

07 Anger Fighter Skills Builder  
**How to Stop Couple Anger  
in its Tracks**

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“Anyone can be angry, that is easy.  
But to be angry with the right  
person, to the right degree,  
at the right time,  
for the right reason,  
and in the right way,  
this is not easy.”

*-Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)*

## Stop Couple Anger In Its Tracks

"How do I do that, you might ask? My partner and I have horrible, explosive fights."

*Start by taming your Amygdala.* Tame my what? Yes....you heard it right. Tame your amygdala.

The amygdala is a part of the brain where anger and other primitive emotions live. It is an almond shaped structure that is part of our "limbic" system (sometime called our "reptilian brain"). It is our internal alarm system that detects danger or threat in our world. Because it is concerned with our survival, it is activated almost immediately when perceived threat is detected.

Much later (like several seconds later) the thinking part of our brain (called the frontal cortex) is notified of the perceived threat via other neural pathways. But by the time this happens, we are triggered and ready for action - unless we learn to tame that "hot" amygdala.

### How does it help your relationship to learn and master this skill?

Partners who have good communication and repair skills are able to deal with conflict, anger or other negative emotion triggered in their brain by their partners-sometimes without your partner knowing they even did it. This is important because a great deal of damage can be done to a relationship in just a few moments of disruption. By learning to tame your amygdala, you can eventually prevent or diminish future blowups and disruptions of emotional connection with each other.

Learning this skill serves to repair disruptions in your relationship two ways:

1. It really helps in dealing with the current disruption between you, minimizing the damage and helping to fix whatever conflict you are having.
2. If repeated enough times, It eventually "re-wires" your brain so that it might not be so reactive to the same trigger next time or in the future. You are teaching you brain new responses.

### LET'S SEE HOW THIS WORKS WITH A CLIENT NAMED TOM

Tom called recently to sign up for anger management consultation with me, saying he had been referred by his couples therapist. Like many men who call me, he felt sheepish having to make the call, but said that his wife of 15 years (Sarah) threatened to leave him unless he got his anger under control.

His next sentence was also very typical: "I am not a monster. I am a nice guy most of the time." He continues: "I have no anger problems at work. I don't rage on the freeway if someone cuts me off. I have lots of friends who think highly of me."

Yet, last Saturday night after attending a party with his wife, she accused him of not paying enough attention to her. He became defensive. They started to argue. She started using "that tone". He became frustrated, grabbed her hair and threw her down on the bed. Thankfully, she was not hurt physically but both were severely hurt emotionally.

Tom could not believe that he was capable of doing something like that. He felt foolish and shameful. Now, he had to work his way back into his home and his marriage.

The relationship itself was very wounded. Years of building a life together with children suddenly was threatened. Trust had to be re-established. The issue of continuing the marriage or not was now on the table. If it was to survive, learning to handle conflicts and communicate better was now a top priority.

### **Tom was a victim of "Whoosh"**

All this happened to Tom in about 30 seconds, after simply going to a party. And the frustrating part to Tom is that it all happened before he even thought about what was happening. It was what famed therapist Terry Real calls a "whoosh" experience. Tom's wife did what she did- and bang- he was pissed off and defensive. Later, his rational brain kicked in, but it was too late.

### **His amygdala had been triggered.**

The skill of putting some time between an anger trigger and your blowing up is a skill that can make the difference between a major, hurtful, long argument or solving the marital issue in a way that does little damage.

Without that important gap in time, you and/or your partner can feel "flooded" with emotion which can literally hijack your brain. This does two things:

1. it activates the emotional part of your brain which wants you to attack and win, no matter what the cost and
2. it deactivates the thinking part of your brain so that you lose perspective and solid reasoning. To avoid this, let yourself cool down before responding to the anger trigger and see if you don't get a better result with much less marital conflict.



Michael was another client who had to learn to tame his amygdala

### **CASE EXAMPLE: MICHAEL IS ALWAYS LATE...**

Thirty one year old Michael was engaged to Stacy, a bright, talented woman whom often gets upset with him because he often is late for almost everything.

