

How to keep arguments from turning into battles

By Dan Morris
NC News Service

How can married couples argue without fighting? Just asking that question snaps snippets to mind of some of the doozies Eileen and I have had over the past 15 years:

- The whizbanger about four years ago on Mother's Day, when she was so mad at me that she jumped out of the car at a stoplight in downtown Oakland and said she'd get home on her own. She did.

- The time about four years into our marriage, when I grew so angry at her that I needed to get out of the house. But she followed on my heels, yipping that I should not walk out on the "discussion," which just pushed my blood pressure high enough to allow me to steam through the back screen door without opening it.

I distinctly remember writing in a personal

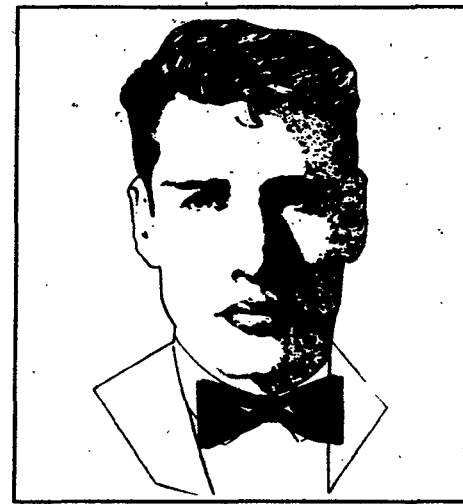
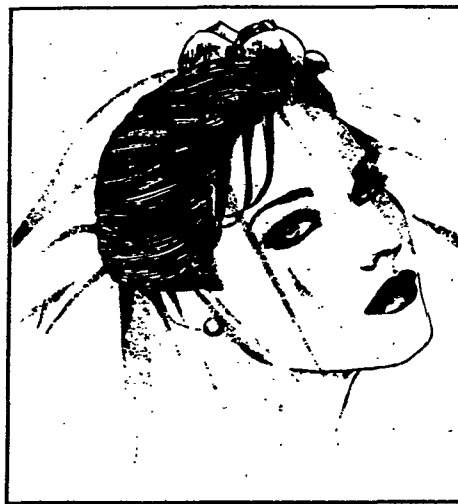
journal about six months after pledging lifelong love that I could not grasp how marriage could work for us.

You don't have to be married long to know we all have vulnerable areas. They can be anything from physical attributes ("If I had known you were going to blimp out after a few months of marriage...") to skeletons in the closet ("Yeah, but let's remember the time you...").

Hundreds of articles, books and theories delineate fair fighting in marriage, but two threads weave through most of them:

1) Every couple has its own characteristics, so how one pair will manage harsh disagreements might not work for another.

2) Every couple should consciously agree to rules of conduct, at least on actions or tactics that are out of bounds. We have friends who have agreed he will not use the phrase, "You are just like your mother,"



and she will not throw a dish on the floor.

"Fair fighting can be very helpful from one point of view," says family and marriage counselor David Kundtz of Kensington, Calif. "It does tend to get feelings expressed, which is so vital. But there have to be rules."

While Kundtz and other experts emphasize that every couple must ultimately determine their own rules, there are several sound, general suggestions:

- Remember the grace available in the sacrament of marriage. Jesus promises to help us in marriage; call him on it.

- No fair changing the subject. If you are discussing whose family you will visit on the Fourth of July, it's rarely productive to drag in your daughter's choice of friends.

- Find the real subject. An argument launched by a piece of burnt toast might have a lot more to do with one spouse's lingering pain from a cutting remark two days ago than blackened raisin bread.

- Handle hot spots now. Don't let minor issues smolder for days, weeks or years until they explode. I think of a friend who quit smoking a few years ago while his wife had not. He became increasingly resentful of the cost, the health risk and the odor. His wife felt guilty, yet chafed under his "self-righteousness." It took a trial separation, a lot of time and a priest to save their

marriage.

- Don't drink and debate. There is the clear risk that alcohol or other drugs reduce clarity, either creating cloudy conclusions or producing problems of their own.

- Arguments may be postponed. I chuckle at the advice given Eileen and me before our marriage: "Never let the sun go down on a disagreement." That generated some agonizing evenings for us that were exacerbated by fatigue and no opportunity for a cooling-down period.

Now we have made a time-out — often a night's sleep — an understood part of our rules of combat.

Realizing one's spouse cannot survive in a style of confrontation comfortable to oneself can postpone lots of gray hairs. For example, some people are destroyed by noisy fights while their husbands or wives were raised in vocal, noisy families whose members yell when passing the salt, Kundtz explains.

Still, a crisis can bring important marital issues into the open. The goal is to love and learn enough about ourselves and each other to keep those times from turning into verbal or emotional slashings.

"It's so important to keep in mind that you can say, 'I disagree with you. I think you are wrong, but I love you,'" Kundtz observes.

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