurmountable problem in the relationship itself.

- e.g. Saying “*If our relationship was really important to you, you never would have done something like this to me.*”

“FLOODING:” Attempting to overwhelm your partner with as many problems, issues, and concerns as possible to avoid looking at whatever you had originally begun to address. This often involves “bringing to life” as many old and unresolved hurts and resentments as you can remember so that the current issue will be completely lost in the process.

- e.g. Saying “*What about all those times at the beginning of our relationship when you didn’t want to spend any time with me?*”

“RUNNING AWAY:” Abruptly leaving a conflict in a disrespectful way with no intention of returning to continue to attempt to resolve it. This can also involve getting away from the issues or problems by becoming over-involved with an activity that absorbs all your time and energy.

- e.g. throwing up your hands in exasperation and walking out of the room without saying anything to your partner or making a commitment to return; exiting the house and slamming the door behind you; abusing alcohol or drugs, watching TV continually, compulsively eating or shopping, or trying to stay busy and “productive” at all times

KEEPING A “LAUNDRY LIST:” Remembering and bringing up every “wrong” and “slight” your partner has ever inflicted on you (from your perspective) so that you can feel self-righteous and arrogant in the midst of a current argument. This often serves as a way to justify anything that you feel like saying or doing in the present.

- e.g. Saying “*Since you acted like such an jerk with my family last Christmas, I’m not even going over to your family this Christmas.*”

INTIMIDATING: Bullying and threatening to get your partner to “back off” and “resolve the conflict” your way.

- e.g. Saying “*If you don't knock this off, I'm out of here*” or “*If you keep this up, there are really going to be some problems in this relationship.*”

USING HUMOR: Smiling, chuckling, laughing, or joking around when your partner has something important that they want to discuss.

- e.g. smirking and chuckling about how “cute” your partner is when she or he is angry with you

PLAYING DUMB: Acting as if you just “don’t get it” or just don’t understand what your partner is trying to communicate to you so you won’t have to address the real issues in the conflict.

- e.g. Saying “*I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about,*” “*You're making absolutely no sense at all to me right now,*” or “*I just don't get what you're so uptight about.*”

BEING CONTROLLING: Attempting to dominate conflict situations so that your partner is unable to effectively present their point of view by refusing to listen, jumping in at every opportunity to present your perspective and, working hard to persuade them that you are “right” about the issue being discussed.

- e.g. interrupting, trying to “explain” your side over and over again in a variety of different ways so the other person will finally “understand,” “accept” your perspective, and agree with you; talking over the other person so that they have no opportunity to present their way of looking at the issue

INSINCERE APOLOGIZING: “Going through the motions” to make amends to your partner rather than genuinely accepting responsibility for what you have said or done that was hurtful or disrespectful and then apologizing clearly for that. This can be done simply to “get them off your back” so you don’t have to talk about and address the other person’s feelings about what has happened between the two of you or to avoid having to continue to discuss an issue or problem that you don’t really want to address any further anyway.

- e.g. Saying “*I'm sorry you felt so bad about what I said to you*” vs. “*I'm sorry I called you a jerk last night;*”

If your insincere apology is not accepted the way you think it should be, you can further damage the communication process by saying, “*I've already apologized about what happened. You're never willing to move on and 'let things go.' What's your problem, anyway?*” to create even more tension and emotional distance in the relationship.

“CRITIQUING:” “Finding fault” with and “correcting” the way a partner is speaking about an issue or conflict so that you do not have to listen to them, truly hear their perspective, or move forward in a positive way toward addressing what they are concerned about. It is “picking apart” HOW they are talking to you as a way to avoid actually dealing with whatever the issue happens to be rather than really attempting to listen and understand their feelings and perspective.

- e.g. Saying “*If you'd just talk to me the way I think you should (the 'right way'/'my way'), then maybe we could actually get somewhere with this issue*”

USING AN “AUDIENCE:” Trying to bolster and “prove” your case in the conflict by claiming that other people in your life view the issue in the same way that you do so that your partner is “outnumbered,” with the hope that this will force them to “back off” and accept your point of view as a result.

- e.g. Saying “*I've talked with our friends (family members, pastor, counselor) about this and everyone sees it the same way that I do.*”

“OVERWHELMING:” Trying to completely control the conversation by literally not allowing the other person to speak or “to get a word in edgewise.” This involves “taking the floor” and refusing to give it up or, if the other person does start to say something, jumping in as soon as there is a break in what they other person is saying and then going “on and on,” for minutes and sometimes even hours, about your perspective and how you see things.

- e.g. completely monopolizing your conversation with the other person and having little or no interest in anything they have to say about the issue

PLAYING THE VICTIM/ACTING “FRAGILE”/USING SELF-PITY: Lapsing into a “one-down,” helpless, powerless, inadequate, and victimized position in an attempt to get your partner to feel sympathy for you, “back off,” and stop the conflict that is occurring so you can avoid having to address issues directly.

- e.g. looking very hurt, acting completely overwhelmed, and maybe even beginning to cry so that your partner will feel sorry for you, stop talking about the issue you are discussing, and perhaps even focus on taking care of and comforting you rather than continuing to deal directly with the situation at hand