Usually, it is because of work demands which he claims he cannot control. In a typical scenario, she berates him for being late. He apologizes, saying that it can't be helped. Then she repeats the criticism three or four more times during the evening at which point Michael explodes and attacks going from calm to Decon-4 in a few milliseconds.

He calls her names, loudly points out her character defects in vulgar language, proclaims how his life was better without her, and generally is in an uncontrolled verbal rant. When he calms down, he feels terrible. But the damage is done. The evening is ruined and she refuses to talk to him for several days, as she recovers from his verbal assault.

Explosive people like Tom and Michael may also attempt to "undo" it by rationally pointing out the many "good" things they have done or accomplished; that rarely works either, because our brain seems to be hard-wired to remember negative events more than positive ones. Rants, rages and tirades stick in people's minds for a long time and often diminish memories of flowers bought, kind things done, favors rendered, or sacrifices made.

So, how do we tame our amygdala?

Taming Your Amygdala and other parts of your nervous system is a 3-step process

#### **Step 1- Simple breathing**

A simple techniques known for thousands of years could have saved Tom and Michael and many other "hot-headed" people from the consequences of their impulsive actions. Taking in a deep breath and then temporarily removing yourself from the situation (if necessary) allows your body to return to normal, and provides a cooling down time for your triggered amygdala. This allows your brain to return to its normal state in which you can reason and think more clearly.

Start by taking in that deep breath. Then do 4 more. Your goal is to "condition " your nervous system to respond differently to your anger triggers with relaxation instead of rage or anger outburst. Recent research shows that the best way to do that "conditioning" is while your amygdala is activated...

#### **Step 2 - Temporarily retreat to rebalance yourself**

After breathing 5 times, make yourself take some time between feeling a negative feeling and dealing with it. This won't be easy because you are conditioned to react when provoked in certain ways. But, with practice it gets easier. It's like training a new muscle or developing a new habit.

Also, know that this step of strategic retreating works much better if you and your partner agree that this will be your "go-to" protocol if things start to get too heated.



Again, before reacting create a gap in time by taking your breath. Then back off, and announce to your partner you need to take a time out, but that you will be back soon to deal with the issue. The time period of retreat can be anywhere from 20 minutes to several hours. There is a world of difference between strategically retreating and avoiding dealing with the issue. Strategic retreating is healthy for your relationship. Frequent avoidance is not.

During your "time out" do something that brings you back into personal harmony... something that will help you re-balance yourself.

Common activities that help are taking a walk, meditating, working out, listening to music, attending a pet animal, reading, doing some mundane tasks that are familiar to you (like weeding your garden).

Avoid excessive drinking of alcohol or use of other drugs to stabilize your misery. As most of you probably know, alcohol tends to impair judgement, increase impulsivity and decrease inhibitions. All this leads to doing and saying things you shouldn't, not thinking before you act, and showing boundary violations which are out of character for you.

### **Step 3 - Practice four "Thinking Repairs" to use when cooling down**

The purpose of this step is to provide new input to your amygdala from your pre-frontal cortex (the thinking part of your brain). When you learn to think differently about an issue, conflict or disagreement, your emotion connected to it often changes.

The idea here is to teach your nervous system to not react to triggers the way it usually does, if that reaction is no longer appropriate. Under stress your amygdala and other brain structures want to react like it always does to certain triggers. It defaults to earlier learnings in your life (even if you don't consciously remember them). The process of changing your default reactions can be thought of as "thinking repairs." In our work with many clients, we have discovered four core thinking repairs that can easily make you a much better partner when dealing with your loved one:

#### **Thinking Repair #1 - I am responsible for self-regulating my emotions including anger, anxiety, fear, and other negative emotions.**

Yes, your partner may be unreasonable in their criticisms of you or in their behavior. Or, they may have what you consider extremely misguided political opinions, or parenting beliefs or values about money.



