

Anger Fighter Skills Builder

A practical skill-building program to keep anger from jeopardizing your marriage or relationship

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couples counseling

01 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
Communicate with Respect

Anger Fighter Skill #1

Communicate with Respect

Many partners create an anger-based atmosphere in their home over time because they don't have the skills or the motivation to communicate in a loving way. They stop being nice to each other. Out of frustration, they may begin to bully (intimidate) each other to get their own way. They stop being respectful to each other.



DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE

If you feel angry toward your partner more than 70% of the time, or they feel ill-will toward you more than 70% of the time, your marriage or relationship may be in jeopardy. A tension filled relationship causes a couple to lose emotional connection with each other and eventually to feel unloved by their partner. Soon, the relationship devolves into what is called a utilitarian relationship....it's not about love or caring any longer, but about just fulfilling roles and doing marital duties and obligations.

Emotional bullying may start to occur as a way for a partner to get their own way. This often involves using fear or intimidation tactics to get your partner to do the things you want them to do. Their feelings about it become irrelevant to you.

Partners start to communicate by interrupting each other, yelling and screaming, threatening, using profanity openly - or name-calling. Some partner bullies insist and demand that things be done a certain way- and only that way. Other times, bullying may involve insistence that partner have a certain relationship with their family of origin, or a certain relationship with their children.

Short of all these behaviors, some partners create anger-based tension just by seeming to be irritated with their partner, or being dismissive of partner's opinions, feelings or input about a problem or issue. These partners get angry at the drop of a hat, show extreme impatience with any shortcoming displayed by their partner, and generally project an aura of negativity which spreads like a fog throughout the house.

EXAMPLE

FEMALE BULLY #1:

Debra, age 36, young mother, married to a successful business man, Sam.

Wife (angry, yelling at husband): I have had it! I hate your sister and she hates me. I invited her and the rest of your family for Thanksgiving dinner, but they all declined. Everybody had something better to do. Your sister lies all the time and pretends to be nice on the surface while she is stabbing me on the back.

I don't want you (husband) to ever talk to her again!

Husband (protesting)... I agree she is a pain in the butt. But she doesn't dislike you and doesn't want to hurt you.

Wife: There you go... taking her side, again. Always defending her. She is evil and I don't want you to have anything to do with her. I checked your telephone records and you talked to her twice last week. If you really love me, you'll stop calling her. If you don't, it will end our marriage. I mean it. I've had it and I can't stand it any more.

What kind of a man would put his sister above his wife? You don't try hard enough to defend me or stand up for me with your family. You are weak. You only think of yourself. I need a husband who will be on my side and protect me from people like your sister.

NOW LET'S HEAR FROM A MALE BULLY:

MALE BULLY #1:

Dr Paul, a very successful neuro surgeon married to a young internal medicine doctor, Dr Beth. They come from a culture where males are expected to dominate and females are expected to fit in.

"You should be grateful I even married you. My parents (WHO are both doctors) warned me not to. You just do what YOU want instead of fitting into the family, like wives should. You don't even try to get along with my mother, even though we all live in their house. So what if I invited them along on our honeymoon... she is my mother. Now you are showing how ungrateful you are by insisting we move into our own house instead of accepting the gift my parents are offering of building a new house for all of us to live in.

If you insist on this, I can assure you that my family's lawyers will prove you are an unfit mother and you will not be able to take our child with you, if you move out as you say you will do."

Dr Fiore gives the following suggestions:

Anger based tension in a marriage can have many origins including bullying behavior by one or both partners, as you just heard. Some people just have to get their own way and have never learned the art of negotiation or working together in a cooperative way to achieve a goal. If a bully doesn't get their way, there is hell to pay. Sometimes they have a deep seated personality disorder which renders them deeply flawed and unable to participate in a loving give-and take relationship required in marriage.

Instead, they try to control their partner with threats, drama, put-downs, guilt, withholding affection, or constant criticism. Often, partners of bullies feel manipulated and constricted, maybe even cut off from friends or family at the insistence of the bully partner.



What to do If you are the partner who expresses anger by bullying:

1. Remember that bullying works against emotional closeness in a relationship. The cost is high if your partner does things for you out of fear instead of love or free willingness to want to please you.
2. Most marriages today in America are based on the concept of equality of partners. Instead of bullying, develop more empathy skills to more fully understand how your partner sees things and what the issue looks like from their perspective.
3. Develop better conflict resolution skills. Bullying often represents frustration by a person in not knowing how else to solve the problem or openly discuss options or solutions.

How to cope with a bully

Coping with a bully can be very challenging, but the place to start is to realize that both partners have to “participate.” This may seem like a strange thing to say, but the fact is, in most cases, a bully partner can’t be a successful bully without someone to bully.

If that “someone” is you, you need to change the game... by asserting yourself and standing up to the bully by making it clear that if bullying behavior continues, the marriage cannot be business as usual. This takes courage. But, as a marriage partner, you should have the attitude that you have the right to be treated with respect and dignity regardless of the issues between you.

But, you should not communicate this by cross-complaining, criticism them, demanding change without consequences if things continue as they are, or attacking them with non-serious threats of leaving the marriage. These tactics usually only make things worse.

