

02 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
Connect Better Emotionally

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Welcome to program 2 in the series:

7 anger fighter skills for couples - a practical skill-building program to keep anger from jeopardizing your marriage or relationship.

Written by Dr. Tony Fiore, psychologist, marriage therapist and anger management expert. This audio series was developed by Dr Fiore to serve as a resource for partners struggling with anger issues. It can be used as a supplement for people in anger management programs or couples therapy, or as a stand-alone self-help resource for couples not currently in therapy.

Anger Fighter Skill #2 Connect Better Emotionally

*It is a skill that is a solution to anger expressed as **emotional avoidance**.*



DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE

Emotional Avoidance is a passive way of dealing with anger and other emotions. It means simply to shut down emotionally and not deal with the problem at hand. Avoiders often deny feelings at all, deny that something is bothering them or won't admit to vulnerability. They put up a barrier that says "stay away—I don't want to deal with it, or, "I don't need your help in dealing with it... I'll do it myself in my own way in my own time.

EXAMPLE

Wife complaining about husband in marriage therapy:

Erika: "Sven: We sit in our house here in Northern Minnesota day after day and you rarely talk to me. You never tell me anymore that you love me." I feel angry and frustrated—almost that you don't even like me anymore."

Sven: "Erika: I told you on the day we married 30 years ago that I loved you. If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

This dialog actually occurred in a marriage session many years ago with Dr Fiore who started his practice in the cold climes of Northern Minnesota where partners had to spend day after day with each other in a small house in the off-farming season.

Two types of Emotional Avoiders

Type 1 - The Emotionally Unavailable Partner: Some people, like Sven, just don't relate to the world in terms of emotions or emotional needs. It's not that they don't care about you or the relationship, it's just that emotions just aren't on their radar. They have very low need for nurturance from others or to need to nurture others. They don't turn to others to solve their problems, instead preferring to handle things themselves. They are islands emotionally because they are pretty much self-sustaining. They are not particularly angry; often they don't have a clue as to why their partner is so upset with them.

Type 2 - The Stonewaller: This type of emotional avoider is reacting to what they perceive as an angry partner. They too are angry but they handle it by emotionally shutting down and walling off which further infuriates the other. They shut down to avoid further trouble with their spouse. But ironically, they get into more emotional trouble by withdrawing, physically escaping or staying silent. This is because partners of Stonewaller feel invalidated, not understood, and emotionally frustrated. The partner of a stonewaller will often demand a response, sometimes following the Stonewaller from room to room or not letting him/her leave until things are resolved.

Why is emotional avoidance of either type harmful to the relationship?

- Because it creates distance in the relationship due to lack of emotional closeness.
- Feelings of love and passion for each other gradually decrease if the emotional needs of either or both partners are not met.
- Many problems that could have been solved early in the relationship are now "perpetual" because of inability to successfully resolve conflicts with each other.

Type 1 - The Emotionally Unavailable Partner

CASE EXAMPLE OF TYPE 1- THE EMOTIONALLY UNAVAILABLE PARTNER

Jim and Mary have been married for 12 years. Mary is very emotional, wears her feelings on her sleeve, as they say, and easily connects with people. Jim, on the other hand, is an engineer who rarely shares anything with anybody. It is difficult to really get to know Jim, but he is otherwise a devoted husband, a great father, and a model community member. Jim comes home from work and;

Mary asks: "So, tell me about your day."

Jim Replies distantly: "I got up. I went to work. I worked. I came home."

Mary interprets this that he is upset with her or that she has done something wrong. So, she says: "why don't you ever tell me how you feel?"

Jim replies: "I don't feel anything right now. I just want to unwind from work. Is there any mail?"

Mary wants to share with Jim how frustrated she felt today with the children, how she feels inadequate as a mother sometimes, how worried she is about the health of her aging parents, and is that a gray hair coming in?

