

# AND ANOTHER THING ...

## Rules of Engagement: Navigating Relationships

*Morristown psychologist on how to communicate effectively with your partner.*

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Psychologist Dr. Nicole Rafanello.  
Photo courtesy of Dr. Nicole Rafanello

Relationships are at the center of most things we do in life. People skills and the ability to successfully manage relationships are at the heart of mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Most relationships involve a combination of understanding what the other person wants and knowing what you want. We must also maintain our self-respect and that of the other person in the context of the relationship.

When these things are not in balance, people become unhappy, conflict ensues, and sometimes relationships end badly. How do we navigate such complicated situations and resolve conflict without avoidance, feeling used, or losing the relationship?

Below are some “rules of engagement” to assist you in trying to find that balance between getting your own and the other person’s needs met, without feeling that anyone’s self-respect has been lost or values undermined.

### **You have a right to be in a wise state of mind when discussing important issues:**

This means you have to be calm and collected when discussing important issues or trying to resolve conflict. If you are too upset to be calm and skillful, don’t address the issue yet. Wait and revisit it at a better time. If you don’t, you may end up giving in too much or being too aggressive and ultimately lose the relationship.

### **You have a right to feel safe and be free to express your opinions:**

You have a right to say what you think to the other person and be heard. This, of course, is tempered by the nature of the relationship. For example, if you are caught speeding and are pulled over by a Police Officer, you should take into consideration that the other individual has a greater amount of power in the relationship and is not obligated to listen to your excuses.

Alternatively, if you are a parent, while you should listen, you ultimately hold the power in the situation. In equal relationships, you both should have equal control and freedom to express your opinions. Never throw your values out the window because you fear the other individual will “abandon” you or end

the relationship if you don’t give them what they want. That’s relationship blackmail.

### **You have a right to give and receive respect:**

Without respect for each other, people skills will not work. This means that if your respect is violated you may need to consider whether the relationship is toxic and if so, end it. These skills do not work in toxic relationships. Alternatively, you may suggest that one or both of you are not in a wise state of mind and take a break from discussing the issue until you are. You must however commit to revisiting it at some point in the future.

### **You have a right to be fair to yourself and others:**

You shouldn’t disregard your needs and wants, or those of others. Both should be considered simultaneously. Often we dig our heels in and this creates a win-lose situation as opposed to a win-win situation for the parties involved. It is important that both parties walk away from the negotiation feeling satisfied. Usually this occurs when both have compromised and gained something. In order to do this it is important to validate your side of things as well as those of others.

### **Stick to the topic, don’t confuse issues and pick your battles:**

Too often when trying to resolve issues, we bring up things that are irrelevant or we try to attack the other person. This clouds the issue and makes possible solutions more evasive. In order to resolve conflict effectively, stick to the topic. Don’t bring the “kitchen sink” into discussions, and don’t allow yourself to be sidetracked because of attacks or threats. In this regard, be a “broken record.” If people try to attack you or change the subject, redirect them back to the issues at hand.

### **Notice the good and the bad without delusion or judgment. Don’t throw out either because you are obsessed with one:**

Everyone is a “mixed bag;” no one has all good or all bad qualities. Accept both as reality and work with them. Do not delude yourself into believing that you or anyone else is all right or all wrong. Most situations or positions are some combination of both. Don’t sacrifice your standards because you seem to be smitten with how good or how bad someone is.

Remember everything and everyone is a shade of grey.

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