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## Controversial Rules for Couples

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There are many expert opinions on what steps a couple can take to improve their relationship. Many ideas are helpful and practical, but a few make me wonder what pipe a particular "expert" was smoking. One rule that has been around for decades is "Never go to bed angry with your spouse." This sounds like a great idea . . . just one that is practically impossible unless you don't need much sleep or you like pulling all-nighters from time to time. The reality is that we can't always choose the time when issues arise in our relationships, and sometimes we are still upset with our partner when we're tired and ready to go to sleep. The last thing we need is to feel guilty because we're not supposed to go to bed angry! Not only that, but how effective are we able to be when we're physically tired and perhaps emotionally exhausted? I suggest that couples acknowledge that emotions are at a high level and that the discussion will need to be continued. Then agree on a specific time to revisit the issue the next day. Yes, you may lose some sleep because you are agitated, angry, or hurt, but hopefully the knowledge that you will resume problem-solving the next day may help get you through the night. If you don't have time with each other the next day, it is still important to specify the next time you can both address the problem. And in the meantime, you can write down your thoughts to share when you are able to get together. Couples say that it helps them get more perspective when they take time to cool down.

Another rule I often question is how couples are supposed to disagree with each other. According to some professionals, we are supposed to keep our voice intensity and tone modulated, listen respectfully to our partner's perspective, and basically behave in a controlled, reasoned, and polite manner. Some experts even suggest that highly compatible couples do not engage in arguments with each other - they merely have discussions. I have worked with couples who are puzzled that their relationship is in trouble since they never argue with each other. Sometimes one or both partners are conflict-avoidant; they suppress their negative feelings either to keep the peace or because it is difficult and frustrating for them to communicate effectively. This is not a recommended approach since a pattern of holding back strong feelings over time can result in pent-up resentment and alienation. Perhaps there are a few perfect couples reading this, but for the rest of us I think it is better to be realistic. First we need to expect that we will be highly upset with each other at times, maybe even irrationally angry. Then, we need to decide how we are going to deal with our own emotions and those of our partner. Yes, we can attempt to apply the rules of fair-fighting and remain as calm and reasonable as possible. And we certainly need to avoid words that "hit below the belt" and being physically or emotionally abusive. But we are most likely going to have strong reactions from time to time, and this is not only okay - it is healthy. There are strategies for de-escalating anger in arguments, such as time-outs, agreeing to disagree, or trying to understand the issues and emotions underlying the issue so that the discussion can be more rational. We need to be prepared for times when intense negative emotions arise in our relationship and not be caught off-guard. But often such intense sharing of feelings brings us closer to each other and provides us with more information for building a better relationship.

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