

Why Couples Fight - Reflections of a Therapist

By Rafael Mendez, Ph.D.

"Why didn't you close the closet?" It may sound trivial, but for him it triggers an old story. He grew up with a controlling father who constantly told him what to do. He learned to resist authority and promised himself no one would ever boss him around again. So, when he replies, "Why should I?" he's not reacting to a closet door; he's reacting to a lifelong struggle with the narrative of being controlled.

For her, the same exchange carries a different narrative. She grew up feeling alone, responsible for everyone, with no one to rely on. When he says, "Close it yourself," she doesn't hear defiance; she hears, "You're on your own." Her frustration is fueled by a quiet fear that she'll always be the one holding everything together on her own. The fight isn't about the closet. It's about power and who's in control versus feeling unsupported and being left alone.

As a therapist, I hear stories of fights like this all too often. I've worked with many couples, and one thing is always clear: the moment we form a couple, we stop being just individuals. We're a social species. We're wired to be relational. Who we are is shaped in our interactions with the people around us. When two people become "a couple," they form a new entity that includes me, my partner, and "the relationship." A relationship needs care to thrive. "The relationship" is the activity of being interdependent, and that interdependence isn't a flaw; it's the foundation that allows a relationship to grow and develop over time.

From what I've seen, relationships move through familiar cycles: harmony, rupture, repair and, when tended to, each cycle can foster deeper emotional development. The couple can strengthen. When couples are having difficulties, that interdependency is threatened, and we experience an existential threat. This existential threat to the relationship makes us simultaneously aggressive and defensive.

Today, "the couple" faces a difficult challenge. On one hand, people seek security, stability, and emotional reliability from their partner. They want commitment, trust, and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, individuals also crave excitement, novelty, and exploration. The desire for adventure and personal growth often conflicts with the desire for stability and predictability. Balancing these two powerful forces is one of the central dilemmas of a romantic couple.

Our rapidly changing society brings life challenges no one could expect. People change in unexpected ways. The longer difficulties continue, the more resentment and anger accumulate, and the more often couples make fatal errors. It's not healthy for couples to live without feeling wanted or attended to. Without the quiet signals of affection and being seen, relationships deteriorate. It deprives us of something essential. Couples in difficulty often struggle to talk to one another. When they do communicate, they usually repeat the same lines as before, and neither hears the other. When this happens, couples fight.

Fighting is common and, at times, essential to a growing relationship.

How We Fight

What's critical is how we fight. Do we fight to be right? Do we fight to hurt? Or are we fighting on behalf of the relationship? Most couples don't fight about the wound itself; they fight because they lose the narrative that keeps them connected. It's rarely about the towel on the floor, who left the bathroom light on, who was supposed to pick up the children, or who is always late. Beneath those everyday plotlines lie three deeper relational dynamics: power and control, closeness and care, and respect and recognition. That's where the hurt lives.

We don't fight the same way. Some of us grow up in homes where arguing is loud and direct; others grow up where needs are swallowed and never spoken. This is where we learn how to defend ourselves. We learn how, or whether, to ask for what we want. We carry these lessons into adulthood, shaped by watching our parents with each other and with us. For example, when we don't know how to ask directly, we criticize instead. Some of us are maximizers: we explode. Others are minimizers: we keep it in, wait, and wait, until one day we erupt over something trivial that has nothing to do with the actual issues hurting us.

What's striking about relationships in conflict isn't about the words; it's about the underlying relational dynamics. All relationships are co-produced. The more one person escalates, the more the other may shut down. The more one shuts down, the more the other intensifies to get a response. Without meaning to, we draw out the most extreme version of each other.

My pushing elicits your withdrawal. You withdraw; I push harder. We become defensive, critical, or demanding because we feel the relationship is threatened. We co-create the very dynamics that threaten us.

What Goes Wrong

Occasional fights may be troubling, but bickering is worse. Bickering is the chronic, low-intensity warfare of the unhappy relationship. Behind every criticism is a wish, a desire to be treated with more attention and affection. But rather than expressing the wish, I attack. I pile things on. I bring up the towel on the floor, the phone call you didn't return, and something your mother said years ago. I dump on the argument, like dumping all the dirty dishes into the sink at once. The argument expands until neither remembers how the fight started. It began with a cup of water and ended with the feeling, "Should we be together?" Both are hurt and left threatened.

All relationships run on a shared narrative. When we're fighting, the narrative changes. I fall into what psychologists call confirmation bias. Once I decide you're careless and inconsiderate, I search vigilantly for anything that confirms it. I keep score. There's also the double standard: if I'm late, it's because of traffic; if you're late, it's your character. My mistakes are circumstantial; yours are personal. As each person clings to their own narrative, the space between them widens.

After a fight, I often don't feel proud of myself. I don't like what comes out of me: the tone, the sharpness, the condescension. Sometimes I punish you with silence. Other times, I pretend nothing happened. But avoidance doesn't repair anything; it just lets resentment sit quietly between us.

How to Repair

A bad fight often follows a predictable pattern: attack, blame, defense. But there is a turning point available to us. Behind anger, there is hurt. Behind every criticism lies an unmet longing. Criticism is often longing in disguise. The real challenge is to speak about what I feel rather than what you did to say, "I felt small," instead of, "You humiliated me." Acknowledging that each partner can have a sincere but different experience of the same event is a core move toward fighting for the relationship rather than against each other.

Listening is harder than we like to admit. In conflict, we can truly listen for about ten seconds before preparing our rebuttal. Repair begins when we shift from reacting to reflecting. We can say, "I don't see it the same way, but I understand that this is how you experienced it." Validation isn't agreement; it's recognition. That shift from escalation to reflective listening is where healing starts.

One powerful tool is the theatrical do-over. Like in a rehearsal, we can say "cut" and redo the moment differently. Another tool is taking space: "I need to cool down. I don't want to say something I'll regret. Let's come back to this later." The person who leaves must return and reinitiate the conversation. Trust is built in that space.

Apologies matter. A genuine one names harm, owns the impulse, and expresses regret. Accountability is the willingness to take responsibility without collapsing into shame. Responsibility says, "I did something wrong." Shame says, "I am bad." Shame hides; responsibility repairs.

Fighting isn't the problem. Disconnection without repair is. The measure of a relationship isn't the absence of conflict but the ability to reflect, return, apologize, validate, and grow. One needs radical acceptance: the ability to see oneself as flawed and still hold oneself in high regard. When fighting, remember to represent the relationship. When you do that, you don't need to win. The relationship wins.