



## COUPLE TALK

### Communicating with Your Partner

#### Dealing with Anger in Marriage

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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 spouses must develop is how to deal effectively with anger. Though anger is one of the most common emotions known to the human race, few people manage it 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.

When two people live together, there are bound to be episodes of anger. In fact, those who study anger indicate that more angry feelings develop in marital relationships than in any other type of relationship. The frequency and potency of these angry episodes varies from couple to couple. Successful anger management can mean the difference between marital joy and misery. The success or failure of a marriage depends more on the way a couple copes with and manages their angry feelings, than on the mere fact that they have angry feelings.

Many couples hold misconceptions of anger, which in turn lead each partner to cover up their anger in different ways. D. L. Carlson, a noted psychiatrist, discusses five commonly held misconceptions about anger in his book *Overcoming Hurts and Anger* (2000, Harvest House Publishers):

- 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 marriage partners 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 marriage relationship. To avoid perpetuating this situation, both spouses can 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. Because yelling only serves to increase distance, creates an adversarial environment, and frequently leads to retaliatory anger, couples can greatly benefit from a firm non-yelling policy. If both partners can express their anger calmly, they will be able to find out how and why the anger is present in the marriage and work to find ways to resolve it.

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 who effectively manage their anger agree that it is necessary to express and acknowledge it.

#### ADDED NOTE

David and Vera Mace, pioneers in the Marriage Enrichment movement 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