Instead, the antidote is to communicate how their behavior makes you feel and you assert yourself as a person of equal importance in the relationship who deserves respectful communication by your partner.

Here is how you do it.

Sam Ideal Response to Bullying Debra:

To Debra: Debra, I love you but I feel completely disrespected by you in how to talk to me and what you ask of me. You are asking the impossible: for me to choose between my relationship with you and my relationship with my family.

I am sorry you feel so estranged from my family, but what you ask is unreasonable and makes me feel very distant from you because it is not taking my needs into account, which are equally important and valid as yours.

For us to survive, please try to see things from my point of view and find a way to respect the frustrating no-win position your demands put me in.

Beth’s Ideal response to bullying Dr Paul:

To Paul: Paul, When you talk to me like that, I feel totally devalued, unloved, and disrespected by you as your wife, and mother of your child. You make me feel like there is something wrong with me because I would like a house of our own and a family of our own, separate from your parents.

I am sorry that you are disappointed in me and that I somehow don’t fit into the family slot you wanted to put me in after we got married. However, I can’t continue with you unless you prioritize OUR relationship. I love you, but there are too many family members figuratively in our marital bed for “us” to work out.



Notice the elements of this communication

1. It focused on feelings and reactions- not facts that can be argued or debated.
2. It was clear and direct. There were no threats, innuendos, name-calling, blaming, one-upsmanship, or threats.
3. It clearly communicated what the partner's boundaries were and what the reaction would be if the bully continued to bully.

Important Points to Think About

Does this work all the time? Of course not. Nothing works all the time. But, assertive communication is a powerful tool to stand up for yourself and influence bullying or disrespectful behavior by your partner. And, of course, being nicer and communicating respectfully is a great way to not be seen as a partner bully in the first place.

02 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
Connect Better Emotionally

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 perspective. An excellent app to do that can be downloaded free at 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.

03 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
**Choose To Be Kind Instead
Of Needing To Be Right**

Anger Fighter Skill #3 Chose to be Kind Instead of Needing to be Right

This skill is the remedy to one or both partners being overly critical toward each other creating tension, anger and resentment in the relationship or marriage.



EXAMPLE

Paul was a 40 year old successful architect who came for anger management consultation at the insistence of his wife due to a recent blowup between them.

Paul, a pleasant fellow, began the session with me by saying "I am a real a**hole sometimes but I can't help it."

Continuing, he said "We just moved into a new house. My wife said she would paint the bedroom. She did what I thought was a crappy job and I blew up."

"I couldn't let it go, even though everybody else said the bedroom looked fine. I don't understand why she just can't do it right the first time like I would. Why do I have to accept incompetency from her?"

Sandra, age 45, requested anger management consultation because she resented her husband keeping in touch once a year by text with an old flame of his.

He wasn't hiding it and he refused to stop because he considered her a good friend. She couldn't give it up, constantly berated him about it. Otherwise, she considered him a very good husband and father.

She was absolutely insistent that she was right in seeing this as inappropriate behavior on the part of her husband.

Marital conflict often clash between two “rights”

How can this be? Isn't there clearly a “right” and a “wrong” answer or solution to marital fights, disagreements or conflicts? Isn't there clearly a “right” and a “wrong” way to do things to make a successful marriage or relationship? How can both partners be “right” at the same time? To answer these perplexing questions, we need to introduce a concept called “theory of mind.”

***Theory of mind** is the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.—to oneself, and to others, and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own.*

Often couples fight because they fail to understand that their partner may see things differently - not because they are wrong, stupid, misguided or purposely being difficult, but because they don't have a well developed theory of mind that takes into account that their partners may have different perspectives which are equally as valid, but different, because of different life experiences, different backgrounds, or different genetics.

An extreme example of lack of adequately developed theory of mind

Therapist asked both husband and wife in session what the color is of the lampshade in front of them:

Husband response: The Lampshade is Yellow

Wife response: The Lampshade is Beige

Therapist to Husband: Why did your wife say the lampshade was beige?

Husband Response: Because she was lying.

Wow! Can you imagine trying to win an argument with that guy?

Getting back to more reasonable people, you will remember our friend Paul, in the first case example, who was upset with his wife because of a “crappy” paint job. He told himself that was obviously the truth, as anybody could plainly see. His wife, however, saw things differently. She thought the paint job was “just fine” considering it was the children’s room and didn’t need to be “perfect.”



With most marital conflicts, “right” is a point of view-not an absolute.

So, who was right? There is no answer to this, as you may have guessed by now. This is the case with many marital arguments. Let’s repeat: There is no definite “right” answer to many marital disputes. Showing anger by constantly criticizing our partner over their way of doing things or seeing things is a formula for disaster for many reasons including loss of friendship between you.

Sandra, in example 2 cited earlier, was livid that her husband wouldn’t give up his once a year contact with his ex flame of 20 years ago. A power struggle ensued. Neither would give in. They were at a stand-off. Both were right in how each of them saw things, but neither was willing to have a deep conversation around how the other saw and felt about it. Insistence on our partner accepting our “right” as “the truth” leads to perpetual conflict instead of conflict resolution.

