What Kind of “Fighter” Are You?

Do You...?
- Avoid conflict at all costs?
- Feel that any criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Hit "below the belt" and regret it later?
- Feel "out of control" when conflict arises?
- Withdraw and become silent when you're angry?
- Store up complaints from the distant past?

At one time or another, most of us have done one or more of these things. That's because in most relationships, conflict inevitably arises, and for many of us it creates significant discomfort. But conflict, if handled appropriately, can actually strengthen relationships and improve our understanding of each other. When handled badly, conflict can result in broken friendships, ended relationships, and long-simmering feuds.

What Causes Conflict?
Conflict can arise whenever people - whether close friends, family members, co-workers, or romantic partners - disagree about their perceptions, desires, ideas, or values. These differences can range from the trivial, such as who last took out the garbage, to more significant disagreements which strike at the heart of our most fundamental beliefs and concerns. Regardless of the substance of the disagreement, though, conflict often arouses strong feelings.

Anger and Conflict
Disagreements can lead to people feeling angry or hurt, and for many people, feeling hurt is a position of vulnerability. People generally feel less in control when they are hurt, and they may move into feeling angry as a way of feeling less vulnerable or more "powerful." Feeling angry isn't necessarily a problem if that anger is handled constructively; however, problems with anger are often worsened by common beliefs that are not necessarily true. For many people, parental messages planted the idea that being angry is the same as being out of control or acting childishly. Or, many people have the idea that anger equals aggression. But the truth is that anger is a normal human emotion, just as normal - and healthy - as joy, happiness, and sadness.

Conflict Styles
"Mad Bomber," "Smolderer," or Somewhere in Between?
Because many people never learned to manage anger constructively, it's very common to handle it in inappropriate ways. The "Mad Bomber" gets angry easily and expresses it, but with little control. At the other end of the spectrum, the "Smolderer" stores up complaints but doesn't express them directly. Instead, "smolderers" may seethe inwardly and act out angry feelings in passive ways.

To the Rescue... Fair Fighting!!!
Fair fighting is a way to manage conflict and associated feelings effectively. To fight fairly, you just need to follow some basic guidelines to help keep your disagreements from becoming entrenched or destructive. This may be difficult when you think another's point of view is silly, irrational, or just plain unfair. But remember, he or she may think the same thing about your ideas.

Fair Fighting: Ground rules
- **Remain calm.** Try not to overreact to difficult situations. By remaining calm it will be more likely that others will consider your viewpoint.
• **Express feelings in words, not actions.** Telling someone directly and honestly how you feel can be a very powerful form of communication. If you start to feel so angry or upset that you feel you may lose control, take a "time out" and do something to help yourself feel steadier - take a walk, do some deep breathing, pet the cat, play with the dog, do the dishes - whatever works for you.

• **Be specific about what is bothering you.** Vague complaints are hard to work on.

• **Deal with only one issue at a time.** Don't introduce other topics until each is fully discussed. This avoids the "kitchen sink" effect where people throw in all their complaints while not allowing anything to be resolved.

• **No "hitting below the belt."** Attacking areas of personal sensitivity creates an atmosphere of distrust, anger, and vulnerability.

• **Avoid accusations.** Accusations will cause others to defend themselves. Instead, talk about how someone's actions made you feel.

• **Don't generalize.** Avoid words like "never" or "always." Such generalizations are usually inaccurate and will heighten tensions.

• **Avoid "make believe."** Exaggerating or inventing a complaint - or your feelings about it - will prevent the real issues from surfacing. Stick with the facts and your honest feelings.

• **Don't stockpile.** Storing up lots of grievances and hurt feelings over time is counterproductive. It's almost impossible to deal with numerous old problems for which interpretations may differ. Try to deal with problems as they arise.

• **Avoid clamming up.** When one person becomes silent and stops responding to the other, frustration and anger can result. Positive results can only be attained with two-way communication.

• **Establish common ground rules.** You may even want to ask your partner-in-conflict to read and discuss this brochure with you. When parties accept positive common ground rules for managing a conflict, resolution becomes much more likely.

**Fair Fighting: Step by Step...**

To make the Fair Fighting ground rules effective in resolving a specific conflict, use the following steps:

• **Step One:** Before you begin, ask yourself, "What exactly is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue?"

• **Step Two:** Know what your goals are before you begin. What are the possible outcomes that could be acceptable to you?

• **Step Three:** Remember that the idea is not to "win" but to come to a mutually satisfying and peaceful solution to the problem.

• **Step Four:** Set a time for a discussion with your partner-in-conflict. It should be as soon as possible but agreeable to both persons. Springing something when another is unprepared may leave the other person feeling that he or she has to fend off an attack. If you encounter resistance to setting a time, try to help the other person see that the problem is important to you.

• **Step Five:** State the problem clearly. At first, try to stick to the facts; then, once you've stated the facts, state your feelings. Use "I" messages to describe feelings of anger, hurt, or disappointment. Avoid "you" messages such as "you make me angry...."

• **Step Six:** Invite your partner-in-conflict to share his or her point of view, and use active listening skills. Be careful not to interrupt, and genuinely try to hear his or her concerns and feelings. If it seems helpful, try to restate what you have heard in a way that lets your partner know you have fully understood, and ask your partner to do the same for you.

• **Step Seven:** Try to take the other's perspective - that is, try to see the problem through his or her eyes. The "opposing" viewpoint can make sense even if you don't agree.

• **Step Eight:** Propose specific solutions, and invite the other person to propose solutions, too.
• **Step Nine**: Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal.

• **Step Ten**: Be ready for some compromise. Allowing the other person only one course of action will likely hinder resolution. When there is agreement on a proposal for change, celebrate! Set a trial period for the new behavior. At the end of the trial period, you can discuss the possibility of modifying or continuing the change. If no solution has been reached regarding the original problem, schedule a time to begin the discussion again.

**When Nothing Seems to Work**
Sometimes, despite our best fair-fighting efforts, a disagreement or conflict seems insurmountable. When this occurs, talking with a trained professional can help. A trained mediator can help you communicate more effectively and eventually work your way through to a solution.

**A Final Word**
Conflict is a normal, inevitable, and even healthy aspect of most relationships. When managed well, it can be used to enhance and strengthen relationships with friends, family members, co-workers, and romantic partners. Fair fighting provides the tools and techniques to help you achieve positive results when problems arise.

**For Further Reading**
- *Anger, the Misunderstood Emotion* by Carol Tavris. Touchstone, 1989.