

HOW TO STOP HAVING FAMILY FIGHTS

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Health Authority. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

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HOW TO STOP HAVING FAMILY FIGHTS:

Each family has its own set of disagreements which serve no purpose other than to get everyone upset. In most families the same tired arguments, the hurt feelings, the slammed doors, the walking out of the house, the verbal assaults and the hurling of thoughtless slighting remarks go on and on. Then, then it is all over, there is still the anticipation that it is going to happen again and again.

The fighting process only intensifies hostility and never resolves any problem.

Here is a list of the most common subjects and situations that involve the same old fights:

Do you fight about the things that most people fight about ?

- **Money:** "You spend too much" "You earn too little"
- **Household Jobs:** "Your room is a mess" "I told you to take out the rubbish"
- **Visiting parents or acquaintances:** "I don't like your friends" "Your mother never liked me"
- **Past Behaviours:** "I'll never forget about that woman you were seeing" "Why didn't you paint the house last spring?"
- **Personality Traits:** "You're too shy/lazy/inconsiderate/clumsy/aggressive/fearful"
- **Disappointment:** "You're not the person I married" "I expected so much from you"
- **Changing Attitudes:** "I want to have my freedom"
- **Drinking, smoking and other personal habits:** "You embarrass me" "When are you going to lose some weight?"
- **Communication:** "You never listen"

You've heard these remarks over and over again: "Fighting is only natural", "It's healthy to have a good row now and then to keep the relationship lively". "Family members argue with each other because it clears the air". Yet you know that arguing is not a pleasant activity and that every time a family fight occurs you feel miserable and drained. That's why it is time to challenge the erroneous beliefs that rows are an inherent part of family life, and even desirable.

In fact, fighting almost always results in a breakdown of communication, a distancing between those arguing, and unpleasant physical reactions such as increased blood pressure, headaches, backache and insomnia. Heated arguments are extremely destructive to all involved and indeed can be one of the most tormenting parts of family relationships.

So, if you find yourself disliking this aspect of your family life and you are unhappy about the constant repetition of the "same old family conflict" trust your own judgement. The arguments

that take place with your spouse, children or in-laws, can be avoided if you begin by throwing out the notion that they are somehow an essential part of living with other people.

WHY ARE YOU ARGUING ?

While it may seem absurd to think that you actually get something out of fighting, nevertheless you do. If you didn't have a reward system, you simply wouldn't have these regularly recurring argument patterns in your most important relationships.

It is important to understand that the rewards I am talking about are not necessarily healthy ones. In fact, almost all the rewards that you reap from arguing in your family are self-defeating. But that doesn't change the fact that you do indeed receive a kind of pay-off from your fighting behaviour. If you were very honest with yourself, you would probably come up with some of the following answers to the question.

What do I get out of taking part in these same old fights ?

- You can feel sorry for yourself because nobody understands you
- You can manipulate others into doing what you think they should do by turning an incident into a fight
- You can feel self-righteous and correct and even get your friends to agree with you by participating in fights and then complaining to someone else about how inconsiderate your family members are
- You can use the row itself as a way of building your own feelings of self-worth: you can feel proud of your arguing ability.

Whether you like to admit it or not, any time you are engaged in a fight [unless it is to save your life when someone else attacks you physically] you are voluntarily participating in the activity.

Once you recognise that your conflict with other family members is a choice and that you do indeed receive some rewards – neurotic though they may be then you are at least taking the first very important step towards changing your behaviour for the better.

Basic Principles to Adopt:

If you seriously want to eradicate the tendency to argue from your personal and family life, then you will have to adopt a code of ethics for yourself.

Here are some guiding principles that will be helpful whenever you feel yourself being drawn into one of the typically explosive situations.

Virtually all arguments revolve around the erroneous thought:

“If only you were more like me, then I wouldn't have to be upset”

This is wrong simply because people, including your spouse, your children, your parents, or anyone else will never be the way you want them to be. When you find yourself upset with someone else what you are really saying to yourself is:

“Why can't you do things the way I want them to be done ?”