Tips for overly critical partner

If You are the overly critical person, focus on being kind instead of being right, here are some tips to do that:

See your partner as a friend. Remember, he/she must remain your friend to make a marriage work. In the words of famous philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: "It is not lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages."

1. Before you criticize too much, **remember that there is a human being on the other end of that criticism who has feelings.** Be kind. Ask yourself how the criticism will affect them and the relationship itself. Will it weaken the friendship between you? If so, is the criticism worth it? Will it over time weaken trust or their sense of feeling safe with you? If you shoot an arrow, ask yourself if it will just hit the bulls eye or will it destroy the whole target?
2. **Broaden your perspective** of your partner in context of whatever is bothering you about their specific behavior. In our example of Paul, the therapist asked him how good of a wife he thought she was when she wasn't painting walls. He said she was fantastic as a wife, mother, partner and lover. He immediately smiled with recognition when he realized how ridiculous it was to fault her for such a small thing in the context of what a great wife she was otherwise.
3. **Pay more attention** to HOW you deliver a complaint or criticism that you deem is justified (as it sometimes is). Watch especially your Voice Qualities (called Prosody) that convey mountains of subtle messages, meanings and judgements with just slight variations of volume, pitch, rhythm, and intonation. Overly sensitive or defensive partners will have their radar on to detect disapproval from you which may trigger push-back from them.
4. **Use a softer start-up** to deliver your complaint. Again, be kind and remember that your long-term goal should be to preserve the friendship. If you have an issue, stick to the issue without involving the character of your partner. For instance, say it bothers you sometimes that the house is not clean instead of saying that the house is dirty because they are lazy.
5. **Practice changing your self-talk** and thoughts about expectations and being too judgmental. Remind yourself that your perception of things is just that - which may or may not be the ultimate or ONLY truth. Remind yourself that there are various ways of looking at marital issues and your way is only a perspective! Respect the right of your partner to have their perspective too.
6. **Make sure that your criticism is reality based** instead of born out of insecurity or misinformation on your part. Criticizing someone unjustly for things they are not doing is a sure way to eventually drive your partner away. Be careful not to create a self-fulfilling prophecy - like constantly accusing your innocent partner of being unfaithful until they finally do betray you in some way because they desperately need emotional connection with someone.

What the partner of an excessively critical person can do

Living with a highly critical or unfairly critical partner can be a real challenge. The first step is to listen to what they are saying with an open mind- after all, they may have a point and you should try not to be defensive about their criticism.

If, for instance, they criticize because you don't help enough around the house, take this the criticism seriously and, if true, help out more. If, as another example, they criticize because you have lost all interest in sexual intimacy, again listen and try to come to a solution.



What you should NOT DO

But, if the criticism is unfair or untrue, or based on the past which can't be changed, you need a different strategy to deal with it. Arguing with logic, statistics, or evidence often won't work. Fighting back with your own criticisms or arguing that what they do is worse (or equal) to what you do often just makes things worse.

What you SHOULD do

Instead, try simply sharing how what they are unjustly criticizing you for **MAKES YOU FEEL**, without arguing your case at all.

Here are some common examples taken from actual case scenarios:

When you constantly criticize me, it makes me feel very badly about myself and angry toward you.

When you accuse me of things I didn't do, it makes me lose love feelings for you.

When you constantly critically yell at me it makes me not emotionally trust you and I pull away.

I feel like I am constantly walking on eggshells around you.

I worry about how your constant criticism of me will affect our children who hear it all.

I feel sad when I try so hard to please you, but nothing is good enough.

I ask myself: "is there ANYTHING you like about me?"

I feel hopeless in continuing to try to make our marriage work when nothing I do seems to make a difference to you or how you treat me.

Important points to think about

Anger due to excessive criticism in a relationship can be extremely destructive. The remedy is for the critical partner to learn to be kinder and change perspective and expectations rather than to be invested in always needing to be right. Their partner can also better cope by reacting differently - instead of arguing or defending, a strategy of sharing feelings often works much better.

04 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
**Lay Down Your Shields And
Listen To Your Partner**

Anger Fighter Skill #4 Lay Down Your Shields and Listen To Your Partner

This skill is the antidote or remedy to Anger expressed as Defensiveness in your marriage or relationship.



What is Defensiveness?

It is best described as one or both partners being overly sensitive or reacting very strongly to criticism (perceived or real) by their spouse. Defensive partners spend most of their energy protecting themselves, justifying their behavior, denying what is obvious to their partner, and fighting influence or control by their spouse.

Defensive marital partners are not psychologically open people – at least not in their relationship with you. They are fragile, they often live in their own private bubble and they spend much energy protecting (often needlessly) themselves from you. Rather than being open to input from you in the form of suggestions, opinions, alternative solutions to problems, or seeking honest feedback, they put up an emotional force field to keep you at bay to protect themselves.

