

PLAY FAIR

Rules of Engagement for Healthy Disagreement

Purpose

Disagreement in marriage is not the problem. **How couples disagree determines whether conflict strengthens or damages the relationship.**

Healthy conflict creates understanding, growth, and unity. Unhealthy conflict creates resentment, distance, and emotional wounds.

These **Rules of Engagement** help couples navigate disagreement in a way that protects the relationship and honors God.

Supporting Scripture

Proverbs 15:1

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

1 Peter 3:9

“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing.”

These scriptures remind us that **our tone, attitude, and words shape the direction of every disagreement.**

Rules (Boundaries You Do Not Cross)

Rule 1: Be Respectful

Disagreements should never lead to disrespect.

Commit to the following behaviors:

- Do not walk away in the middle of the discussion.
- Do not use harmful or insulting language.
- Speak words that build understanding rather than tear down.

Helpful Scripture

Ephesians 4:29

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up.”

Reflection

Did my words help my spouse understand me, or did they hurt them?

Rule 2: Own Your 100%

Every disagreement has two participants.

Healthy couples focus less on **blaming** and more on **taking responsibility**.

Ask yourself:

- What did I contribute to this conflict?
- Did I misunderstand something?
- Was my tone respectful?

Ownership creates **growth instead of defensiveness**. **Remember:** Even if your contribution was 10%, you still contributed.

Reflection Question

What could I have done differently that might have led to a different outcome?

Rule 3: Express What You Feel — Not What They "Made" You Feel

Blaming language escalates conflict.

Instead of saying:

“You made me angry.”

Use ownership language:

“I felt frustrated and unheard when I was interrupted.”

This approach invites understanding rather than defensiveness.

Principles for Healthy Conflict

Principle 1: Be Aware of Your Emotional Triggers

Triggers are emotional reactions connected to past experiences, stress, or sensitive topics. When someone feels triggered, they may:

- Become defensive
- Shut down
- Respond harshly
- Withdraw emotionally

Recognizing triggers allows couples to **slow down instead of reacting quickly.**

Personal Reflection

What topics or situations tend to trigger me emotionally?

Principle 2: Be Aware of Your Spouse's Behavior

Healthy couples learn each other's emotional sensitivities.

If a conversation suddenly shifts from calm to tense, a trigger may have been activated.

Pause and ask:

“Did I say something that triggered you?”

“Can you help me understand why that response was a trigger for you?”

This creates understanding instead of escalation.

Principle 3: Respond Gently When Conflict Escalates

If the conversation suddenly becomes tense:

Slow down.

Return to the principle from Proverbs 15:1:

A soft answer turns away wrath.

A calm tone often diffuses tension and restores emotional safety.

Helpful Questions

- Can we slow down for a moment?
- Can we start over?
- Do you feel heard and understood right now?
- What do you need from me right now?

Don't wait until your spouse takes the initiative to deescalate the situation. Let it begin with you.

Goal of Conflict

The goal of conflict is **not to win the argument.**

The goal is to **protect the relationship while pursuing understanding.**

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

— Ephesians 4:2

Healthy disagreement strengthens trust, communication, and emotional connection.