



Our Fair Fighting Ground Rules

Check it is safe, choose your rules, agree a time-out signal, plan a soft start-up and some repair attempts, then review after an argument. Not for relationships where someone is afraid: England 0808 2000 247, Scotland 0800 027 1234, Wales 0808 80 10 800, Northern Ireland 0808 802 1414, US 1-800-799-7233.

01 First: is this worksheet right for you?

This worksheet is for relationships where both people are safe and can say no. It is not for a relationship where one person controls, frightens or hurts the other. If you are afraid of the other person, there is hitting or threats, you are controlled, or you are stopped from leaving, please do not use ground rules or ask them to sit down and agree. Talk to a domestic abuse service first. In England, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline is free and open 24 hours on 0808 2000 247. In Scotland, call 0800 027 1234; in Wales, 0808 80 10 800; in Northern Ireland, 0808 802 1414. US: National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233. In immediate danger, call 999 (UK) or 911 (US). If you are the one whose anger has led to hitting, threatening or controlling someone, this worksheet is not enough on its own: the Respect Phoneline (UK 0808 8024040) is free and confidential.

- ☐ I am not afraid of the other person.
- ☐ Neither of us hits, threatens, or stops the other leaving.
- ☐ I can say no, or leave the room, without being punished.
- ☐ I can say what I really think without fear of what happens next.

Who is this agreement with, and what situation is it for?

02 Choose your rules

Tick the rules you would both be willing to try. A few rules you can keep are better than many you forget. Add your own at the bottom.

- ☐ Stick to one issue at a time
- ☐ No name-calling, insults or sarcasm
- ☐ No bringing up old arguments to score a point
- ☐ Use 'I' statements instead of 'you always' and 'you never'
- ☐ No raised voices or shouting
- ☐ No swearing at each other
- ☐ Take turns: one person speaks, the other listens, then swap
- ☐ No bringing in other people (parents, friends, children) to take sides
- ☐ No phones or screens during the conversation
- ☐ Either of us can call a time-out, and the other respects it
- ☐ No walking out without saying when we will come back
- ☐ Not starting a serious talk when one of us is tired, hungry or about to leave
- ☐ Finish with a repair, even a small one

Our own rules:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The one rule I find hardest to keep, and why:

03 Agree a time-out signal

The Gottman Institute describes 'flooding' as feeling overwhelmed so fast that it is hard to listen or think clearly. Its article '5 Steps to Fight Better if Your Relationship is Worth Fighting For' suggests that if either person is flooded, a 20 to 30 minute break helps, and its article 'Why Is My Husband Yelling at Me?' says the break works best when you calm yourself rather than going over the argument in your head. A time-out is a pause, not a way to avoid the subject, so agree a time to come back.

Our time-out signal (a word, a phrase or a gesture):

What I will say, for example: 'I need a break. I will be back at ____.'

How long we will take, and when we will return to the conversation:

- ☐ Slow breathing, with the out-breath longer than the in-breath
- ☐ A short walk
- ☐ Music or something that absorbs me
- ☐ Cold water on my hands or face
- ☐ A stretch, or washing up
- ☐ Not rehearsing what I will say next

What I will do during my break:

04 Plan a soft start-up

The Gottman Institute says soft start-ups avoid criticism and contempt, and suggests opening with 'I' instead of 'You'. The idea is to begin with your own feeling about a specific situation, not a verdict on the other person. A way to start: 'I feel ___ about ___. I need ___.'

A hard start-up I have used (or heard):

Softer version: 'I feel [feeling] about [one specific situation]. I would like [a clear request].'

A good time and place to raise it:

05 List your repair attempts

A repair attempt is anything either of you says or does to stop things getting worse. The Gottman Institute groups example phrases such as 'Can we take a break?', 'Let me try again', 'I am sorry' and 'I understand'. Its article also notes that a repair attempt only works if the other person can take it in, which is harder when someone is flooded. Choose a few you could say, and a few you would welcome hearing.

- ☐ 'Can we take a break?'
- ☐ 'Let me try again.'
- ☐ 'I'm sorry.'
- ☐ 'I want to say this more gently.'
- ☐ 'I can see my part in this.'
- ☐ 'Can I take that back?'
- ☐ 'I understand.'
- ☐ 'Thank you for ...'

A repair I could offer

A repair I would be glad to receive

06 Review after an argument

Do this once you are both calm, not straight after. Keep it to what happened and what to try next, not who was right. Make a copy of this section to reuse.

How well did we keep our rules this time?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all					Very well				

What was the argument really about, underneath?

A rule or repair that helped:

A rule I broke, and what I will do differently:

One thing to change before next time:

Date

What helped

What to change

-------------------	-------------------	-------------------

When you're done, a moment to reflect

- When an argument goes badly, what is usually the first thing that tips it: a tone, a topic or a time of day?
- Which rule would make the biggest difference if you both kept it?
- What do you do when you feel overwhelmed in an argument, and what would you prefer to do?
- Is there something you want from the other person that you have never asked for plainly?
- If the arguments keep repeating, is it about this issue or something underneath it that deserves its own conversation, or outside help?

Free worksheet from selfgrowth.org. Free self-growth worksheets for real life. Fill it in online and it saves as you go: selfgrowth.org/worksheets/fair-fighting-rules-worksheet



If things feel heavier than a worksheet can hold

These are self-reflection tools, not therapy. If you're struggling, especially if you have any thoughts of harming yourself, please reach out to someone now. In the US, call or text **988**. In the UK & Ireland, call **116 123** (Samaritans). Elsewhere, find a free helpline at findahelpline.com. If you're in immediate danger, call your local emergency number.