Some Examples of Defensiveness between Partners:

EXAMPLE #1:

Partner 1: *"You are shouting and it's going to wake the baby"*

Defensive Partner: *(with angry tone) "I am not talking too loud- you are overprotective of the baby."*

EXAMPLE #2:

Partner 1: *"You are grouchy and not much fun anymore."*

Defensive Partner: *(dismissive tone) "Grow up - life is more than just having fun and playing games."*



EXAMPLE #3:

Partner 1: *"Did you go to Happy Hour after work today when you promised not to?"*

Defensive Partner: *(lying) "No... you always accuse me of stuff I don't do. You act like my mother."*

EXAMPLE #4:

Partner 1: *"We never talk to each other any more. I feel very lonely in this relationship."*

Defensive Partner: *(hurt tone) "You knew I was like this when we got married. Why should I change now?"*

Why Is Defensiveness Harmful To Your Relationship?

1. Defensiveness discourages honest communication between partners.
2. Issues are never resolved. Instead they get re-cycled and become “perpetual.”
3. Defensive partners often play the victim role in the relationship, not accepting any of the responsibility for their share of the problem or issue at hand.
4. The defensive partner does not grow or mature. They are not inclined to profit from their mistakes or errors. They don't see honest feedback from their partner as an opportunity improve the relationship.
5. Because overly defensive partners cannot tolerate “push back” of any kind, and usually can't stand being proven wrong, inadequate or mistaken, it is almost impossible to have a relaxed mature relationship with them. For some partners it is like “walking on eggshells.”

What can you do if you are overly defensive?

If you are the defensive partner, the AngerFighter Skill you need to learn is to lay down your shields, put aside your ego, and actually LISTEN to you partner. This is in contrast to the usual mental “filters” you might typical erect for self protection.

Some Reasons you might have for defensiveness are:

1. You don't trust that your partner has your interests or well being at heart with their criticism or complaint. They may have hurt you in what they are saying or opened up old wounds so now you want to retaliate.
2. You don't want to face the truth or you fear they may be right or partially right, so you fight against it because you don't want to hear it. You have built up a “self-story” around the issue in your head which is being threatened by their criticism. For instance, you may see yourself as having been victimized by someone but your partner points out your contribution to the problem. This makes you defensive.
3. You don't want to have to do what you know you should do if what they are saying is true. (Like they tell you the house needs painting and that is the last thing you want to spend money on this year- so you get mad because they brought it up).
4. Their criticism symbolizes to you that they may love or respect you less (even if this is not true)
5. Their criticism strikes fear in you that they may withhold things from you in the future that you really cherish or need.



Fight Defensiveness by Having A Talk With Yourself

Another tool you can use to develop this AngerFighter Skill is to examine your self-talk (what you tell yourself) about your partner and what they are doing to make you feel defensive. Rather than getting mad or striking back when they criticize you, disagree with you, or insist on doing things a different way, tell yourself things like:

- Their opinion is as valid as mine. I don't have to take what they are saying personally.
- Nobody is perfect. If they complain, maybe what they are saying could of benefit to me. I don't have to always fight back or react in a way to protect myself.
- Partners in an intimate relationship are SUPPOSED to influence each other.
- I don't have to see every disagreement as a battle or struggle for power or superiority or control.
- I don't have to react defensively to my partner's criticisms. My reaction is under my control. I can let it upset me, I can just let it go, or I can decide to constructively change because their criticism, comment or feedback has some merit.
- I can decide to accept what they say without it injuring my whole view of myself. For instance, maybe I am selfish sometimes (like she says) – that doesn't make me a bad person. I can work on changing that or accept it as part of my personality.
- We are conditioned to believe that strength means coming out on top and winning the fight. But in fact, real strength means having the courage to put our swords and shields down, and to risk being open and undefended.

What can you do if you are the partner of an overly defensive person?

What the partner can do

While you may not be the cause at all of your partner's over-defensiveness, you still can often greatly help the situation by (a) changing how you bring up issues or how you behave that triggers his or her defensiveness, and (2) react differently to them so as not to escalate further defensiveness or conflict.

Here are some practical tips:

1. Encourage openness of feelings. Don't "punish" your partner for telling you how he or she really feels about something because that will encourage them next time to distort things or withhold information to stay out of trouble with you. You can tell a good friend the truth: you should be the same with your intimate partner.
2. Use "softer startups" when bringing up an issue. Example: DO NOT START THE CONVERSATION IN WAYS THAT WILL IMMEDIATELY ALERT YOUR PARTNER TO PUT UP THEIR DEFENSES TO PROTECT THEMSELVES (AS THEY SEE IT) FROM THE ONCOMING ATTACK

Examples of poor startups:

"you have ruined my whole life....."

"you are an idiot for lending him money"

"if you don't like your boss, just quit but stop complaining about it"

Examples of much better "softer startups:

"Could we talk about something that we need to address?"

"After the kids are in bed, how about we have a glass of wine and discuss something that is important to me?"

"I know how upset you get when I bring up this issue, but we need to deal with it soon. When would be a good time to discuss it?"

3. Within limits, try to be deal with difficult issues between you in a way that your partner feels less judged by you. Be seen as more supportive and less critical. (More like a friend)
4. Use empathy skills more with your partner so they know you understand them even if you don't agree with them.
5. Find something you enjoy doing together so you can have fun with each other, build trust with each other, and feel more connected to each other.

