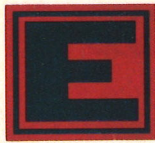


by
Melinda
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YOU can argue and every time—if you use anger positively and appropriately to his.



EVEN IN THE BEST OF RELATIONSHIPS, COUPLES get angry with each other. A typical scenario may go like this: He comes home an hour late, tense and preoccupied, muttering excuses about the boss keeping him. She's furious because he never even called. But in this best of all relationships, our model couple would fight more or less like this: Rather than blast him when he walks in the door, she would wait until she cools down and he has had a chance to unwind, explaining, "I'm too angry right now, but I'd like to talk about it at around nine if that's good for you." (If it's not, he suggests an alternate time.)

During their talk, she doesn't blame him or "kitchen sink"—bring up a barrage of past injustices. Instead, she uses "I" statements, stressing how *she* feels. "When you came home for dinner later than you had said you would, I felt dismissed and neglected."

He listens intently—without editorializing, disagreeing, or interrupting. When she's finished, he "mirrors," or paraphrases, what he heard her say: "So, you felt as if I didn't care about you when I came home late." Hearing that she's hurt, he apologizes and promises that the next time he's unavoidably detained, he'll call at least a half hour before he is due home. They hug each other and marvel at how well they've learned to navigate the rough spots in their relationship.

Sounds great, right? So, you might ask yourself, why is it that whenever I argue with my partner, we scream, we hurl verbal abuse, maybe even objects, or we wound each other with deafening silence? Our smoldering resentments always seem to burst into flames, and one of us invariably says or does something terribly hurtful to the other. Why can't we fight the good fight?

The simple answer is that most of us haven't learned how to manage our anger. In a relationship that is strong and loving, the couple are able to control their anger—to express it and receive it—in constructive ways. At least most of the time. If this seems like an impossibility to you right now, take heart. Thanks to the work of gifted researchers, therapists, and conflict-resolution trainers throughout the country, it is now possible to learn the techniques for fighting the good fight.

Lauren and Dee Reed are an inspiring case. Psychologist Howard Markman, Ph.D., director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies (C.M.F.S.) at the University of Denver,

notes that when he first met the Reeds, their marriage exhibited all the warning signals that foreshadow divorce: Lauren (the husband) avoided or withdrew from discussions; routine talks turned into arguments; and both partners twisted, disregarded, or invalidated what the other said.

"We were living in an armed camp," recalls Dee, 29, a sales consultant and the mother of four young children. "We were surrounded by invisible barbed wire, and we had these little hand grenades that we threw at each other in the form of words."

Lauren, 33, a baker, agrees with his wife's picture of their relationship: "It was terrible. Every time we had a discussion, I'd get up and go into another room or just clam up. Everything I did or said was wrong. We'd start talking about the housework—something stupid, like 'I asked you to take out the garbage and you didn't.' When I'd try to defend myself, she'd just hit me with something else." Their confrontations became so frequent and intense that they began to talk about divorce.

After a series of especially virulent fights—including one in which Dee slapped Lauren—the Reeds responded to a newspaper ad placed by the C.M.F.S. for a "research couple." Under the bright lights and scrutiny of a video camera, Lauren and Dee were asked to talk about a problem in their marriage. Despite their initial self-consciousness, within minutes they were hurling their "little hand grenades" at each other.

Fortunately, Markman directed them to the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), developed at the University of Denver. The course taught the couple to contain and express their anger without blaming and to listen to each other without feeling defensive. Given some guidance from the experts and a willingness to look at your own behavior, so can you. What follows is a compendium of advice to harness your anger—and his—and to transform destructive confrontations into manageable conflicts.

Controlling Your Anger

While many people fear and repress their anger, letting it all hang out can be equally damaging, maintains Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph.D., author of *The Dance of Anger* and *The Dance of Deception*. "Women who vent anger ineffectively suffer as deeply as 'nice ladies' who constantly accommodate their partners." Moreover, anger doesn't simply explode—it builds. How do you lower the burner before you reach the boiling point? ▶

BRIAN HAGIWARA

be a "winner"
your
respond
That's



Fighting Fair

Children cry for attention; adults blame.

1 Get to know what your early warning signals *feel* like: a knot in the stomach, sweating, flushing, a pounding heart. Take your attention off your partner and focus on breathing deeply.

2 Recognize your anger "buttons" or "hot spots": words (for Dee, it was being called a "bitch"); topics (money, sex, and in-laws are common); behavior (he reads the paper while you're talking to him).

