



How to Stop Fighting in your Marriage In 3 Easy Steps

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Introduction

In my 30+-year psychotherapy practice I have come in contact with many couples who say that if they could only *stop the fights* they would have a much happier marriage. Even though they want to change they seem unable to stop fighting. They ask if there is a way that I can teach them to stop fighting before it's too late. I have used this 3- step method with a lot of success. The steps are the same as the one's we learned as kids to stay out of trouble when crossing the street. A fight is a lot like that.

You must:

1. STOP
2. LOOK

3. LISTEN

When it's all clear it's ok to cross the street into your partner's arms.
I'll take you through the steps.

First, here are some quotes from couples I have worked with. Perhaps some of these problems sound familiar to you.

I feel angry a lot in my marriage. Every time either of us asks the other to do something we start to fight about who is responsible for doing what. Who does more? I always feel burdened with having to do the housework and take care of the kids even though I work too! Just because I work at home Jeff thinks I have all the time in the world.

I often wonder what happened to the partner I married. We used to have great sex and we could talk about everything. Now we fight about everything, especially when it comes to the kids. We just don't see eye to eye on how to bring them up.

My husband and I don't fight out loud. But we do battle silently. Charlie will leave dishes in the sink or crumbs on the counter when he knows that drives me nuts. I do his laundry but I don't fold his t-shirts the way he likes. I tell myself that since he doesn't care about what I like so why should I care about what he wants. Or maybe we need to learn to talk about things instead of silently fighting it out.

We are so busy that we don't make time for one another. It seems like we are ships passing in the night. I don't know how to approach her any more. Whenever I try it turns into a fight. We start talking and before I know it she is yelling about how I never want to spend time with her. I feel like I can't get it right.

When I ask what is wrong he says, "NOTHING is wrong. I'm not mad! Stop trying to push me." So then I withdraw and feel lonely. When I try again everything escalates. I can't do it all myself. I thought we were supposed to be a team.

I am always living with the anxiety of when the anger will flare up. It doesn't make sense to me. I feel like I am walking on eggshells all the time. Even when things are going well I know it's only a matter of time before I'll be in trouble regardless of how hard I try.

We have taken seminars and workshops and after that we can stay in the groove for about 3 weeks. Then something will come up and we will go back to our old patterns of picking on each other and that turns in to a fight. I'll try to use the tools but I can't seem to stay with them when I feel attacked.

It seems like we fight all the time. I can't stand it any more. We used to have good makeup sex but even that is not happening lately. Whenever I come home she seems already angry with me so I try to keep my distance. If I need something I just do it myself. It's so much easier to do that than to ask for something and not get it. I think there is something really wrong with our marriage and I don't know what to do.

Fighting is a difficult and painful problem. With these 3 steps you can stop the fights and begin to see the ways you have of relating to one another that are keeping you stuck in a pattern of fighting. I will be introducing you to the skills that make up the steps of Stop, Look Both Ways, and Listen before you cross the street. This will help you create the relationship you want. I cannot say it will be easy. But for many it has been priceless.

1. Stop

We weren't born with the fear of crossing the street but it was important that someone taught us that we should be. So let's say that this is the time to learn how to cross the street again. This time the street is what reminds us to stay awake and choose to stop before the fight. When we first learned to stop at the sidewalk, most likely before we can remember, we were taught that something bad could happen if we were not aware and if we did not make the choice to stop at the curb. Lets say it's the same in your relationship as you step toward the curb of an argument. You can see it and feel it and you can chose to be aware that it is coming. You can choose to stop. If you chose to stay aware that the curb is coming you can use your will to stop. Stopping allows you to know when it is safe to cross. Stopping will allow you time to make some better choices than the usual patterns of fighting. If you stay in the usual pattern of fighting it is like running in to the street without knowing if the cars are coming!

You may think that you end up in a fight before you are aware that it was coming. But if it really were a street and not a fight you wouldn't get to do that too many times before you were hit by a car. So what is different? You have trained yourself to be aware and use your will to stop at a street. You did that because you decided it was important. Awareness and will are something we all have. We can strengthen them like a muscle. We can use them to stop before a fight just like stopping at the curb.

