

Simultaneous Fighting:

One of the biggest relationship problems that couples have is what you might call ‘simultaneous fighting’. This is what happens when two people are arguing and both people are trying to articulate their point of view *at the same time*. Each person in the disagreement is either attacking or defending but neither is listening or seeking to understand. Both people want to ‘hold the floor’ at the same time. It is a most frustrating experience.

In its more extreme forms it has all the attributes of dark comedy – two people slugging it out, both simultaneously trying to beat the other person into submission by the weight of their argument without resorting to what you might call healthy and proper procedure for handling conflict.

It happens all the time. Two people trying to convince each other of something when both are more invested in defending themselves than listening. It is back and forth, like a tennis match, going nowhere. Both people, in these arguments, go around in circles and dig trenches in the process.

Two people can never resolve conflict if both people want to hold the floor and present their case *at the same time!* It’s impossible. In fact it is quite ludicrous really. It’s like two people in a boat rowing in different directions in their attempts to move forward. They just end up going around in circles.

When people feel under personal attack logic goes out the window and, though they present their case as if it is logical, its purpose is primarily to be defensive and to save face. The more entrenched the argument the more each party resorts to exaggeration.

The first rule for dealing with a relationship conflict is for the parties to realise that both people cannot hold the floor at the same time. Only one person should have the floor at any one time. When one person has the ‘floor’ the other person has to have the ‘seat’. Instead of both people arguing their case simultaneously, they need to argue their case at separate times. Instead of both people on the attack a couple need to allow one person to present their case and have the other person be the receiver or listener. This is difficult to do but enormously rewarding.

The reason this is very hard is because of people’s exaggerated and irrational sensitivity to being criticised. There is a sort of inner moral reflex that twitches every time someone feels criticised by their partner. This results in an immediate counter-criticism or counterargument that is largely impotent but almost irresistible. It’s the adult version of the “I did not”, “You did too” stalemate displayed by children.

In order to solve relationship problems one needs to gain control of this self-righteous twitching and learn to realise that you cannot prosecute both cases at the same time.

A basic technique for conflicting couples is what you might call “The Floor Exercise”. This exercise stipulates that both people cannot hold the floor at the same time. A technique I often use with couples is to give them a tennis ball and to create a ritual

whereby the person holding the ball holds the 'floor'. When a person holds the 'floor' they are free to give expression to whatever is on their mind. The other person holds the 'seat' and their role is to work at communicating back to the person with the floor that they are understanding what's being said. The person in the seat cannot defend themselves or engage in counterargument (they can do that when they have the floor). Their job is simply to illustrate that they understand what is being said. The person with the floor can hold it until such point as they feel understood.

So the person with the 'floor' has the freedom to try and articulate what's on their mind without being interrupted or contradicted. The person who has the 'seat' can be freed of the burden of trying to defend themselves knowing that their turn will come to present their case. When this first round is all finished, the roles can be reversed and the tennis ball can be tossed from one to the other to signal the relinquishing of the floor.

It may sound trite enough but I can guarantee you that it is a powerful exercise that can have quite dramatic results. The hardest thing to do is to hold the seat without getting defensive. It is hard to hold back ones impulses to fight back but it becomes very rewarding to discover the disarming power of listening and communicating understanding.