But, ONCE YOU ELIMINATE THIS ABSURD EXPECTATION THAT OTHERS OUGHT TO BE THE WAY YOU WANT THEM TO BE, A LOT OF ARGUMENTS WILL BE AUTOMATICALLY ELIMINATED.

You get treated in life the way that you yourself teach people to treat you. Rather than blaming people who seem to be exploiting you and treating you in an inconsiderate manner, you might ask yourself: "How did I come to teach them to treat me like this?"

DECIDE TO YOURSELF TO STOP SENDING SIGNALS WHICH TREACH OTHERS TO TREAT YOU IN A WAY THAT YOU MUST THEN RESOLVE BY FIGHTING.

PEOPLE ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OBJECTS.

If you keep this principle in mind you will end a lot of those repetitive arguments since so many of them centre around things like houses, cars, or clothes. Personally, I believe no object is worth fighting about, and while you want to enjoy your possessions, they have no meaning at all without the people who give them meaning.

Perhaps the most neurotic pursuit of all is our desire to have those who live us always understand us. The fact is that each individual is unique; that means that no-one could possibly understand you all the time because to do so would mean they would have to become us. Once we stop expecting even the people closest to us to understand us totally, we'll be removed from the old conflict which starts with the angry accusation: *"But you don't understand me!"*

People who like themselves and have self-confidence very seldom participate in the same old argument syndrome; because when you are at peace with yourself it is virtually impossible to do things that are self-destructive.

Here are **9 HIGHLY EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES** that you should adopt for yourself and use regularly to avoid potentially explosive situations:

- 1. STOP TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE ELSE'S BEHAVIOUR:** If the children refuse to clean up their rooms, just close the door and stop looking at the mess. Make the priority of your life your happiness, rather than looking for things which will upset you.
- 2. DON'T EQUATE THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS WITH YOUR OWN WORTH:** If your children get poor marks, see it as their choice. Help them understand that they must suffer the consequences of their actions, but never allow their behaviour to be the source of your hurting yourself with anger.
- 3. USE POSITIVE BUT NOT ARGUMENTATIVE SENTENCES:** When you are having any kind of confrontations such as *"I am going to visit my parents today and you are welcome to come along if you choose ..."* or *"We've discussed this matter several times before and I don't wish to get embroiled in it all over again"*.
- 4. PRACTICE USING ACTIVE BEHAVIOUR RATHER THAN FUTILE, ENDLESS CONVERSATION:** When your little boy is cheeky, tell him you won't listen to such talk and follow with decisive action. Don't drive him to his next party and when he complains, remind him that you will not perform a service for someone so disrespectful.

5. **WHEN OTHER PEOPLE ATTEMPT TO LURE YOU INTO AN ARGUMENT WITH THEIR ANGER, PRACTICE SENTENCES WHICH BEGIN WITH "YOU" RATHER THAN "I":** Say, *"You are really upset that I didn't do your washing"* rather than *"I didn't do it and don't have to"*. When you begin with *"you"* you are effectively placing the upset where it belongs, on the other party. You are also reaching them that you see what they are attempting to do. If others are upset, do try to remember that they "own" the upset and that you don't have to join them in their feelings.
6. **SIMPLY LEAVE THE ROOM WHEN YOU FEEL THE SAME OLD PATTERN BEGINNING TO EMERGE:** Allowing for a cooling off period when you can be alone and when your would-be-antagonist can also think it through without your being there, is a most effective technique. Providing privacy for all concerned is often enough to stop a row before it begins.
7. **IF YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE A DISCUSSION WITH A SPOUSE OR A CHILD, DO THIS AT AN ANXIETY-FREE TIME:** If a child has just spilled a glass of milk, this is not the time to deliver a lecture on clumsiness. Similarly, when your husband arrives late for dinner, don't launch into a tirade on the importance of punctuality. By all means, talk to your husband and your child, but at a time when they are not automatically being put into a defensive position.
8. **REFUSE TO BE A REFEREE IN YOUR CHILDREN'S DAILY DISPUTES:** Go into your bedroom, shut the door and read until the requests for you to resolve petty arguments are over. Do this regularly for two weeks and you will discover you will cease to be continuously bombarded with requests to be the referee in every little disagreement that surfaces in your family.
9. **WHEN SOMEONE REFUSES TO COOPERATE WITH YOU AND USES HOSTILITY TO KEEP YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING, TEACH THEM THAT THEIR BEHAVIOUR WILL NOT RUN YOUR LIFE:** For example, if on a Saturday night when you've planned to go out, your husband/wife suddenly says: *"I really don't know if we'll go to the cinema"*, say *"You are welcome to stay where you are , but I've decided I'm going to see that film"* and then go ! You won't have to do this too often before you'll see their evasive, awkward behaviour disappearing.