Your Awareness is a muscle.

In this present moment you can have an experience of awareness: while reading the words on this page notice you also have *awareness* that you are reading this page. You have a mind that is capable of reading the words and another part of your mind capable of noticing that you are reading these words. Your awareness is ever present regardless of whether you focus on it. Your awareness is alert, non judgmental, and ready to be called upon. All you need to do is decide that it is important to be aware or as some say- awake. If you decide something is important enough to stay awake for and you strengthen your muscle of awareness then you will be able to do it. If someone were going to give you a million dollars if you could stay awake then you probably would be able to summon the awareness to do it. If it were your last chance for real, you would be motivated to stay in your awareness. In this case you could decide to stay awake to when a fight was coming instead of being swept into unskillful habitual or emotional reactions. We can easily be consumed and overpowered if we do not develop the muscle of awareness.

Try this to develop the muscle of awareness:

Find something that will remind you to practice being in your awareness. Some cue that will remind you to stop and notice. You could try putting your watch on the other wrist. Or putting a sticky in your car or on your mirror that says ‘stop.’ Or try setting your phone to ping every hour.

Once you have done this, when the reminder comes take 20 seconds to be totally aware of:

What you hear

What you see

What taste is in your mouth

What you smell

What sensations you feel

What emotions you feel

What thoughts are arising

Just notice. Just using the muscle of awareness. No judgments.

Then just for fun ask yourself “who is aware?” You don’t need to answer, just stay with the question.

Before Carol learned to Stop.

Carol and Jed fought a lot. They both hated it but couldn’t seem to stop. Carol told herself she was not going to fight tonight. In fact she was sure it was NOT going to happen again tonight. But still the dread was there. The anxiety and the foreboding sense of failure she felt every night lately. It so heavily cloaked over her that her shoulders drooped beneath her long lovely brown hair. As she arrived at her house on a cold January night her gloved hand turned the ornate doorknob that was part of the \$500 carved wooden front door to her home. “Did he always have to be so extravagant?” she said to herself in a stern voice condemning her husband’s expensive taste. She had this thought every night as though it was the part of the script wired in to the movement of opening the front door. It seemed like she was in a sitcom she had watched so many- too many times. Stepping into the front hall she listened for any signs of life. Was he home from work yet? Then she heard the CNN newscaster and knew she would find him in his recliner. She thought, “Why can’t I ever come home to the smell of roasting potatoes or garlic simmering? Why do I have to do all the work?”

“Hi hon.” Came in floating around the corner in a monotone before Jed, her husband, came into view.

“Hi” she quipped. Silence.

As she entered the living room she asked, “How’s your day?”

“Full with case conferences and meetings.” “Yours?”

“Ok”

“What’s for dinner?” he queried still watching the screen.

Just then it happened as surely as if she was in a movie and the director said “action.”

Carol turned into what Jed called “the bitch wife.” Rage possessed her. Her face got red, she felt power in her arms, and energy in her spine, even her breasts got hot. She opened

her mouth and in the grey smoke that bellowed out came the words she had meant to avoid.

“What is wrong with you? You think I was put on this earth for you? Just because you worked all day you think that I am in charge of everything else? When is it my turn? And get your filthy shoes off the chair.”

“Carol shut up!”

And she did. But the damage was done. As she walked upstairs into the bedroom she heard the front door shut behind him.

“What is wrong with me?” Carol asked herself. “I just can’t control myself. Maybe I am incapable of a happy marriage. Maybe I don’t have a right to have needs of my own. My anger is destroying us. I am a really bad wife and I wouldn’t blame him for leaving me. He just did- it serves me right. Is any of this his fault? Is all of this his fault? If he would only think of what I might want sometime.” And on and on.

Anyone who has ever been in a relationship will tell you they are not always easy. So what makes them hard? What makes scenes like the “homicidal bitchin” that goes down in every kitchen” (George Leonard) so common. What makes the fuses so short? Of course the content or the issue is different for each of us but the process is a shared one. We have not STOPPED. The curb is there and we have walked into the “street” with no awareness.