From her husband, she gets nothing. He often goes long periods of time without talking to her at all. Sometimes that is because he truly has nothing to say. Other times, however, it is because he IS angry at her but handles it by avoidance and putting up moles around himself to stay safe, hoping things will settle down by themselves.

Typically the avoider is the husband with a wife who needs more communication to feel emotionally connected to him. He is wired differently; he doesn't need to talk about feelings that much to feel close to her.



This, of course, leaves the partner feeling left-out and frustrated. Women often describe such men as "emotionally unavailable." They feel a lack of connection at a time when it is important to feel that they are together on an issue.

Why are some people like this? Some research shows that sometimes it originates from the attachment style they had with their primary caretakers as children. That is, avoiders became that way because they learned at a young age to rely on themselves to solve problems, to go within, without needing much input from loved ones. They are "hard-wired" in their brain to be that way. Perhaps they couldn't depend on their parents to be there for them so they simply learned to be extremely self-sufficient.

How can you change if you are the emotionally avoidant spouse?

Well, you may not be able to change your basic character or personality, but you can improve your communication skills by doing the following things:

1. Try to be more communicative and realize that communicating with your partner is not just about providing information, but about emotionally connecting with each other.
2. Work harder at finding common things to talk about with your partner. Try to talk more about feelings, emotions and reactions than just facts.
3. Realize that it may be important for your partner to feel that you are a team. Work hard at increasing emotional connection by sharing and talking.
4. Devote at least 10 minutes a day to sitting down and do nothing but talk to each other.

How can partners react differently to an emotionally unavailable spouse?

Remember that your reaction has an influence as to the amount of anger in the home. So, to start, try not to take it personally if your partner is sometimes emotionally unavailable to you. It may have nothing to do with you. He probably was that way (or had tendencies along that line) long before you came into his life.

1. Within limits, try to accept that you have different needs than he does and explore ways to get those needs met outside the marriage (e.g. share with a trusted woman friend) rather than suffering from constant anger, frustration or resentment.
2. Try to find a new common interest or activity that you both participate in. This will give you something to share and talk about.



Type 2 - The Stonewaller

Stonewalling is another matter and is a much more serious issue. Emotionally shutting down can bring down a marriage or relationship, if not corrected. It can lead to miles of emotional distance and days of silent treatment of not talking to each other after drawn-out, hateful fights and verbal conflicts. Unfortunately, these fights often involving mean-spirited name-calling, insults, and empty threats.

Anger fighting skills needed to deal with stonewalling:

1. What the couple should do as a couple:
 - Agree ahead of time and practice a ritual called "Retreat and Think Things Over." This means to have a plan to get away from each other for about 20 minutes when things start to escalate into the yelling-withdrawal cycle. This will allow time for things to cool down before trying again to deal with the issue at hand.
 - Keep your commitment to indeed deal with the issue at a later time when things are calmer.
 - During the cooling down period, consider meditating about the problem to get perceptive. An excellent app to do that can be downloaded free at [headspace.com](https://www.headspace.com)
2. What you should do if you tend to stonewall:
 - Increase your "emotional intelligence" by learning to better understand the emotional components underlying the surface issue you are both arguing about.
 - Realize that stonewalling often only escalates things instead of creating "peace through avoidance," as the Stonewaller often wants. Practice Assertive Communication to convey your needs and frustrations and also stand up to stand up for yourself if you feel violated or unheard.
3. What you should do if you are the partner of the Stonewaller:
 - Give your partner more time and space to sort out his/her feelings over the issue that is upsetting you. Some people can't access their feelings under pressure. Feeling attacked make them want to withdraw even more to protect themselves. Partners will "open up" more if they feel emotionally safe with you.
 - During your retreat time from each other, do things to emotionally regulate yourself so you can better deal with the issue when it is time to do so. Present your issue with a "softer startup" when they return.

This was the second program in a series of 7 Anger Fighter Audio Programs for Couples available at fiorecouplescounseling.com/angerfighters.