Work at postponing your anger for short periods of time. When you're angry, time yourself for 60 seconds. During this minute, talk to yourself and remind yourself that the other person's behaviour is not a reason for you to become upset. If after 60 seconds, you want to explode, then do so. But the delay process will give you time to consider whether or not you want to have a fight.

The next time you are having dinner out with your spouse, have a discussion about the things that you seem to fight about most frequently. Develop a set of signals – a tug of the ear, a finger on the nose, or a puckering of the lips – that are designed to send a message to your partner that he or she is doing the very thing that you find irritating. For instance, perhaps you dislike being interrupted when you are talking to other people. Tell your partner so at a non-stressful time and ask if they would mind if you simply tugged at your ear the next time they interrupted you. That would signal that you didn't like it, but that you wouldn't want to discuss it with them. Ask them to tell you the things about you which irritate them and work out a signal that they can use.

Always remind yourself that someone else's belief is not your reality. If in a moment of anger your spouse says you are stupid, that does not make it so unless you decide to make their opinion of you more important than your own opinion of yourself. If you learn to ignore this kind of judgement, you'll not only eliminate those same old fights, but you'll also find they will stop making such pronouncements because they no longer get the desired results. Virtually all arguments between family members, spouses, in-laws, and even friends could be eliminated when we stop expecting others to be what we want them to be and accept them for what they are.

TO SUMMARISE:

We established that fighting is not "natural/normal". It is destructive and non-productive. Fighting is NOT an essential part of living with other people.

The things about which people most commonly fight were mentioned, as well as what people get out of taking part in the same old fights.

Basic strategies/principles to avoid family fights were outlined. [These are summarised below for easy reference]

STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING FAMILY FIGHTS

- 1. STOP TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE ELSE'S BEHAVIOUR**
- 2. DON'T EQUATE THE BEHAVIOUR OF OTHERS WITH YOUR OWN WORTH**
- 3. USE POSITIVE, BUT NOT ARGUMENTATIVE SENTENCES**
- 4. PRACTICE USING ACTIVE BEHAVIOUR RATHER THAN FUTILE, ENDLESS CONVERSATION**
- 5. WHEN OTHER PEOPLE ATTEMPT TO LOURE YOU INTO AN ARGUMENT WITH THEIR ANGER, PRACTICE SENTENCES WHICH BEGIN WITH "YOU" RATHERN THAN "I"**
- 6. SIMPLY LEAVE THE ROOM WHEN YOU FEEL THE SAME OLD PATTERN BEGINNING TO EMERGE**
- 7. IF YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE A DISCUSSION WITH A SPOUSE, OR A CHILD, DO THIS AT AN ANXIETY-FREE TIME**
- 8. REFUSE TO BE A REFEREE IN YOUR CHILDREN'S DAILY DISPUTES**
- 9. WHEN SOMEONE REFUSES TO COOPERATE WITH YOU AND USES HOSTILITY TO KEEPO YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING, TEACH THEM THAT THEIR BEHAVIOUR WILL NOT RUN YOUR LIFE**