



ANGER!!!!

Anger is a major problem for many couples. Arguments that quickly turn to anger are often a lost cause: the anger makes us unable to negotiate, work out a better understanding, or negotiate a reasonable compromise.

And yet many couples find themselves caught up in a pattern of angry reactions and responses. For once an angry response comes out, the other becomes defensive and reacts by either fighting back, flight (literally leaves), or with freeze (shut down). Fight/flight/freeze are the three standard responses to a very intense situation.

Physically, with anger the body gets flooded with adrenaline, blood pressure shoots up, and heart rate increases, among other responses. How then, can either person work through a situation in such a state? *You can't*. Its best to take a "time out" and split off for a while till the physiological effects simmer down. Doing this takes a clear decision and willingness to walk away- just when you are amped up for a fight. But for the sake of your relationship, you must swallow your pride and walk away. The issue can wait.

What is all this ANGER about anyway?

Anger is considered a *secondary* emotion. That is to say, its not what we initially feel, but a reaction or defense against the *primary* emotion. Sound hard to believe? Seems like anger is automatic and instantaneous, but when people look back at what happened and analyze their feelings just before getting anger, they often find other feelings. These *primary* feelings are often painful and have us in a vulnerable state.

Lets consider the situation of a young child. The child is playing with a ball, happy and involved. Suddenly another child comes over, and grabs the ball away. The first child is stunned and starts to cry! Perhaps he/she feels shocked by such a sudden turn of events, sad over the loss of fun happiness, hurt and victimized by the other child. What they don't necessarily feel at this moment is anger. At a young enough age, crying and primary feelings may be the only feeling displayed.

As the child grows, crying in response to the mean actions of other children may result in taunts, finger-pointing and laughing, and sooner or later the child learns to get angry instead of just responding with hurt or sadness. Maybe the response includes hitting or pushing. After all, anger feels powerful and may scare off the offending children. Soon the others don't mess with them anymore. Also, anger quickly covers the painful feelings of being a victim, hurt, sadness from loss, and other such primary feeling.



As we grow, the transition to anger can become very quick indeed! One hardly notices the more vulnerable feelings that came first.

If you carefully deconstruct a recent comment or action from your significant other that brought on a fight, you will probably remember the primary feelings that preceded getting angry.

Here is an example:

He: I didn't like the way you talked to my friends at the party.

Her: (anger and defensiveness, etc.)

Once anger is engaged, he becomes caught up in his typical fight/flight/freeze reactions too. *And the typical, non-productive dance starts once again!*

After careful reflection, she recalls her feeling response to his original statement was: *shamed; guilty; criticized or hurt feelings; her bond with him broken in favor of his friends and so feels betrayed or abandoned* by him— just to name some possible feeling responses. However, once anger was engaged, she has blocked out the primary or original feelings which made her feel so vulnerable, weak, uncertain, adrift.

The goal here is to reconnect with the awareness and experience of the primary feelings. As painful as they may be, they give us the possibility to express ourselves in a way that will bring empathy* from the other, and a productive conversation vs just another argument.

*See: "You Statement vs I statements", "I Statement Breakdown", and "Making a Great Apology" for a breakdown of a more productive ways to communicate with your mate.

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