Important Points to Think About

Defensiveness in a relationship can be extremely destructive for both partners because it works against closeness, trust and intimacy. If you are the defensive one, work on your self-talk, lay down your shields, and practice empathetic listening to your partner and what they are telling you. If you are the partner, encourage your spouse to be more open, and practice using softer start-ups so he or she will feel safer to be more vulnerable and look at things more from your point of view. That may motivate him or her to work on giving you more of what you need.



05 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
**Have Courage To
Communicate Honestly**

Anger Fighter Skill #5 Have courage to communicate honestly

This is a skill that is a solution to anger expressed destructively as “passive aggression.”



In successful relationships, anger, resentment, and conflict, are handled in a healthy way. Your goal in marriage or any intimate relationship should be that of developing what one famous therapist calls a **secure functioning relationship**.

In a secure functioning relationship, you always have each other's back, you trust each other, you see each other as a friend, and you both try to do things based on what is good for the relationship- not only what is good for you as an individual.

This requires a certain type of communication that is honest, direct, and genuine- as opposed to other types of communication such as passive-aggression. It is difficult to have a securely functioning relationship when you can't trust your partner to be up front with you, you can't trust that they will do what they say they will do, or you never know when they will do something to sabotage things you thought you had agreement on.

This program addresses the problem of passive aggression from perspectives:

1. How the passive-aggressive partner can be less passive aggressive by developing the courage to communicate directly.
2. How much should the partner of a passive aggressive tolerate and what are ways they can better cope with passive-aggressive behavior?

First, let's look at basics:

What is Passive Aggression?

If passive-aggression was an animal, it would be seen as a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is **an indirect** and safer way of expressing hostility, anger or related emotions. Often, the PA denies that this is what they are doing-like the 4 year old with his hand in the cookie jar explaining that he is not stealing cookies. Some passive-aggressives don't ever show overt anger-they just get even sometimes with an angry smile. "Getting even" may include refusal to talk about something important, withholding things you know your partner needs (like sex), but blaming something else, or throwing your partner under the bus, so to speak, by not backing them up on an agreed upon discipline issue with the children.

Other passive aggressives never offer opinions, weigh in on important decisions, or commit to things, the consequences of which they would have to live with. They often hide emotional needs or desires from their partners (and sometimes from themselves). That way, they can avoid disappointments. They stay safe.



Many partners complain that their passive-aggressive spouses are not proactive in their relationships. That is, they don't take leadership roles especially regarding responsibilities around the house. When the partner of a passive-aggressive take over, then the passive aggressive will complain that their partner makes unreasonable demands on them-or treats them like a child instead of an adult partner.

Finally, many passive aggressive partners cannot deal with actual or perceived criticism from their spouse. They feel picked on, and unjustly criticized, under appreciated, or used.

Alright. Those are the basics. But, here are two more observations you should know about passive-aggressive behavior

Not all passive-aggressives are equal in either amount of passive-aggression they show, or the causes of their passive-aggression. Sometimes, passive-aggressive behavior is combined with other personality traits in a person to create a mix that is almost impossible for a partner to cope with and retain one's life balance (not to mention sanity)

In many years of couples counseling, I have observed that passive-aggressives come in three patterns. This is important because you as a partner may want to make different decisions about your marriage depending on which pattern best describes your spouse or significant other:

Three Patterns of Passive-Aggression In Relationships

Pattern 1- Hard Core

With these folks, passive-aggressive behavior is part of their character or personality structure . They were like this long before you came into their lives. They see nothing wrong with being passive-aggressive. They probably were passive-aggressive as children.

Some case examples of “hard-core “passive aggressives;

EXAMPLE #1:

Sue, a 38 year old attractive but slightly overweight 8th grade teacher was recently married (6 months) to Tony, a 35 year old real estate developer who had recently lost his mother to cancer. Sue was devastated because Tony told her on their honeymoon in Paris that he did not find her sexually attractive. They had not had sex since their marriage, even though they had a lot of sex previously. She had been looking forward to starting a family with Tony, as agreed during their courtship.

Why was this passive-aggressive? Because in his mind he was taken advantage of by her after his mother died and she played on his emotions to get her to marry him when he was vulnerable. In his mind, he was her victim! So now, it was get even time!

What should Sue do if in a relationship to a “hard core” passive aggressive like Tony?

In short, run for the hills! She should not waste any more precious years trying to change him or adapt to him.

What should he do?

Commit to long-term individual therapy with a therapist who specializes in helping people re-wire their character structure. But, the probability of change is very low in this situation, even though the passive-aggressive in Tony’s category may claim he wants to change.

Pattern 2 - Peace at Any Price

Some people with passive-aggressive behavior are that way because they honestly believe in “peace at any price” in terms of dealing with their partners. In a pattern that was learned in childhood, they will do or say anything to avoid an argument, a decision, or a conflict, even if they have to pay a price later on down the road.

They have as their motto: ‘Go along to get along.’ The goal is survival, staying out of trouble, or staying off the radar, yet still being loved or cared for.

