

280: How to Fight Fair



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Jen Riday

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Hi, I'm Dr. Jen Riday and you're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast, episode number 280. I'm talking today about how to fight fair. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey, there my friends, we're talking about marriage today and how to fight fair. This is juicy. Now, if you're not married this still applies to you. Maybe you have a partnership or maybe you have a significant other, or you're dating, or a boyfriend, or a girlfriend. I think you're going to love this because we're going to learn how to fight fair in a way that allows all of us involved to feel emotionally safe.

Relationships used to be about financial security, or safety, or whatever, a 100 years ago. But now they're really about emotional safety, emotional connection, and fulfillment. And if we don't have that in our relationships, what's the point to some extent? So, by the end of this episode, I hope you'll have some ideas on how you can fight more fairly to make your disharmony, your moments of conflict a little shorter, a little safer emotionally so it's less painful.

Now, I know what I'm talking about here. I am a little bit ashamed to admit, yes, there is that shame word. I have experienced much shame and much trauma over the course of my marriage. I would say hands down that the most traumatic experience of my life has been my marriage. That's sad, isn't it? You're like, "Jen, what are you doing? Why are you still with him?"

Why am I still with him? Because both of us, he and I, my husband, Heathcliff, and I have grown so much. And by and large we really don't fight

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that much anymore. And when we do the fights are short, usually emotionally safe. I don't experience the traumatizing devastation I did in the past, largely because I have learned so many tools and better applied them with more patience. Now, my husband is quirky, a scientist, I believe on the autism spectrum. Now that said, autism is a spectrum. We're all really on the spectrum somewhere. We might be low on the spectrum or we might be high.

I believe my husband is higher, he has not chosen to be diagnosed but suffice it to say empathy, and reading emotional cues, I don't feel is fully there for him. And that's okay. Now, let's talk about attachment. You know probably that we each have an attachment style. This is from research from John Bowlby, and Ainsworth, and you've probably heard of attachment a million times. The goal would be to have a secure attachment which makes us more confident and able to function healthfully, or in healthy ways in relationships.

You might have an anxious attachment or an avoidant attachment. There are sub attachment styles. I'm not going to go into depth there. But my husband and I had what is called an anxious avoidant relationship pattern. What does that look like? I was anxiously attached, which meant I was often needy for approval. I wanted validation. I wanted him to help me feel better when I was sad, or anxious, or worried. I wasn't handling my emotions independently which in some ways is a bit like codependence.

My husband in contrast, didn't need anybody, didn't care about emotional connection. Was independent, self-sufficient to a degree that was unhealthy or known as avoidant attachment. He takes care of number one, because of situations in his childhood he doesn't need anyone and doesn't really enjoy being vulnerable or connecting on an emotional or emotionally intimate level. So, you put us together, it's all fine and good until there's a difference of opinion.

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Anxious avoidant patterns in a marriage look like this. There's a difference of opinion, the anxiously attached person wants validation, wants comfort, wants to know that the other person understands, will often pursue, while the avoidantly attached person withdraws. It's a pursuit withdrawal cycle. We did that for years. It was ridiculous. The more I showed emotion, my husband because of his higher level on the autism spectrum was repulsed by my emotion, sadness, anxiety, any of it. Because of things that happened in his childhood my emotions would trigger him.

And it took me a while to recognize that this was actually a trigger and not just him responding to me. He was transferring past experiences to me. It took me years to figure this out. Well, what did we do? We fought every time we traveled and we were outside of our normal routines, when we drove to my parents' house, which is only six hours, terrible fights, horrible fights.

And as you know when someone is triggered their prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of their brains shuts down and all the blood, so to speak, is flowing to that reptilian brain, the fight or flight survival brain. And when all our blood is flowing there and we're worked up and triggered, and in fight or flight, we're not going to control what we say to each other. We're going to be probably a bit more hurtful. We would go on, and on, and on for hours fighting in front of our kids, I'm ashamed to say. Biggest regret of my life that I didn't figure more of this out sooner.

Well, anyway that was us for years. You've heard my story of having a miscarriage. We fought all the way to the hospital, one hour while I was having a miscarriage. That epitomizes the level of conflict. So, what changed? Well, I decided too many therapists did not know how to deal with my husband because of him being on the spectrum. I read a ton of books about autism. I started to read every book available about marriage, and about relationships, and about conflict.

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And of course, as you know, I studied cognitive behavioral therapy. I went back to my research in human development and family studies. I pulled everything together. And it has been by hard rugged determination that I have found tools that work. So, if that sounds like something you can relate to, or you've had conflict that you just don't want, even if it's not as bad as ours was, this episode is for you and there is hope.

My husband and I have really, really changed. I said at the beginning it felt like we were a couple of spiky rocks placed into a rock tumbler and just we've polished out each other's edges. And that's true. Being with my partner has forced me to learn to be emotionally independent, 100% responsible for my feelings. I'm not codependent in a way where I'm making him responsible for my feelings. And it's so cool to get to that place.

You've heard me talk about thought tables before. Thought tables explain where our feelings come from. You might think that your partner causes you to feel a certain way. You made me feel this. When you did that I felt angry. When you do this, it makes me mad. Not true. Your thoughts about that situation generate those feelings. One of my favorite thoughts is I'm a 100% responsible for my own emotions and my own happiness. I love that because suddenly I don't have to wait for my husband to do, say or behave in any certain way. I've got it for myself. So that has been huge.

Additionally, my husband and I have a fair fighting rules list. It has things that help us. But I want to challenge you to create your own fair fighting rules list. Maybe on that list you have some rules like no talking when you're hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. Or don't fight in front of the kids unless you're going to resolve that conflict. Perhaps no name calling, or insults, or swearing, no talk of divorce. No use of force of course, like pushing, shoving, blocking, breaking things, throwing things.

