

# Professional Approach to Fighting

by [Susan K. Perry, Ph.D.](#)

Calm down, choose your battles, don't sweat the small stuff. Excellent advice, but pretty much useless during everyday marital combat. What I've found works to lessen those inevitable conflicts is to play at being a "professional." For instance:

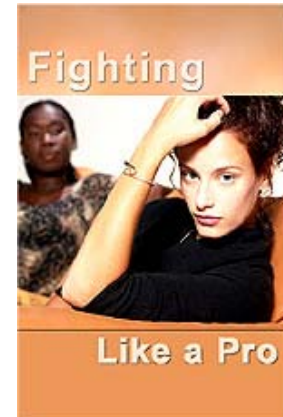
**BE AN ANTHROPOLOGIST.** Search out the pattern of your struggles. Try to behave like a scientist and analyze your emotions with some detachment. Beware, though, of falling into that familiar and stereotypical pattern where one of you is overly detached. There is a time and place for scientific detachment, which is not when one of you is weeping your heart out.

**BE A WEATHERPERSON.** Assess what else is going on in your lives that might be contributing to this particular clash. Do either of you feel emotionally exhausted at the start of a fight, due to career pressures, children's demands, inadequate sleep, or hormonal shifts? Trust each other's statements of your inner worlds. Deal with as many of those other stresses as possible first, rather than inflicting them on each other.

**BE A GOOD PARENT.** Factor in the presence of tykes: it's been found that although marital spats take place twice as often when the kids aren't around, some of the most virulent, hostile, and destructive conflicts are carried on in front of the children. Psychologists guess that couples are least able to inhibit negative interactions when they're most distressed, with the unfortunate result that children don't often see adult problem-solving when it's being handled most constructively. This, then, is another reason to become aware of your state of mind and not allow marital negativity to build to explosive levels.

**BE A CLOCK-WATCHER.** Timing is more important than many of us realize, so that we get embroiled in snippy tête-à-têtes that could have been avoided. Do some of your conflicts occur at transition points in the day, such as when you're awakening, are arriving home from work, or are exhausted? Sit in your car a few moments. Plan ahead for a refreshing drink, a quick reconnection-in-passing, before you fully transition. Commit to connecting more thoroughly later. Learn not to take your partner's transitional needs as a personal affront.

**BE A NEGOTIATOR.** Some couples, rather than ever compromising when there's a decision to be made, such as whether or not to visit a relative, make a purchase, where to eat or what movie to see, determine to whom it matters most. For this to succeed, you have to trust that the other person is telling the truth about what's crucial and what isn't.



**BE A FUTURIST.** It is pointless to spend a lot of time arguing over what one or both of you ought to have done, unless it's in the service of preventing the same alleged misbehavior in the future. If you reach the point of irreconcilable views over what did happen, stop the bickering and ask each other, "What might we do to ensure this type of conflict doesn't happen again?"

**BE A REPAIRPERSON.** When in the midst of a battle, try to remember that it isn't conflict resolution at all that ensures marital success. Much more relevant is the way repairs are made when things fall temporarily apart, says University of Washington psychologist and marital researcher John M. Gottman. If your marital friendship is strong, you'll be able to keep negative moments from causing lasting damage.

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**Loving in Flow:**

*How the Happiest Couples Get that Way and Stay that Way!*

*Loving in Flow* is based on in-depth interviews with more than three dozen long term couples who rate their relationships as absolutely top-of-the-line. The book is filled with insights and practical suggestions about navigating the transitions and crises of a relationship.

