

"If anger and fighting are ruining your dream of a happy marriage,
Dr. Turndorf's conflict resolution program is for you."
—John Gray, Ph.D., author of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*

TILL DEATH DO US PART (UNLESS I KILL YOU FIRST)



A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR
RESOLVING RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

Jamie Turndorf, Ph.D.

Contents

Acknowledgments	xiii
Preface	xv
Introduction	4
Understanding the Chemistry of Fighting	8
The Relationship Battleground: Rate Your Conflicts on the Fighting Richter Scale	17
The No Fly (off the Handle) Zone: Eliminating Fight Traps and Faulty Conflict Resolution Tactics	35
Battle of the Bulge: The Sex Wars	59
Battle Scars: How Childhood Wounds Cause Chronic Conflict and How to Heal Them	71
How Your Head Can Be Your Own Worst Enemy: Training Your Mind to Fight for (Not against) You	98
The Battle Ax: How Women Can Use Climate Control Techniques to End Relationship Fighting	106
Listening to the Battle Cry: How to Use Your Ears to Resolve Conflicts	131
On Furlough: Knowing When Not to Negotiate	157
The Peace Treaty: How to Negotiate a Contract	172
Conclusion: Declaring a Permanent Truce	206
References and Suggested Reading	209
Index	218

Understanding the Chemistry of Fighting

Your husband just informed you that he will be taking a white water rafting trip with his buddies the following weekend. He smiles with boyish delight, displaying a full set of sparkling teeth, which you have to resist punching out. You have asked him, more times than you can remember, to talk with you before making plans. He forgot, clearly a case of juvenile Alzheimer's. Now, you find yourself telling him, once again, how annoyed you are. Suddenly, his eyes glaze over and he turns stone deaf. He's not listening, so you turn up the heat. No use. Instead of understanding what's bugging you, he digs in his heels. This annoys you even more, so you crank up your emotional thermostat. But, before you have finished, he orbits from the room and you are shouting to the back of his head.

Now, you're ballistic. So you chase him to the living room, where you find him staring blindly into space, his jaw tight. You nag, whine, complain, and yell, but he ignores you.

The longer he maintains his stony silence, the more upset you become (he doesn't even love you enough to respond to your pleas). In a last-ditch effort, you push your attack to the max and hammer harder. Eureka! His silence is broken, but instead of offering words of understanding, he hurls verbal death blows.

"Maybe you're the freakin' problem!" he shouts, swinging his fist like a club.

“Don’t try to pin this on me....You’re the one who made plans to go off.”

“Who would want to spend time with a bitch?”

In seconds, he is orbiting from the house.

The next time you try to talk to him about your issue, you’re even hotter than last time. And, big surprise: he’s more deaf, and more defensive or just plain outta there in the flash of a firefly.

The scenario described above—male retreat under fire—is also referred to as “husband withdrawal”—an involuntary fleeing reaction that occurs when a man feels attacked. And, according to extensive research, husband withdrawal is the number one cause of marital conflict and divorce.

Husband withdrawal is caused by a collision of two incompatible modes of handling conflict: that of the wife, who intensely expresses her hurt and anger and that of the husband who withdraws from the confrontation. The technical name for this phenomenon is the *Demand/Withdraw Negative Escalation Cycle*, and I shall discuss in chapter 7 how women can break this cycle by cooling down their emotional communications. But for now, we must concentrate on the reasons why men withdraw.

According to J. M. Gottman and R. W. Levenson’s research, husband withdrawal is caused by a biochemical imbalance that occurs when a man feels threatened. When this occurs, a man’s autonomic nervous system (the ANS) kicks into high gear. His adrenal glands begin pumping adrenalin, his heart races up to 100 beats per minute (bpm), his muscles become tense, and he is often sweating. Those are the physiological manifestations of ANS arousal; they are automatic, and occur without the mediation of thought.

Men are physiologically hyper reactive to stress, a fact

that has been empirically demonstrated in numerous studies. For example, I conducted a laboratory study in which I assessed husbands' and wives' arousal levels, using a device that measures pulse rate and amount of skin moisture before, during and after a conflictual marital discussion. The results of this study demonstrated that males, but not females, experience ANS arousal during emotionally fraught discussions. Another study, by C. W. Liberson and W. T. Liberson, yielded the finding that when faced with the same stressors, men experienced physiological disturbances, whereas women's internal chemistry remained relatively stable. Another study, by L. J. P. Van Doornen, found that on an exam day, male subjects' experienced biochemical imbalances, whereas females experienced no physiological changes. The studies are clear. Men are more prone to experiencing ANS arousal in response to stress in general and, relationship conflict, in particular.

When ANS arousal occurs, it triggers the fight-flight response, a primitive, survival reaction that arises whenever a person feels emotionally or physically endangered. The instinct to flee in the face of danger derives from ancient times when men were hunters and had to fight ferocious beasts. Imagine a primitive man on a mission to slay a dragon or rustle up some steer. He was out there facing countless life threats and his body had to be up to the task. Out jumped a tiger, and his body switched into the fight-flight mode, an instinctive reaction that guaranteed that he would either fight the tiger or flee for his life. This instinct was necessary to keep the hunter alive.

How does the fight-flight mechanism figure into the most common form of relationship conflict: the Demand/Withdraw cycle? When a woman comes at her guy, baring her teeth, berating him with attacks and criticisms, his ANS sees danger. Modern danger is not in the form of ferocious prey; it has evolved into the angry wife or girlfriend. And, modern

man is faced with the same dilemma that his primitive ancestors encountered. Fight the enemy or flee.

