

elevate your RELATIONSHIP

Dealing with Anger

Anger is a natural emotion, a very human response to perceived threats to your safety, well-being, or happiness. Everyone expresses anger—some people more intensely and frequently than others. One of the most important skills partners must develop in a marriage is how to deal effectively with anger. Though anger is one of the most common emotions known to the human race, few people are skilled at reacting to this feeling effectively. Many of us rely on a few specific responses that we learned as children and continue to use as adults. These responses can turn into constructive or destructive behavior. It's not whether we get angry, but what we do with our anger that matters.

Any time two people live together, there are bound to be episodes of anger. In fact, those who study anger report that more angry feelings develop in marital relationships than in any other type of relationship. How often anger occurs and how it is expressed varies from couple to couple. Managing anger well can mean the difference between joy and misery in the relationship. The success or failure of a relationship or marriage depends more on the way a couple manages their angry feelings, than on whether they have angry feelings.

Certain myths about anger lead couples to cover up their anger in different ways. D. L. Carlson, author of *Overcoming Hurts and Anger* (2000, Harvest House Publishers), shares five commonly held misconceptions about anger:

- If you don't look angry, you're not angry.
- If you ignore hurt and anger, they will go away.
- If you vent feelings of anger, they will go away.
- Playing the martyr (being nice all the time) and not expressing anger will not damage you.
- Your relationships will suffer if you express any anger or hurt.

If couples have any of these misconceptions, they may cover up their anger in some of the following ways:

- Denial (ignoring the evidence).
- Peace at any price (giving in rather than engaging conflict, withdrawal).
- Grievance collecting (keeping track of everything that has happened).
- Passive/aggressive behavior (pouting, sarcasm, stubbornness, procrastination, generating guilt).
- Bigotry (hating another group of people).
- All is well attitude (overly sweet and nice about what is happening).

When people cover up their anger, it goes unresolved, causing even more problems in a relationship. As well, yelling only serves to increase distance and creates a hostile environment. Establish a firm no-yelling policy. Couples in healthy relationships make efforts to notice angry feelings coming on and then calmly, with love and patience, express those feelings in much of the same tone as they would describe any other common occurrence, such as, "it's raining." They agree never to attack in anger even though they share angry feelings or have been pushed beyond an acceptable level of tolerance.

David and Vera Mace, pioneers in the Marriage Enrichment movement developed an acronym ("A.R.E.A.") to help couples remember a better way of resolving anger:

- A** is for admitting your anger to your spouse.
- R** is the desire to restrain your anger and not let it get out of hand by blaming or belittling.
- E** stands for explaining in a very calm manner why you are angry.
- A** stands for action planning or doing something about the cause of the anger.

Using this calm approach to identify the cause of the anger and what can be done about it, couples usually find that the anger was based on a misunderstanding or misinterpreted words or deeds. Couples who effectively manage their anger agree that it is necessary to express and acknowledge it.

Activity

Think about the last time you were angry with your spouse. Evaluate how you managed the anger you felt. Did you follow A.R.E.A.? Next time you have a disagreement and become angry, what could you do differently to help (not hurt) your relationship? Negotiate with your spouse some rules for how you both want to express anger in a calm and safe way. Here are a few rules to get you started:

- Always tell your spouse when you're angry.
- Taking a few minutes to cool down if the fight gets too heated.
- Never yell or use name-calling during a fight.
- Always try to use "I" messages.
- Never leave the anger unresolved for more than a day, at most.

For more resources, visit healthyrelationships.uga.edu and ElevateCouplesGeorgia.com.

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