And, yes, what they are saying may not be fair or rational. Yet, you should remind yourself that sometimes your partner will, in fact, be wrong, unreasonable, or unfair. There will always be legitimate reasons (from your point of view) to justify negative feelings. Therefore, the only reasonable solution is to acknowledge that you – and you alone – are responsible for handling those feelings, despite provocation or your partner's unwillingness or inability to change.

You cannot control and often cannot change what your partner does or believes - but you can always change your reaction to it – with the proper thinking repair.

Remember, If you are in windstorm, what good does it do to yell at the wind? Instead, develop a plan of resilience or coping with it until the winds die down. Believing this is a way of taking personal responsibility for your emotions and your contribution to the relationship conflict.

**Thinking Repair #2 - Maybe I should look at my part in the conflict or the loss of emotional connection.**

As we saw in the sad case of Michael, anger escalation or loss of emotional connection is often a dance. Partner A takes a step that is a reaction to the step Partner B has taken. Partner B then reacts to Partner A, and so forth.

When you get caught up in your own distress, you may become unavailable for connection and may inadvertently do things or say things that start the dance. Or, the trigger may be exhibiting certain body language, causing a reaction in your partner. If you are married a long time, the body language triggers may be very subtle- and you may not even be aware of them.

A raising of the eyebrows, a twitch in the corner of the mouth, or a slight irritation in voice tone can trigger a reaction in you or your partner. Sometimes, these things are at the root of upset in you or your partner, regardless of what you are talking about on the surface.

Very few conflicts start in a vacuum. Almost always, it takes two to tango in your relationship dance. Taking an honest look at your possible contribution to the conflict or disharmony is an amazingly strong tool to better deal with it, because you can control "you" much more effectively than you can control your partner and what they do.

In Michael's case, the conflict actually started with his being late and not calling Stacy ahead of time. (Contribution #1).

When confronted, he did not commit to not doing it again, or try to validate her frustration in any way. Instead, he said , in effect, that she would have to learn to deal with it. His voice tone was dismissive. He did not make eye contact. (Contribution #2).

Unfortunately Stacy grew up in a home in which her feelings and opinions were constantly discounted and dismissed by her father. As an adolescent, Stacy became defiant toward her father. Dismissive behavior was the last thing she wanted in a husband. When Michael told her she would have to deal with it, Stacy's amygdala was triggered and went into default mode of attack to deal with her hurt; she escalated her anger and became quite nasty. (Contribution #3) which led to an explosion (Contribution #4) and well, you get the picture.

### **Thinking Repair # 3 - Maybe I expect too much from my partner or from the relationship.**

Often we become out of harmony with our partner or the relationship because they do not think, behave, react, or feel like we think they should. They may have values that we think are silly or misguided. They may not give us the attention we think we deserve or we may resent them for not contributing their share to the relationship either financially, emotionally, or physically. We may have expected them to help much more with household chores, to keep the house cleaner, or show more interest in sex, as they used to.

The repair to "tame your amygdala" is to remind yourself that the real relationship problem may lie as much in your expectations as in your partner's shortcomings. Since you can't change their shortcomings,(only they can do that) you should focus on adjusting your expectation around the issue to see if there might be some flexibility on your part.

In short, remind yourself that you may not have a realistic or reasonable view of your partner even though you think that you do.

Commonly, partners have distorted or faulty expectations of their partner's limitations, their motivation to change, or the influence their family background is still having on their values and how they behave in the marriage.

Here are some common faulty expectations that you may need to work on in your head when providing your amygdala and other brain structures with new information:

- **Faulty Expectation #1** - For marital unity, my partner should believe in the same things I do. James, for example, thought that it would improve his marriage if he could convince his wife Irene to believe in a certain political philosophy, which he strongly vehemently believed himself. . He went on hour after hour trying to convince her to see things differently. Of course, after several weeks of this she was ready to throw him down the closest mountainside.

