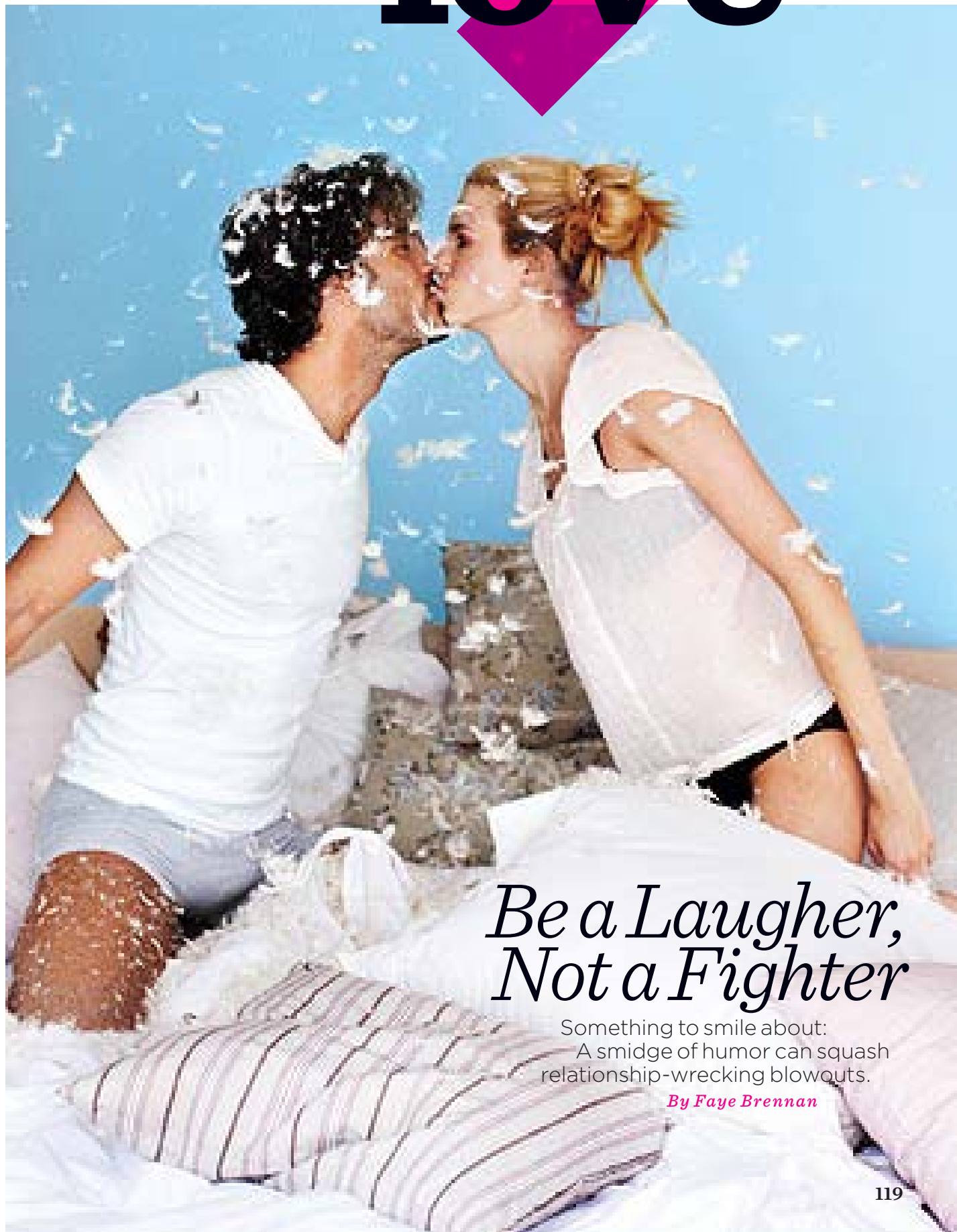


# love + life



## *Be a Laugher, Not a Fighter*

Something to smile about:  
A smidge of humor can squash  
relationship-wrecking blowouts.

*By Faye Brennan*

Ain't love grand? Sure it is...until your Sig-O annoys the hell out of you by leaving a wet towel on the floor—all day. A survey found that 45 percent of pairs who say they're discontented bicker often or all the time, compared with only 11 percent of couples who say they're extremely happy. "We're sussing out what it is that we want from our partners and for our life," says Kavita J. Patel, a relationship coach in New York City. But that doesn't mean our relationships have to be heavy.

There's a savvy strategy for quelling minor disagreements and, maybe more important, keeping them from turning into full-blown ragers. Getting a little playful with your guy—being goofy, using games to make decisions—can actually defuse adult arguments before they can fester (something happy couples know never to do). And though you may not feel like kidding around when you're fuming, adopting these techniques could save your partnership from imploding. Worth a try?

