

House Rules: Guidelines on Healthy Disagreements

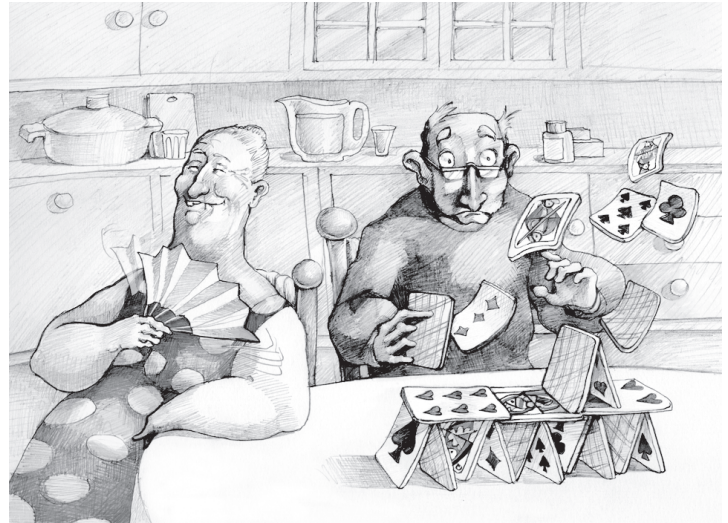
Imagine playing a game with someone without shared rules. How about two people playing chess, with one following the rules of croquet and the other playing by rules of boxing. As you can imagine, it is going to create some serious problems between them, and the game will likely end in disaster. Spoken and unspoken rules are a fundamental requirement for any couple to have healthy disagreements. When people do not follow a shared set of rules, they set themselves up for failure from the start. When couples have disagreements without shared guidelines, they end up spending so much time arguing about arguing, creating damage that takes time and energy to heal (sometimes years), and tend to endlessly go round and round getting nowhere. Spinning their wheels ends up being very frustrating, futile, and painful for both parties.

Disagreements are necessary for healthy relationships – they just need to be done in a productive manner. If issues aren't being addressed and resolved productively then they tend to build up and explode or continue to simmer resentfully underneath the surface. Resolution through, healthy conflict/-disagreements also helps the relationship to deepen, increase authenticity, build a sense of trust/safety, and help the relationship to evolve. When couples are able to consistently follow healthy guidelines and communication practices, they tend to move through disagreements quickly, find resolution, and walk away feeling good even if one or both of them don't get their way. How does a sense of peace and connection sound to you???

Below is a list of "House Rules." I encourage both of you to read and discuss it together. After the discussion, I suggest identifying between 3-5 rules to focus on and adhere to until some level of mastery is reached. Once this is achieved, then add more as progression is made. One of the things that strikes me most, is how couples abide by these rules in all areas of life (work, school, friends, etc.) just not in the relationship. This says to me that you are capable of following all of these rules. You just need to start using them in the place that matters most, with the one you love.

Please discuss the concepts below together and come up with your shared list so that you can play/argue fairly and effectively with one another. The list is a "we" need to change list, not a "you" need to change list. You are only responsible for you and the other person is only responsible for himself/herself. If one of the persons breaks any of the rules, it does not give you the right to do the same. If one of you breaks a rule, please identify it yourself and ask for a "redo" and if you see the other break a rule ask him/her for a "redo" on his/her part so that you continue to learn and grow towards a healthier connection and evolving relationship.

IMPORTANT: As you go over the list together avoid saying "you do..." and focus more on "I do..." And "we do..." If you point fingers at one another through this, you will end up arguing while going over a list on how not to argue.



My Top 10 List

Never become physically harmful to one another under any circumstances

No name calling or demeaning statements – speak with respect

No raising your voice or yelling- speak calmly

Avoid excessive non-verbal communication. Don't point, throw/slam things, roll eyes, etc.

Don't talk over one another or interrupt – consider using a talking stick or appropriate hand gesture to take turns speaking

Focus more on listening/understanding and less on responding

Breathe and calm your body – this helps to make us more intelligent because it pulls us out of a primitive mindset

Treat the other person the way you would like to be treated. Dignity and respect are a must.

Apologize appropriately and accept meaningful apologies

Do not walk away without discussing it with the other first. Do not hang up on people.

Other rules to consider:

Avoid shit boomerangs (see upcoming article)- this happens when you only see the shit the other person is throwing at you and fail to see the shit you first throw at them that is now getting slung right back at you. You may not be as much of a victim as you thought. We lose our power when we are "victims."

Time outs- anyone has the right to call a timeout, but the person who calls it gives the other person a minute or two to

finish what he/she was saying. Also, have an agreement on how long it will last and when you will return to the discussion. During time outs, cool down – don't use it to build ammunition.

Do overs- When you catch yourself acting or communicating poorly ask for a "redo." If you think it is clear the other person would agree he/she acted poorly, then ask him/her if he/she would like to have a "redo." If you are the person that breaks one of the rules, then own it and apologize. If the other person has broken one of the rules, gently remind him/her and ask that he/she follow the rules.

Sloppy leads to ugly - Couples quickly shift into "sloppy" in communication and when this happens it can lead quickly into being "ugly." When discussions are at an intensity between 4-7, they tend to sloppy and when they reach above 7 they become ugly. I suggest never having a discussion when the intensity is over 5. Most communication past this point tends to be counterproductive. How often has talking in these stages ever been productive? You will spend so much more time trying to repair or in resentment if you continue. When one of you realizes you are in sloppy or ugly, mention it and ask that the both of you shift gears.

Maintain control of your emotions- you give your power away when you don't

Seek to understand first. This will benefit you as much as the other person. Ask curious questions.

Stay on one topic at time. If another topic is brought up, mention it as another topic, write it down, and then make sure to address it later.

Don't argue about arguing

Own your part and apologize when appropriate

Allow the other person to take space to calm down

Express in words and not intense emotions or physical gestures

Use "... Words" as if a child, your parents, or your therapist was in the room

No blaming

No sarcasm

No generalizations such as always, never, or you are.... (selfish, stupid, etc.)

Talk about issues/problems early before they build up

Avoid fighting when tired, hungry, stressed, don't have time, highly emotional....

Use positive physical touch when appropriate- done correctly, this can quickly calm down your nervous system and emotions

Body awareness. Be aware of defensiveness. What is it like for you when the other person is defensive? It has exactly the same effect on the other when you are defensive.

Never fight in front of children. Healthy disagreement in front of children can be very good for them, but arguing and fighting never is.

Reflect back what you heard the person say to make sure you actually understood and so the person feels heard and responded to.

Try not to have these discussions when one or both or hungry, tired, sick, stressed, or intoxicated. Do not, I repeat do not, have challenging discussions when intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. Even a drink or two can become very destructive.

Sit down when possible and maybe even get a non-alcoholic beverage to drink or have a snack.

Please see my article on Insights and Wisdom About Healthy Disagreement

Rules* that we agree to and will abide by:

*Keep these rules handy whenever you have challenging conversations.