3 Think about what you want to accomplish. For example, if you're angry with your partner because you feel he doesn't show enough affection for you, directing your anger at him will not change his behavior in the way you want. Anger is useful as a sign you're not getting what you want, not as a means for getting it. "In relationships, we need to train ourselves to behave consistently with our goals, not our feelings," says Michelle Weiner-Davis, author of *Divorce Busting: A Step-By-Step Approach to Making Your Marriage Loving Again*.

4 Give yourself time to cool off. Lerner stresses that this is not the same as "cutting off" (for example, stalking out of the room), nor does it mean you are agreeing with his point of view. Instead, you remain emotionally connected to your partner while temporarily setting aside the issue you have been fighting about.

5 Speak briefly and directly about your own feelings, rather than accusing your partner. Use "I" statements to express your needs and emotions. For example, instead of blurting out, "Your brother's a jerk and I don't want him in this house on Thanksgiving," as she had done in the past, Dee told Lauren, "I don't want your brother here because he drinks too much, and I'm uncomfortable with him around the children," which didn't put Lauren on the defensive.

Containing His Anger

But what if your partner is screaming at you, and you feel trapped in the grip of *his* rage? You may even feel the urge to shout back, to hurt, even hit him. Underneath, you're confused and frightened. Still, it's often possible to contain his anger—depending on what you do next.

1 Change "the dance"—the habitual, reflexive ways you normally respond. In the heat of a fight, most of us react with a defense ("I never said I would pick up the laundry"); or a counterattack ("If you weren't so inconsiderate, I wouldn't be so upset!"). "Nothing is going to happen until one person can use a little humor and creativity to calm things down," says Lerner.

2 Call a cease-fire. For some couples, this can be as simple as making a statement such as, "Here we go again. Do we really want to do this?" or "Look, I really don't think we're going to settle this by screaming. Let's put some space between us for a little while." Other couples have to physically separate. Either way, agree to reopen the discussion when you both are less volatile—ideally, within the next 24 hours.

3 Identify your partner's hot spots—and don't push his buttons. "You can learn how to control your own buttons. But they're less important in fighting than not pushing the other person's," claims Markman. "People's hot spots vary, but we all know how to find them—by bringing up an affair that happened ten years ago or making statements such as, 'You're just like your mother!'"

4 Listen and really *hear* him, instead of trying to argue him out of his feelings or plotting a counterattack. Then, restate what he says. "Paraphrasing takes him off the defensive," explains Dee, who learned the method at PREP. Similar communication techniques—also called "active" or "empathic" listening, "mirroring," or "sharing meaning"—are suggested by many of the experts.

5 Apologize if he's angry at something you did or said. You may instinctively want to defend yourself, but remember that few arguments are totally one-sided. An apology signals that you care about how he feels. Once he feels heard, the intensity of his anger may drop.

Anger and Pain

Anger is often mediated by what Lori Gordon, founder of the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) program, calls "emotional allergies." Like physical allergies, which may develop from overexposure and sensitivity, explains Gordon, "emotional allergies develop when something in your life has been very hurtful. Even a hint of that something can set off an intense reaction."

A common sign of an underlying emotional allergy is that you repeatedly get angry about the same thing. Harville Hendrix, director of the Institute of Relationship Therapy in New York City and author of *Keeping the Love You Find: A Guide for Singles*, believes that repetitious, intense anger always boils down to emotional injuries sustained during childhood.

If, for example, you are frequently angry at your partner for not being affectionate enough, Hendrix theorizes it is because your parents didn't caress and cuddle you enough. So, when your mate doesn't hug you, it evokes the fear of not being loved that you experienced as a child. Your mate becomes confused with the withholding parent.

Emotional wounds sustained in the past may also cause a person to stoop to what psychiatrist Donald Nathanson, M.D., calls "the attack mode." "The choice of weapons and the degree of meanness involved are a measure of the perpetrator's preexisting pain," writes Nathanson in *Shame and Pride*. Shaming, taunting, belittling, or making insulting comments are all different forms of "attack-other" behavior.

Other common signs of attack-other behavior are:

You criticize. Children cry for attention; adults blame, even inflict pain, in an effort to get partners to meet their needs. "Criticism is the grown-up form of the childhood cry," claims Hendrix.

You try to punish your mate by saying or doing things you know will hurt him. Such strong negativity may be founded on previous infractions or long-held resentments in the current relationship—but, more likely, you're uncon-