So, as an example, they will agree with you even though they don’t really agree, and then “forget” to do that which was agreed upon. They will refuse to state honestly what they want in a situation, then complain later that you are overly controlling because you went ahead and made the decision.

It is an adaptive mechanism probably learned in early childhood. Avoidance of emotional honesty was probably encouraged in their family. In such families, children learn to stay out of trouble and gain approval not by telling their truth, especially regarding anger, but by saying or doing things to avoid conflict, or keep the peace.

But we are hard-wired as human beings such that the root emotion of anger or resentment remains and has to be discharged somehow.

Enter the mechanism of Passive Aggression. With conflict-avoidant folks, it comes out as **subtle defiance** (while pretending to comply), **pay-back** in a way that your partner never knows for sure or **sabotage** hidden in a myriad of excuses as to why something didn’t get done that was absolutely promised.

Common examples are neglecting to pick up the lettuce for tonight’s salad as promised (“Honey, I’m sorry, I forgot”), not paying long overdue traffic tickets as promised (“I meant to, but there was no place to park at the DMV”), or refusing to take part in a decision as to what kind of new car to buy, but then criticizing their decision.



What you should do as a “Peace at Any Pricer” to Improve:

Unlike the “hard core” passive aggressive, you Can change some of your passive-aggressiveness by deciding to develop the courage to communicate more directly and honestly with your spouse.

We say “courage” because “peace at any pricers” are afraid of the consequences if they tell the truth about things. If they admit they took the cookies, they will be punished and this they want to avoid, even if they will be “punished” much worse later on when the truth is discovered.

Specifically, it is recommended you practice the following skills:

- Acknowledge to yourself when you are feeling anger or resentment toward something. Give yourself permission to have angry feelings.
- Assertive communication. Start with small things but tell your spouse honestly how it makes you feel angry or resentful when they do or say certain things. Be up front about your feelings without feeling guilt, shame, or blame.

What you should do to survive being the partner of a conflict-avoidant person and you decide to stay with them:

- Be aware that your partner is passive-aggression and may not change— acceptance is preferable to always being angry at them
- Protect yourself by always having a Plan B
- Do not depend on them if they consistently show passive-aggression in certain ways: for instance:
 1. If always late to important events, drive separately and met them there
 2. If they don't pay bills on time, set up automatic electronic payments
 3. Have them sign physical “agreements” on things they often promise but then renege on....
 4. Find alternative ways to get things done that they promise to do but then don't.
 - hire a carpenter to fix that fence, hire a housekeeper to clean up the mess, etc. Or, decide to do those things yourself.

Pattern 3 - One spouse is unknowingly encouraging passive-aggressive in their partner by inviting lies

Dr Elyn Bader, a well known couples therapist, writes the following:

“Everybody knows about the liar; the person who lies through his teeth, covers his tracks, or acts evasively. But few are aware of the person working behind the scenes, orchestrating the deception even as they’re demanding to hear the truth. We call this individual the “Lie Invitee,” the forgotten partner in marital deception. For indeed,, it often takes two to lie.”

Some people are completely unaware of the fact that they’re inviting partner lies, distortions, or misrepresentations while others understand what they are doing but feel helpless to do otherwise.

Meet Lisa, a successful attorney with deep insecurity in her romantic relationships. Married for 10 years, her husband Jacob, knows this about her and honestly tries to stay out of trouble with her, but constantly feels he cannot be truthful . Why? Because she is constantly accusing him of betrayal or at least being tempted to stray. He has never cheated on Lisa, but recently he posted something on Facebook about a football game he would be attending next month. An old girlfriend saw the post and sent him a text to say ” hello, what are you doing these days? Want to have a cup of coffee?”

He did not respond to the text. However, Lisa saw it one night, after deciding to snoop a little by reading his smartphone while he was in the shower.

The following interchange then occurred:

Lisa: *(in accusatory tone) “So, who is this Mary woman who texted you yesterday to say hello?”*

Jacob: *(who didn’t want to outright lie to Lisa, but knew what would happen if he revealed that Mary was an old girlfriend and they had been lovers at one time) so he says casually) “she is a friend I went to high school with.”*

Lisa: *“Just a friend? Why is she texting you? Why does she want to have coffee with you?”*