For some a fight does not look like screaming in anger. It may look like silent resentment and then withdrawal followed by depression or incapacity to give or receive affection. There are many versions.

So what are we to do if we are not creating the kind of relationship we want? What can be expected of us since we have our own needs and desires and our partner has theirs?

Let’s look at how Carol took the first step to transform this scene by learning and diligently practicing the Three Steps to Stop Fighting.

After Carol learned to Stop.

As she arrived at her house on a cold January night her gloved hand turned the ornate doorknob that was part of the \$500 carved wooden front door to her home. “Did he always have to be so extravagant?” she said to herself in a stern voice condemning her husband expensive taste. She had this thought every night as though it was the part of the script wired in to the movement of opening the front door. It seemed like she was in a sitcom she had watched so many- too many times. Stepping into the front hall she listened for any signs of life. Was he home from work yet? Then she heard the CNN newscaster and knew she would find him in his recliner. She thought, “Why can’t I ever come home to the smell of roasting potatoes or garlic simmering? Why do I have to do all the work?”

After practicing being in her awareness she now *noticed* this thought. Carol now had the *awareness* that when she was having negative thoughts about Jed it was because she was not feeling close to him. Stepping into the front hall she listened for any signs of life.

Then she heard the CNN newscaster and knew she would find him in his recliner. Most of her wanted to start a fight and let some of the pressure out. *But* what she knew she really wanted was closeness. Now she knew she could have that if she used the 3 steps: stop, look and listen. She knew the first step was to stop.

“Hi hon.” Came in floating around the corner in a monotone before he came into view.

“Hi honey,” she said cautiously.

As she entered the living room she asked, “How’s your day?”

“Full with case conferences and meetings.” “Yours?”

Here is where Carol stopped! She just stopped. She focused on her breath. She stayed quiet. She said nothing until she could say:

“Ok- but I realized I wanted to talk about something- can we do that soon?”

“Yeah, give me 15 more minutes here.”

“Ok, I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Your Will is also Muscle.

To be *aware* of how you are relating is different than being able *to do* something to change it. So what helps us change our ways? It is not only our **awareness** but also our **will**. We can think of ourselves as both awareness and will. Carol had practiced exercising the muscle of awareness and the muscle of will. She had been aware that the fight was coming and she had used her will to stop her from starting a fight. She had stepped up to the curb and she had stopped.

Try this to build the muscle of your will.

Put a reminder in place like for the awareness exercise. This can remind you to stop so that you can do something you have chosen to do for 20 seconds. Like with the practice of strengthening your awareness it can be putting your watch or bracelet on the other wrist. Or putting a sticky in your car or on your mirror. Or try setting your phone to ping every hour.

Once you have done this, when the reminder comes take 20 seconds to do what you have just chosen to do for this exercise. It can be get up and walk across the room. Or stretch with your arms above your head. It can be to sing a verse from a favorite song or tap on the desk as though it were a drum. Be aware that you can chose and do something different even when it is not in the direction you were going. That is your will. That is the muscle you are exercising. In the midst of your life you can choose to take 20 seconds and do what you have decided to do that is in a different direction from the flow you are in.

Let’s look deeper into the will.

When I ask you to be aware of yourself reading this page and you try it- that is your will. I have suggested that you become aware (of reading or thinking or feeling) and you have *chosen* to do it. Even if you have chosen *not* to do it- that is still you making a choice. Just like awareness is a pure capacity to be **aware**, to observe, to notice (not defining the

object or content of awareness) so the **will** is a capacity for intention, choice, and action (or inaction). Just as awareness is not describing the contents of awareness but simply the capacity to be aware; so the will does not dictate *what* the will is going to choose but simply the power of choice itself. It feels great once we learn to exercise our will in a direction that makes our marriage a happier one!

