

Wrestling about an old dispute? Stick with the issue at hand.

How to fight right!

I used to take comfort in knowing that my husband, Steve, and I bicker about only the little things (scheduling, housework). But it turns out *how* you argue matters more than what you argue about. So I sent a transcript of one of our recent spats to marriage therapist Jane Greer, Ph.D., who analyzed our tiff. Use her tips to spar more lovingly—and effectively.

By Valerie Frankel

The scene: a weekday morning. Steve is getting ready to leave for work.

Rather than blame Steve, Val should state her feelings using "I" sentences such as "I feel upset when you don't listen to what I say."

VAL Remember, I have that dinner tonight and I need you to babysit.

STEVE I didn't know about that.

→ **VAL** My dinner—the one with Rebecca, Mary, Penelope and Carol that took months to schedule? You agreed to stay home with the kids weeks ago!

STEVE I can't—I have to work late.

VAL I told you five times!

→ **STEVE** And I'm telling you I don't remember you mentioning it to me.

VAL You never listen to me. You look at me and nod, but you don't hear a word that's coming out of my mouth.

STEVE Believe me, Val, I hear you. I would hear you in China.

→ **VAL** So what now?

Steve shrugs.

→ **VAL** I can never rely on you! Have you ever arranged for child care in your life? Why do I always have to be the one to deal with everything?

STEVE That's simply not true.

VAL [Starts to scream] Aren't you going to say you're sorry? I must have told you about this dinner five times!

Steve puts on his coat, shoulders his backpack and moves toward the door.

VAL That's it? That's the best I can expect from you?

Steve leaves without a good-bye kiss.


Val fumes, makes some phone calls and eventually finds a sitter. Later at dinner, she drinks too much wine and bitches about Steve to her friends. Steve gets home first, pays the sitter, puts the kids to bed and does a load of laundry. When Val gets home, he kisses her sweetly. She thinks about mentioning the fight, but instead thanks Steve for the pleasant homecoming. Reconciled, they turn in for the night.

It's OK to raise your voice for a few minutes, but yelling for longer is counterproductive.

Here, Val should use upbeat language to engage him: "I want to work through this."

Steve's quick exit is a cop-out. Although letting the issue rest may help them calm down, Steve should have said, "Let's talk later."

Steve and Val resolved this fight through action. He helped tend to the kids, and Val voiced appreciation. It worked out this time, but they need to learn how to resolve conflicts with conversation.

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