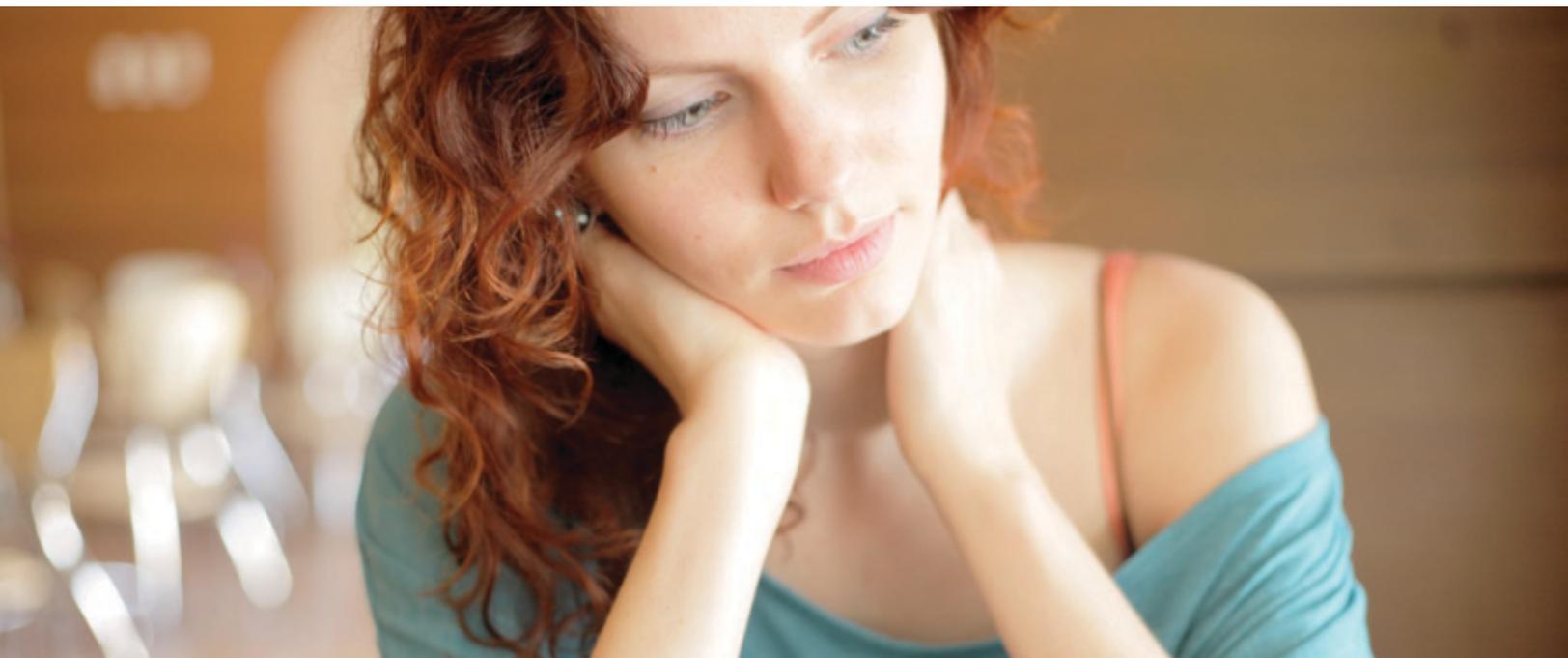
Jacob: *“I can’t control who texts me. We used to be lovers but it has been over for 15 years. I have zero feelings for her. I will text her back and tell her I am now happily married, would she like to meet my wife?”*

The result of his honesty? Let’s just say that Jacob immediately knew that the rest of his evening was completely ruined (and, darn, tonight was the Laker’s playoff game) – maybe the rest of this week was now going to be hell to pay!

Lisa turned into a combination prosecuting attorney and demented drill sergeant who immediately demanded that he let her read all his texts plus all his deleted phone messages for the last six months.

A relentless Lie Invitee can push even fairly honest people, like Jacob, to the far side of truth.

So, what do you think Jacob will say the next time a similar incident come up? Unless he is into pain, he will feel compelled to lie next time. It takes courage to communicate honestly and directly in intimate relationship, when you know what the consequences will be; to avoid this, often people in Jacob's position will dance around the truth, backstroke until their shoulder hurts, or develop a pattern of stretching that rubber band of truth until it snaps.



What should you do if you are a lie-invitee?

The short answer is to do everything possible to become a Truth-Invitee, to achieve that ideal secure functioning relationship we keep talking about. You want to encourage your partner to tell their truth, even if it is a truth is hard to hear, it does not fit your version of things, or it will seriously disrupt plans you may have made.

To be a truth-invitee, according to Dr Bader, you need to develop the skills of having greater capacity for involvement and engagement and request more honest, more complete answers to your questions. And develop the skill to deal with the truth- even if it you don't really want to hear it.

Rather than being a truth-invitee, often the lie-invitee, without being aware of it, closes off selective areas of the relationship discussions, like going through a large house and boarding up unused rooms. Too many of these boarded up rooms can lead to big trouble in your relationship or marriage.

What should you do to create a more open and honest relationship?

Picture that spoof advertisement with Abe Lincoln and his rotund wife who asks him 'Honey, do I look fat in this dress?' You can just see poor "Honest Abe" squirming and struggling with how to handle the uncomfortable conflict that she is forcing him to confront: namely, the truth vs not wanting to hurt his wife's feelings (and/or not wanting to having to deal with her negative reaction)

First, realize that for many reasons complete honesty in a marriage probably is not possible nor desirable. For instance, if your partner expresses a political view you don't agree with, perhaps you should let it go rather than start a major argument.

But you don't have to be a passive-aggressive either in communicating with each other.

As Dr Bader says "Truth is a process and the key is to build a culture of truth- telling in your partnership-Nobody is totally honest all of the time, but if you can start talking more openly about how to give and receive honesty... it will make all the difference in the world." So, create a container and a commitment together to being clear and direct."



