

Fighting for intimacy

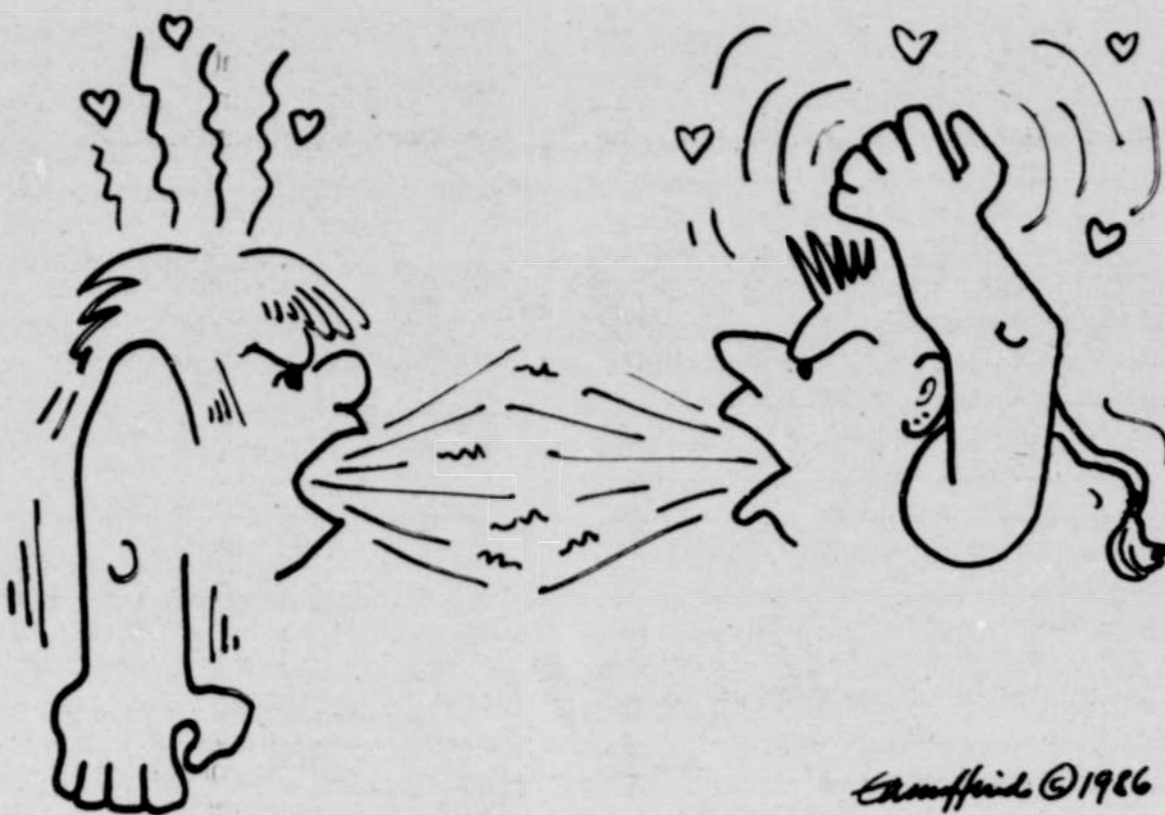
by Cherry Hartman, M.S.W.

Claire and Betty pride themselves on never fighting. They have been together seven years and never had a fight, they tell their friends and children. Of course, they are not as intimate as Betty would like. Sometime she wishes for some strong feeling, any strong feeling.

Josh and Ben fight more than either of them would prefer. Their fighting feels hurtful and seldom ends in any kind of resolution. It seems that either one of them has to lose face or they just wait until enough time has gone by and pretend that the fight never happened.

Fighting in relationships is necessary. People are different and these individual differences are occasionally going to lead to conflict. If the conflict is not recognized, one person in the relationship will end up accommodating his or her partner in such a way that results in either resentment or some loss of personhood or in a deadening of the relationship. Healthy fighting will not only lead to resolution of the conflict, it will also allow for growth in the partners as they strive to express themselves and understand the other. And, too, it will allow for an even greater intimacy between them as they participate in the other's growth and appreciate each of their struggles.

Most of us are "fight phobic." That is, we are afraid of fighting. We have grown up with parents who never fought in front of us, so we are left with the impression that fighting was a very scary thing that they wanted to protect us from. Or, we grew up watching our parents fight in destructive, hurtful ways and we decided we never wanted to be like that, so we try to never have angry feelings or never express them if we do. Few of us had the benefit



Healthy fighting will not only lead to resolution... it will also lead to growth.

of models who were able to fight with each other and with us in ways that resolved problems and left everyone feeling good.

A good fighter is a person who fights to solve problems, thus creating more intimacy, not more distance. Learning to be a good fighter requires, first, the willingness to put aside your fear of fighting in order to engage in a fight rather than avoid it. To do this, you should examine your mental images of fighting. What are the pictures inside your head? Bloody battle scenes full of physical violence? An unending cold war? A bout of name-calling which leaves each person sulky and

distant? The second requirement is the willingness to learn good fighting skills. Most of us are not naturals.

A good fight goes something like this: It was Tom's night to cook. He felt like preparing something special, so he stopped by the market and bought a rack of lamb, Henry's favorite. He had fantasies of a romantic dinner as he moved about the kitchen. Henry was twenty minutes late. Then he was fifty minutes late. Finally, Tom called his office. Henry was surprised at the time. He had been working and lost track, but as far as he was

concerned, there was no problem and he would be home soon. Tom said that there was a problem for him, and he wanted to take some time that evening to talk about it. Henry agreed.

When they began to talk, Tom told Henry of his hurt and anger. He felt hurt that Henry had not been thinking of him and angry because he had gone out of his way to do something special. Henry listened to Tom's feelings without interrupting. He acknowledged that Tom had a right to feel hurt and angry and that he erred in not calling. Satisfied, Tom was available to listen to Henry. He told Tom first that his boss had given him a special assignment that needed to be completed that night. Secondly, that he had no knowledge that Tom was preparing a special meal and was in a romantic mood. So while he was guilty of not coming home at the expected time, he was not guilty of thwarting Tom's own special plans.

Separating these two points was helpful to Tom. He realized that his anger about Henry not getting home on time was legitimate, but his hurt that Henry had ruined his special evening was not.

The elements of this fight that make it successful were: 1) It was not spontaneous. Tom had, in fact, scheduled the fight with Henry. This allowed both people to be prepared and to set aside the time so they would not be interrupted or distracted. 2) Tom expressed his angry and hurt feelings in a clear way. He did not call Henry names or attack his heritage, but simply told Henry directly of his feelings. He also did not drag out any old hurts to support his feelings, rather, he stuck to the current issue. 3) Henry supported Tom's expression of feelings by not interrupting him and not telling him that he should not feel that way. 4) Henry then explained his side in a non-defensive way. He accepted part of the blame and pointed out the part that he was not responsible for. 5) Tom was able to hear Henry and agree with his perception. 6) When both people felt heard and acknowledged, they were then able to move into problem-solving.

Separating feeling expression from problem-solving is a key element of good fighting. We cannot solve problems when we are filled with emotions. If your thinking becomes clouded with feelings during the problem-solving process, it is an indication that you need to move back to expressing feelings. Even if this takes longer, it is well worth it, because in the end you will have a much better resolution.

Some people need to "live with" feelings longer than others to be able to share them. There are at least two kinds of people in the world: those that think things out carefully before they speak, and those that talk out loud in order to think. Good fighting must be flexible enough to accommodate these differences in style.



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