## 1 / Game your disagreements.

Yeah, neither of you wants to clean up the dog's little present on the living-room carpet, but what's even more pathetic than letting it stew is fighting over who should deal with it.

Instead, let chance decide by playing a round of old-fashioned "rock, paper, scissors" or, if you're more tech-centric, Angry Birds. "It's competition, but it's fun competition," says Rachel Sussman, a licensed marriage therapist in New York and author of *The Breakup Bible*, who regularly plays "thumb war" to divvy up tasks with her husband. "All of a sudden, the situation becomes playful and you remember there's no reason to be angry."

Plus, once a winner is established, there's nothing left to do but let it go (and, for one of you, to scoop the poop).

## 2 / Have a silly code word.

Not to add yet another password onto your pile, but did you know that using one can lighten the mood when arguments get too intense?

"When you're focused on a problem, it's as if your brain has been hijacked—it's not just about the issue at hand. Suddenly everything seems more serious," says Amy Johnson, Ph.D., a Detroit psychologist and the author of *Modern Enlightenment: Psychological, Spiritual, and Practical Ideas for a Better Life*. "Using a code word can break up the tension, raise the low mood, and remind you that you've had some really great times together."

For the latter, use a funny memory or inside joke as inspiration for your word (remember when you were talking in your sleep about chickens?). Then agree that

either of you can say it to cool off a heated conversation. "It may not instantly put you in a great mood," says Johnson, but it does bring your emotions back to neutral.

## 3 / Take phone cues from teen girls.

Texting "I don't care" when he asks what you want for dinner can come off much harsher than you intended—and ignite a fight. To avoid this, go emoji-character crazy: Insert hearts, smiley faces, beer mugs, or palm trees into your texts to comically infuse some positivity into your messages. (Who can overanalyze a blunt reply when it's followed by a tiny pizza icon?)

If that fails to chill things out, or if your guy isn't an emoji fan, start dialing. "Just hearing the tone and expression in your partner's voice can help," says Patel. You could also set up each other's phones to display a cute photo of you two whenever the other person calls, like the time you dressed up as Ketchup and Mustard for Halloween.

Wendy Williams, host of *The Wendy Williams Show* and author of the new book *Ask Wendy*, suggests putting a happy photo of the two of you (think smiling wide with your cheeks smushed together) on your cell. "When you're in the middle of arguing and the phone rings from him and you see the picture, you're reminded of what brought you together in the first place," says Williams.

## 4 / Talk funny.

A tame exchange can morph into a battle if accusatory statements are being thrown around ("You never make the bed; I always have to do it!"), but how can you possibly get mad at someone who's

complaining about an unmade bed while speaking like *South Park's* Cartman? Talking in the third person about the subject at hand—in a funny voice, no less—can help you humorously steer clear of personal attacks, says Johnson. She uses this same technique during sessions with her clients (she does spot-on Yoda and Mickey Mouse impressions).

"The more you can distance yourself, the more you can see that this isn't necessarily a problem with your partner or the relationship as a whole—it's simply two people who love each other seeing a relatively minor detail in different ways," says Johnson. Of course, you'll feel ridiculous standing in your bedroom talking like a cartoon character, but then again, ruining your partner's day over some crumpled sheets is just as absurd.

## 5 / Pipe down.

Shrill scolding will get you nowhere: A new study from the *Journal of Family Psychology* found that a higher vocal pitch during a romantic conflict is associated with an increase in heart rate, cortisol (a stress hormone), and negative verbal and nonverbal cues. Instead, try whispering, says Laurie Puhn, a Harvard lawyer, couples mediator, and the author of *Fight Less, Love More: 5-Minute Conversations to Change Your Relationship Without Blowing Up or Giving In*.

That's right—that skill you perfected in middle school when gossiping about cute boys in class can work wonders at easing tension in your adult relationship. "Whispering means you aren't trying to beat your partner over the head with your perspective—it forces both of you to pay close attention and think about the words being spoken," says Puhn. ■



## WE NEVER ARGUE!

**If you and your man rarely fight, there must be something wrong...right?**

**NOPE**, says Michelle Callahan, Ph.D., author of *Ms. Typed: Stop Sabotaging Your Relationships and Find Dating Success*. "People who think a lot of fighting is normal in relationships usually think so because it's normal in *theirs*, so they assume something is off if a twosome is harmonious," she says.

"Not fighting is a cause for concern if one of you isn't honestly expressing your feelings, but it may be that you're simply able to resolve disagreements without anger," says Callahan. "It could be because you have very compatible personalities, solid conflict-resolution strategies, or similar goals. Enjoy the unique peace in your relationship—and the lack of unnecessary, energy-draining stress that can come with quarreling."