06 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
**Let Go Of Things
You Cannot Change**

Resentment is a form of anger. The dictionary defines it as “bitter indignation at having been treated unfairly.”

Most of you have probably heard that we should not hold resentments toward events or people who we feel have wronged us in some way. We have heard that holding resentments is bad for our health, our marriages and our families. . Most world religions include teachings on forgiveness, which provide guidance for the practice of forgiveness.

Even Martin Luther King said:

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness.
Only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate.
Only love can do that.”*

Yet, on a personal level, many angry partners are angry because they are unable to let go of resentment or grievances, even though they agree with the concept in theory.

It is amazing how long some people can hold on to resentments, yet still manage to function in their marriage. But, fact is, resentments are the “elephant in the room.” Imagine a husband and wife sitting on the living room couch trying to hug each other with a huge elephant between them, which both pretend doesn’t exist.

Resentments block love

Resentments block love from being able to exist between two people, just as surely as a cork in a bottle prevents sweet aromas at the bottom of the bottle from getting out. Although not usually seen this way, resentment puts us in a victim position toward the one that we resent.

Holding resentment is a way that we allow the other person to live in our head – rent free – while they go on with their lives. We may live a life of anger and bitterness while they go on unscathed. Sometimes our resentment is constantly fed by their continuing to do what we feel resentment about, but other times our resentment may be based on something that happened years ago which your partner can’t change or do anything about now.

Resentments inhibit our ability to empathize

As hurt and resentment accumulate in a relationship, it becomes harder and harder to empathize with your partner’s experience, because you have so much unheard and uncared-for pain of your own. When too much unattended pain is allowed to foment between people, it can be nearly impossible to listen to, much less care about, each other’s experience. Over time, unhealed wounds create a relationship in which there’s no space left to be heard, and no place where some injustice or hurt from the past doesn’t disqualify your right to kindness and support — and your ability to give your partner kindness and support.

It is difficult to have any semblance of emotional connection or intimacy when one or both partners has a heart of stone toward the other because of accumulated resentment.

The all-time winner of holding on to resentment

Although there is no clear scientific evidence for this, the perception out there is that wives hold on to resentments and hurts more than husbands do. Many beleaguered husbands that have sought us for consultation through the years lament that it is though their wives carry a gunnysack full of resentments around with them often some of which are many years old. Whenever a fight comes up, they say, their wives (“who never forget ANYTHING and remember EVERYTHING ”), reach into their gunnysack, pull out an old resentment and symbolically whack them over the head with it.

Dr Fiore reports that in his 40 years experience, the winner of the “gunnysack” award, hands down, goes to Anna, a 45 year old wife of a teacher who sought consultation for marital conflict. In the middle of the consultation, Ann was asked what bothered her most about her marriage of 25 years. She didn’t mention money problems, household chores problems, parenting conflict or sex problems.

Her biggest complaint after a 25 year long marriage was: “He didn’t buy me the wedding ring he promised me during our engagement.”

In protest, her husband chimed back: “That was because I was a poor teacher at the time. However, if you will recall, 10 years later I bought you a \$20,000 ring that I thought you would like.”

Her angry response: “The ring was nice but it wasn’t there on our wedding day like you promised.”

THE FABLE OF THE WOLF

Reminds us of an old story: The Fable of the Wolf.

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is angry, has envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Learning to Deal With Resentment Is a 4-step Choice called the DARE Process:

Step 1 - Decide to give up your resentment. Resentful partners can only be less resentful if they decide to be. Resentful partners can only be less resentful if they decide to be; at some point the offender partner can do no more to fix things or take away the hurt . He or she often cannot change what happened that is causing the resentment. The ball is in the court of the partner holding the resentment.

Step 2 - Acknowledge your feelings and talk about them instead of trying to ignore them. If something is bothering you about your partner or what they did or didn't do, tell them. They have a right to know!

Step 3 - Remember your tools of giving up resentment and practice them daily. For instance, keep a gratitude journal. Or, make a conscious attempt to focus on the positives of your partner instead of the negatives.

Step 4 - Execute winning communication strategies such as the "communication wheel" instead of sitting in resentment. Using the communication wheel you start by calmly telling your partner what he or she did that bothered you. You then tell them how that made you feel and what you told yourself about what happened. Finally, you make a request as to what you would like them to do instead in the future. Works great once you learn how to do it!



Letting go has huge payoffs

The payoff of letting it go is huge! Forgiveness is an essential component of successful romantic relationships. In fact, recent studies show that capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most significant factors contributing to marital satisfaction and a lifetime of love.

Forgiving yourself and others is about being willing to acknowledge that you are capable of being wounded. It also means that you are willing to step out from the role of victim and take charge of your life.

Couples who practice forgiveness can rid themselves of the toxic hurt and shame that holds them back from feeling connected to each other. Dr. John Gottman, a leading marriage researcher, explains that emotional attunement is a skill that allows couples to fully process and move on from negative emotional events, and ultimately create a stronger bond. Create that bond by letting go of those resentments!



07 Anger Fighter Skills Builder
**How To Stop Couple
Anger In Its Tracks**

“**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.