To Repair things, remind yourself of this: Even in good marriages a high percentage of the time partners do not agree on many issues- and may never agree - even if married for a very long time. These are called "perpetual issues." Trick is not to insist on agreement, but to develop the skill of acceptance of the difference (unless you decide that the issue is a deal breaker). In other words, if you want to improve your relationship, rather than trying to change your partner, find a way to live with each other around the disagreement so you can accept it.

- **Faulty Expectation #2** - My partner should be able to see how irrational/dumb/stupid/misguided/ridiculous (you think) they are. If they continue to do it even after you point out the error of their ways, it must be because they are lying, or stubborn or they purposely want to irritate us. Worse, we may suspect that their real motivation is to control us.

*Au contraire, my friend.*

Remind yourself that how they see things is often actually how they see things, or interpret things - even if their experience doesn't match yours. Or, their standards or values might be quite different from yours.



Common examples: Meet Jim, a contractor, asked his wife to paint a room in the house in anticipation of a new baby coming. The paint job did not meet his standards. He became very upset and critical of his wife. She replied that it was only a paint job which she did well enough - it did not have to be perfect, from her point of view. Better to spend the time on "important" stuff, she reasoned.

As another example, meet Oscar whose wife became dysregulated because he accused her of lying because she was deathly afraid of spiders which prevented her from being able to help him clean the garage. Fact is, she wasn't trying to dodge the cleaning project - she actually was deathly afraid of spiders which made no sense to her husband. But believe me, it was very real to her. Having more empathy (covered in the next chapter) toward the hang-ups and limitations of our partner is a powerful "expectations adjuster" tool.

- **Faulty Expectation #3** - My partner should be like I want them to be or how I imagined they would be instead of how they sometimes really are. On a bad day our partners may be a far cry from what we signed for (just as we might be). This just comes with the territory. How we expect our partner to be has a lot to do with what kind of home we grew up in. Mature marriage partners are able to continue loving their partners for who they are- even with freckles and bad breath - not just for who we want them to be or how we imagined they would be.

Developing the repair skill of thinking differently about your partner or your relationship may lead you to accepting your partner as they are now instead of how you expect them to be or expected them to be when you first met.

This is not easy.

And it has its limitations. Some things they do or don't do may be deal breakers for you - and they should be. But research and my clinical experience shows that many couples are satisfied and happy in a relationship if they get about 70% of what they desire. Not 100% (who gets 100%?) but 70%. Therapist Terry Real maintains that sometimes partners need to go through a grieving process to let go of that difference between your ideal and the real person who sits across the breakfast table from you every morning.

#### **Thinking Repair # 4 - It is damaging to myself and others to see me like this**

Imagine what you must look like to your partner, to your children, to your co-workers, or to your neighbors when you are angry and out of control - or generally dysregulated. Children especially are extremely negatively impacted if raised in high-conflict homes. Coworkers may lose respect for you. Spouses and partners report feeling less love, closeness and attachment toward persons with angry outbursts or distancing behaviors. Worse of all, most angry people don't like themselves very much after they lose control. Ask yourself if your emotional dysregulation is worth all this to happen?

If you do not ask yourself this, you probably need to develop more empathy - which is partly having the ability of self-observation- of seeing ourselves as others see us. Empathy also requires the ability to be sensitive to the impact our behavior is having on other family members.

Empathic partners are constantly aware that whatever they do affects the "us" as much as the "me."

To summarize, taming your amygdala for immediate results is a 3-step process beginning with first breathing deeply to calm yourself down when triggered by your partner.

Then, rebalance yourself with a planned time-out from each other for a specified period of time.

The third step is to give your amygdala and other brain structures new input for long-term repair. This involves learning new "thinking repairs" that will eventually help you better deal with anger triggers in the future.



*This was the seventh program in a series of 7 Anger Fighter Audio Programs for Couples available at [fiorecouplescounseling.com/angerfighters](https://fiorecouplescounseling.com/angerfighters).*