



## Families the strongest link

# Dealing with Anger in a Marriage

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Anger is a feeling, a natural emotion, a human response to your safety, well-being, and happiness. Everyone experiences anger—some people more intensely and frequently than others. Though anger is one of the most common emotions known to the human race, few people are skilled at reacting to this feeling with complete effectiveness. 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. Recognizing what makes us angry can help us find better ways to cope with this emotion. It's not whether we get angry, but what we do with our anger that matters.

Those who have studied anger indicate that more anger is developed in marriage relationships than in any other relationship. Unresolved anger is the principal cause of violence toward another person. Successful anger management can mean the difference between marital joy or absolute misery. The success or failure of a marriage may depend on the way a couple copes with their anger.

## Misconceptions of Anger

Many of us hold misconceptions of anger and these misconceptions can lead people to cover up their anger in different ways. According to D. L. Carlson, five misconceptions are:

- 1) If you don't look angry on the outside, you don't have a problem with anger.
- 2) If you ignore hurt and anger, they will go away.
- 3) Venting feelings and anger will make them go away.

- 4) Playing the martyr (being nice all the time) and not expressing anger will not damage you.
- 5) Your relationships will suffer if you express any anger or hurt.

## How People Cover Up Anger

If marriage partners have any of these misconceptions, they may cover up their anger in one or more of the following ways:

- denial (ignoring the evidence)
- peace at any price (i.e., 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)

## Anger Can Be Healthy in a Relationship

David and Vera Mace, pioneers in the Marriage Enrichment movement, indicate that anger is healthy and normal and is present at different times in all marital relationships. Couples should give each other the right to be angry. The Maces have outlined a way of coping with feelings of anger that surface in almost every marriage.

When a spouse notices angry feelings coming on, those angry feelings should be expressed in words, but said calmly and with love. These feelings should be expressed in much the same tone as they would say, "I'm tired," or "I'm very tired." Couples who effectively manage their anger agree that it is necessary to express and acknowledge it. They agree never to attack in anger even though they share angry feelings. They should agree with each other that they won't yell at one another unless there is extreme danger. If a firm, non-yelling policy is developed, it will remove the need for a spouse to feel defensive or to develop any type of retaliatory anger. If both partners can express their anger calmly, they will be better able to find out how and why the anger is present in the marriage.

## Resolving Anger

The Maces developed an acronym (AREA) 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

If anger is handled in this way, using a 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 may also find out that one partner was pushed beyond a level of tolerance. All these things can be resolved if approached calmly.

## References

- Fetsch, Robert J. "Managing Anger Effectively," *Family and Youth Research Focus* (1991, March-April).
- Jenson, Glen O. *Anger in a Marriage*. Utah State University, December, 1996.