Step 2: Look

What does it mean to look? On the curb it means to look both ways to make sure there are no cars coming. For a couple trying to avoid a fight it means *look* for

1. How you feel
2. What you need
3. What to ask for

Carol had stopped before she crossed the line into a fight. Then she looked for what she felt, what she needed, and then what to ask for.

1. How you feel

*Carol felt her annoyance that there was no fragrance of dinner cooking but she knew that wasn't the deepest feeling.

*She tuned in and discovered underneath her annoyance was the feeling of being burdened and even lonely because she was doing all the meals without help.

*She felt mad.

2. What you need

Carol sat in the kitchen and thought about what she needed. Well a full time cook would be nice!

*But realistically she wanted Jed to participate in the meal planning and preparing.

*She needed to be appreciated for all of her efforts in cooking for them while also working at her job.

3. What to ask for

Carol was starting to feel more hopeful just thinking about getting some help from Jed.

*She decided to ask him to help her plan the week's dinners on Sunday before they went food shopping.

* She decided to ask Jed to help her with dinners when she got home from work.

(15 minutes later Jed comes into the kitchen)

"I'm here, what's up?"

Carol took a deep breath.

"I'm starting to notice that I am feeling lonely doing all the meals by myself. And then I get mad and become the "bad wife" and yell at you. That never works! I have been thinking about what I need and what I want to ask you for."

If Carol had a dream husband he might say “Really? Thanks for telling me. I don’t always know what you need. Let’s figure it out together.”

But what if Jed had said “Carol, its up to you to figure out the meals. I’m the one who has to do it all around here. I make twice as much money and work my ass off. I want to relax when I get home.” ?

Then it would be time for Step 3.

Step 3: Listen

Carol had learned how to *stop* before the fight by exercising the muscles of her *awareness* and her *will*.

Then she had learned how to *look* for what she *felt* and *needed* and wanted to *ask* for.

The third step is to listen. When you are at the curb after you have stopped and looked then you have to listen. A car or truck could be coming around the corner out of sight. It will not be safe to cross if you don’t listen.

Now Carol has to *listen* to Jed. Of course she feels it’s unfair that she has to do all the work to stop the fighting! But Carol is committed to having a better relationship so she has decided she is willing to give it a try and see what happens.

Listening in the way I outline below has the effect of relaxing the part of our brain that goes into fight mode when it feels threatened. This part of our brain is wired in to keep us safe. (They have research on the limbic brain that documents this.) By learning to listen in the way outlined below and letting our spouse know that we hear what they are feeling and why they are feeling it- allows them to relax and come back into partnership mode instead of fight mode.

Learning to *listen* requires not just hearing but also being empathetic. This is a specific and fairly simple skill, although not always easy! Listening requires:

1. A choice to *stop* and *listen*.
2. A choice to put our feelings on hold until it’s our turn to speak.
3. Tuning in to what our partner is feeling
4. Developing a feeling word vocabulary.
5. Telling our partner what we hear in terms of the feeling and meaning of what they are saying (*not* what we want them to be saying).

For now we will assume the first 2 steps are in place because you have learned to *stop* and to *look*. Step 3 involves listening which means hearing, not just the words, but also the feeling of your spouse. In order to be able to *listen* for the feeling experience of your partner you need to have a feeling word vocabulary.

Vocabulary Words to Identify Feelings

While not an exact science, we will use 5 categories to expand our capacity to identify feelings. This includes our own as well as our partner's.

HAPPY SAD ANGRY AFRAID CARING

Under each category there are many feelings that go from a small intensity to a high intensity of that feeling. For example, if you recently asked your partner to go to your favorite restaurant and she/he enthusiastically agreed to find a sitter you would have felt *happy*. And now tune in to what degree of happy. You might have felt *really happy* which could be *thrilled* or *great* or *stoked*. Or you could have felt a smaller degree of happiness like *pleased* or *content*. **There are no right feelings.** This is an exercise in identifying the category and intensity of a feeling so you can learn to match what you hear with what you say to let your partner know that you are listening. Another example: perhaps you came home and discovered your partner had not kept a commitment to clear out a mess they had made. You might have felt something in the sad or angry category. More specifically (depending on how important it was to you) in the sad category you could have felt *disappointed* or *discouraged*. In the angry category you could have been *resentful* or *frustrated*.