Since a man doesn't want to physically assault (fight) with his partner, his body sends out signals that cause him to flee, to withdraw. Withdrawal behaviors are exhibited physically, verbally, and psychically. Examples of physical fleeing include leaving the house or the room and/or avoiding contact with mate; verbal fleeing includes making excuses, justifying or denying responsibility, verbal attacking, and counter blaming; and psychic fleeing, when the mind escapes, includes not listening (functional deafness), appearing stone-faced, becoming silent, or avoiding eye contact. It is important to note that all men who experience relationship distress exhibit withdrawal behaviors in one form or another.

While men are no longer hunters, their biological programming and physiological hyper reactivity to danger is still embedded in their physiology. Not aware that her man's fleeing reactions are the result of this programming, a woman becomes more and more enraged that he doesn't care about her and, unwittingly, sets off more biological fire alarms in her partner. The more he withdraws, the hotter she gets, and, in no time, we have chronic fighting.

To make matters worse, when ANS arousal is in high gear it causes another physiological reaction that further intensifies conflict: a man's cognitive functions diminish, which means that reason and logic cease to exist. This brain shut-off mechanism was adaptive during prehistoric times. When primitive man was on the hunt, face-to-face with a ferocious predator, his mind was unavailable to analyze all the dangers—which was an advantage. “Is this tiger meat worth dying for? What if I fail? If I die, I'll never get laid again...Maybe, after all, I don't need the meat. The Caveman Chronicle just ran an article about the health benefits of a vegetarian diet. I think I'll

try a tofu burger tonight instead.” Before he could finish pondering these thought, he would have been hamburger meat in the beast’s belly. During prehistoric times, cognitive shutdown was vital, not only for male’s survival, but for the survival of the species as well.

Although the brain shutoff mechanism may have been a survival tool during a brief period in history, today that same mechanism may get a man “killed.” When a furious woman comes at her man, the last thing he needs is a brain that’s out to lunch. He needs all his higher order cognitive functions (e.g. reasoning, problem-solving skills) to handle this threat. Unfortunately, the precise tools that he needs to solve the conflict have just clicked-off, and he is completely unavailable for any productive exchange. This explains why there is a great deal of patterning to the fights that occur in chronically conflicted relationships. The fights always play out in the same way, because no creative thinking is available to explore alternate fighting tactics.

Another cause of the chronicity of marital conflicts is that it takes a man a long time-much longer than for a woman-for his internal chemistry to normalize following a stress. In fact, L. J. P. Van Doornen’s research has shown that in relationships in which conflict is frequent, a man’s chemistry never returns to baseline. With each subsequent fight, his arousal mounts higher and higher and his fuse becomes shorter and shorter, placing him at risk of acting out physically before he has a chance to flee. This risk is especially great for impulsive men who are already prone to physical acting out. It should be noted here that domestic violence is not the focus of this book. And if a woman is involved with a man who batters, or if she feels physically endangered, she is advised to seek professional help.

The point to keep in mind is that in all chronically con-

flicted relationships, residual ANS arousal and chronic cognitive shutdown fuel ongoing discord.

George returned home and, without his knowing it, a common fight was brewing.

"Did you buy the milk?" his wife Mary asked.

"No. I forgot," he answered, blank-faced.

"I reminded you to stop on your way home!" Mary sighed.

George stared at Mary, speechless.

"You aren't hearing a word I'm saying!"

"Yes I am!"

"What did I say?"

George stared at her, his jaw clenched.

"I'll refresh your memory. You said you forgot to get the milk!"

"I know!"

"So. What about the six-pack you're carrying?"

"Well...I bought it at the gas station," George said, closing his eyes.

"Since when did they stop selling milk at the gas station?"

"I can't remember everything. You don't care how hard my day was." He turned away.

"What's that got to do with the milk? As always you forgot, because what I want isn't important."

"That's not true, I buy you things," he said, still looking away.

"What?" Mary asked, raising her voice.

"Well, cookies, ice cream, pizza," he shouted.

"And...you eat them yourself. I'm tired of listening to your excuses. Admit it...you forgot the friggin' milk?"

\$19.97

SELF-HELP/RELATIONSHIPS

"[THIS BOOK IS] MANDATORY READING FOR EVERY COUPLE
THAT WANTS TO BUILD LASTING LOVE."

— John Bradshaw

Peace prevails. Love blossoms. Relationships are saved. This is no fairy tale ending. Couples therapist Dr. Jamie Turndorf has seen love and intimate connection replace even the most intense hostility when battling couples follow her twelve-step conflict resolution program.

Dr. Turndorf's groundbreaking, proven plan resolves relationship conflict before tension builds, voices rise, doors slam, and partners bolt. In chapters filled with easy-to-follow advice and helpful anecdotes, she gives couples all the tools they need to calm an emotional exchange before it becomes a fight. Couples will learn how to:

- understand the chemistry of conflict
- identify and avoid Fight Traps (dysfunctional fighting patterns)
- recognize and defuse the three main arguments around sex
- master listening skills that will improve any conversation
- negotiate calmly and effectively about almost any issue

Whether you wish to preserve or reignite the love that brought you and your partner together, *Till Death Do Us Part (Unless I Kill First)* offers the path to peace you've been looking for and provides all the help you need to ensure that your truce lasts a lifetime.

"THIS WELL-RESEARCHED BOOK OFFERS A THOROUGH, STEP-BY-STEP PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES TOOLS FOR COUPLES TO HEAL EVEN THE MOST TROUBLED RELATIONSHIPS."

— John Mack, M.D. Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

Jamie Turndorf, Ph.D. (a.k.a. Dr. Love) is a practicing couples Therapist and the director of the Center for Emotional Communication in upstate New York.



Her website, www.askdrlove.com, receives over a million hits per month and her "Dr. Love" Guides appear in newspapers worldwide.

Photo: Al Nowak/
On Location Studios



Designed by Jennifer James