You might have a rule that no yelling should be taking place. By the way, yelling, yelling is defined by both of you, if your partner says that you're

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yelling and you're like, "No, I'm not, my volume's not loud." Pull back, tone it down and understand that yelling is what is perceived by the listener, bring your tone down, even if your volume wasn't that high, then you'll be following the rule not to yell.

Maybe you have a rule that you talk about one thing at a time. Have you ever heard of kitchen sinking it? Hey, well, so what if I did that? You did this, and this, and this, and then that one time and you're horrible, blah, blah, pulling out every wrong thing you ever did as a means to kind of defend their one wrong choice. They'll pull out the kitchen sink and list all of the wrong things you did. Probably a rule you want to have on your fair fighting rules list.

Maybe you want to have a rule of reflecting back to each other. This can be particularly helpful when you're with someone like I feel like I am with someone who isn't the best at empathy or validation, isn't the best at emotional connection. It's not important to him. So, the next best thing then is when he reflects back. How does that look? Well, let's say I say something like, "Hey, I noticed the kids are still up and it's almost 10 o'clock. I feel worried they won't have enough sleep because tomorrow they have swim lessons."

What would my husband do in that situation, if you wanted to show empathy? If it were natural to him he would probably know what to say, but because it's not natural we use what's called the dialog process created by Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt. Well, anyway it's simple. He simply reflects back, "Oh, so you noticed that the kids are still up and you feel worried they won't get enough sleep because they have swim lessons." He just repeats back my words.

But let me tell you, on the receiving end of those words being repeated back, it feels like he heard me, he sees me, he gets me, it feels like

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empathy. So, try that, reflecting back the exact words your partner said. It also helps your brain stay calm, and not shift into that fight or flight place.

Now, I also have my entire fair fighting rules list in the Vibrant Happy Women Club along with four things my husband and I do to make sure that we don't create defensiveness. A lot of times when you want to bring up a topic with your partner, something you want to change, something you've noticed, it can sound like criticism, or an accusation, or a blaming situation. And when that happens most of us, most humans will get a bit defensive.

So, when we're defensive our brains starts to kick into that fight or flight. The prefrontal cortex, the logical, rational brain up in the front kind of shuts down. That's when things escalate. And those conflicts, those simple small things can escalate into a totally traumatic situation, traumatic for you and your partner, traumatic for your kids, even if it's just emotional trauma like my husband and I experienced and our kids by default who heard it as well. How do we avoid that? We need to learn to communicate in a way that does not feel like accusation, or blaming, or accusing.

How do we do that? Well, I talk about this in depth in the club. But simply stated, you look at the facts, talk about the facts, use I feel language. And make a simple request of what you do want, offer a solution to the problem. It's much, much safer emotionally to avoid the, you did this, why did you do this, what's happening, you always, you never. Very, very, very different.

So, I just taught the full four steps in the club last night. And there were a number of women there on our Zoom call and we practiced and it was so beautiful to watch them go through these four steps and realize, hey, this isn't that hard. And it was fun to kind of watch people practicing and to see. Many women commented, "Hey, it feels totally different when you go through these four steps when you're talking about a problem. It feels totally different." And when your partner reflects back that feels like validation. That feels like empathy.

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So, if you have a relationship, or a partner, or a spouse that is anything like mine, you could really benefit from having a fair fighting rules list and trying to communicate in a way where you're not accusing or blaming, but instead, describing what you see, what you feel with I language. And kindly requesting what you want, trying to solve that problem.

Why should you go to the effort to learn better communication habits? Well, because you deserve to feel emotionally safe in your relationship. You deserve to be validated and to feel like your spouse empathizes, even if that's not natural for them. There are communication strategies like what I was teaching in the club this month that help with that. Additionally, your kids are watching. I know that you want them to learn healthy communication styles and to see how these patterns can be used.

It was so fun when I was teaching my husband these four step process a while back. My daughter was in the kitchen and she said, "Let me try." And she just rattled it off like it was nothing. So, we have the four step process hanging on our refrigerator. And we refer to it often. It's right there to remind us.

And one night recently I actually came home and forgot to use the four steps. And I said, "What, the girls are still up. You promised that you'd put them to bed. This is crazy. They have swimming lessons tomorrow." And my husband said, "Did you forget the list?" "Oh yeah, four steps, okay." And then I went through the four steps and recommunicated it properly in a way that wasn't accusatory or blaming. It felt totally different. Nothing escalates when you use these four steps.

So, I want to challenge you to create your own fair fighting rules list. If you want to learn more, go more in depth, the four step process I'm talking about, I taught about it in the club. I also share my fair fighting rules list there and that's all waiting for you in the Vibrant Happy Women Club.

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Well, my friends, I want you to know you deserve to feel emotionally safe in your relationships, in all of them, your kids deserve to have healthy patterns modeled for them. And your whole family deserves some peace, and connection, and love. And all the things that come when you learn how to communicate in an emotionally safe way. You can do it.

If I can do it, if my husband and I could do it, there is hope for all of you, trust me. We rarely have a conflict that escalates anymore. And we feel safe with each other. With that emotional safety we trust more, we share more, we connect more. And it creates a beautiful ripple effect for our kids as well. So, I told you I'd be vulnerable and I did. And I hope that it helps some of you listening. And I will be back again next week. Until then make it a vibrant and happy week and go do the things that will help you to have a vibrant and happy marriage or relationship. Take care my friends.

If you enjoy this podcast, you have to check out the Vibrant Happy Women Club. It's my monthly group coaching program where we take all this material to the next level and to get you the results that will blow your mind. Join me in the Vibrant Happy Women Club at jenriday.com/join.