A feeling word will always fit into the sentence "I hear that you feel _____."
We can ensure that we name (reflect back) the feeling being expressed if we begin our practice with this format. Later of course, you will use your own style.

The reason we are refining the intensity of feeling in the category is so you can match the feeling word with the intensity of what is being expressed. If your partner is telling you about discovering that a friend betrayed them you will want to be able to express that you hear that they are feeling devastated or furious. You can see how much more empathetic this would be than saying you hear that they feel discontent or annoyed which are much less in intensity and would probably not match. Remember this is not rocket science and your partner will help you know if you are accurate or not. Then you can revise your statement to match how they have corrected you.

Examples

| <u>Happy</u> | <u>Sad</u> | <u>Angry</u> | <u>Afraid</u> | <u>Caring</u> |
|--------------|------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Ecstatic | crushed | enraged | threatened | devoted |
| Joyful | abandoned | resentful | petrified | love |
| Great | lonely | furious | scared | adoring |
| Satisfied | hopeless | mad | anxious | smitten |
| Good | unhappy | annoyed | cautious | concerned |
| Content | down | frustrated | uneasy | appreciative |

Important points:

It will be very important to remember that empathy is not the same as agreement.

You can let someone know you hear what he or she is feeling without agreeing or having the same feelings!

If you cannot find your capacity to be empathetic schedule a new time or ask to be the speaker first if your partner can listen to you first.

When listening, face your partner and lean forward so your body mirrors your disposition of curiosity and heartfelt desire to know what your partner feels and why.

Listening requires practice. Set up some time to practice every day. It's easiest to start with topics that are not too problematic. Later you can move on to the hard stuff.

Agree that you will each take 5 minutes to speak. After each few sentences the "listener" says to the person talking "I hear that you feel _____ because _____." See how Carol responds to Jed below.

After 5 minutes switch roles. You can keep going after that if you have time.

Back to the kitchen where Jed had said "Carol, it's up to you to figure out the meals. I'm the one who has to do it all around here. I make twice as much money and work my ass off. I want to relax when I get home."?

Carol says, "I get it. *You feel burdened and tired because of the amount of work you do.*"

Jed, "Damn straight. And now you want me to do more? You've got to be kidding."

Carol, "I hear that you *feel angry because I am asking you to do even more.*"

Jed, "Hmmm that sounds kind of stubborn doesn't it?"

Carol, "You *feel concerned because you're wondering if you are being too stubborn about all this.*"

Jed takes a deep breath. He looks at Carol who is sitting at the counter, her eyes hopeful and soft. He realizes she is not trying to make him do anything. She is just asking for a conversation. He says, "So what are saying?"

Carol repeats what she said before; "I'm starting to notice that I am feeling lonely doing all the meals by myself. And then I get mad and become the "bitch wife" and yell at you. That never works! It's not what I want to do. It's not how you like to be treated. I have been thinking about what I need and what I could ask for. Would you be willing to come into the kitchen while I am preparing dinner and help and then we can be together. And maybe even one day a week could you be in charge of deciding what to have and starting to cook- then I'll help when I come home?"

Jed, "Sure I could try that if it would make you feel better."

Carol, “Thanks honey. It would mean a lot to me.”

Conclusion

It’s hard to feel close to your spouse when you fight a lot whether it’s out loud or silently. It’s hard to have a happy marriage if you fight by being sarcastic or even just bickering. Stop, look and listen can help you stop fighting and begin to create the happy marriage you want. It takes practice.

One way to practice is to take a common fight that you and your spouse have and write out the three steps with all the parts. Take yourself through the steps like what I did with Carol in the example above.

At some point I will also show you how to express anger in a constructive manner so that you can still “fight” but it will be in a new way. That will come in a future email.

For now, be patient with yourself. Commit to practicing stop, look and listen. Once you have mastered these steps it will be time to safely cross the street and find yourself in the arms of your partner.