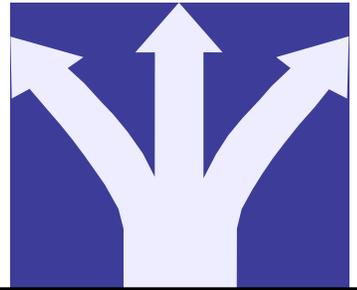


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Volume 5, Number 3

September 2005

Couples Anger: The Beginning of the End of A Relationship? Part One

A British couple, Florence and Percy Arrowsmith, recently celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary, making their union the longest marriage on the planet, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

The secret of their long relationship? Said Mrs. Arrowsmith, "We don't often quarrel. You must never go to sleep as bad friends."

But many couples do not make it to their 10th anniversary, let alone mark an 80-year milestone.

Nearly 60 percent of couples who divorce never make it through their first decade, marriage researchers report.

Should angry couples take Mrs. Arrowsmith's advice and kiss and make up before bedtime to insure a lifelong union?

Flooding

Not necessarily, says John Gottman, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington-Seattle and a leading expert on relationships, who has studied couples and marriage for nearly 30 years.

Gottman believes that the physiological byproducts of emotional stress thwart couples trying to resolve an argument.

The phenomenon, known as "flooding," which produces a rapid heart rate and other physical symptoms, impedes concentration and conversation, making resolution even more difficult.

Consequently, couples can benefit from a night's sleep to calm down and reassess the problem the following

day.

Also, contrary to Mrs. Arrowsmith's experience, limited conflict doesn't always signal a good relationship.

In his groundbreaking work, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, Gottman believes, a couple's willingness to productively address problems is more important to marital stability.

British relationship psychotherapist Paula Hall also notes that sharing emotions and navigating conflicts leads to more productive unions.

Causes of Anger in Relationships

What causes anger in relationships and how can couples navigate the emotional minefield conflicts present?

Hall identifies six causes of anger between partners: 1) Shocking unexpected actions; 2) malicious intentions; 3) repeated hurts and frustrations; 4) unmet expectations during vulnerable states such pregnancy or illness; 5) reminders of past disappointments and; 6) failure by one partner to acknowledge hurt feelings he or she caused.

Whatever the causes, anger erodes relationships. Angry couples retreat from physical interactions. Declining interactions in turn may produce sexual dysfunction and other conditions exacerbated by stress, including high blood pressure, headaches, stomach disorders and a weakened immune system.

But Gottman, who has been credited with being able to tell with uncanny accuracy which couples will break up and which will stay together, believes anger alone doesn't necessarily indicate that a couple will divorce or separate. Why?

(Continued)

Anger, he says, “only has a negative effect if it is expressed along with criticism, contempt or if it is defensive.”

Couples who are less negative in their disagreements are more likely to weather the rough patches in the relationships.

Types of Relationships

Gottman has identified three types of marriages. Couples who are **validators** are able to acknowledge and appreciate the opinions and emotional state of their partners during disagreements.

Couples who skirt around important issues to forestall arguments are **conflict avoiders**, while couples who fight regularly and intensely have **volatile** relationships.

None of these styles guarantees longevity, he says, but Gottman believes the key is to a stable partnership is a 5 to 1 ratio between positive interactions and negative flare-ups.

He says validators experience “moderate tension,” balanced by five times the “fun, loving, and warmth;” conflict avoiders are not overly demonstrative, but don’t engage in criticism and contempt.

Volatile couples may provide free entertainment for the neighbors, however, but affection and reconciliation are very important components in the relationship.

Four Horsemen

Nevertheless, the beginning of the end for any relationship is clear when what Gottman calls “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” arrive on the scene.

The ominous indicators are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

- **Criticism** hinges on attacks the other’s personality or character, rather than the specific behavior, accompanied with blame. Criticism is sometimes confused with complaining; however, complaining is limited to statements about a particular problem or incident, not the partner.
- **Contempt** consists of insults and psychological abuse, including but not limited to: name-calling, hostile humor, subtle putdowns, and negative body

language such as eyeball rolling or sneering.

- **Defensiveness**, responding to a partner’s statements with denials, excuses, and other counterattacking measures, tends to fuel a conflict and does not help solve the problem.
- **Stonewalling** or withdrawal is a refusal to engage a partner, signaled by a retreat into silence.

About 85 percent of males engage in stonewalling, a trait that increases anger in women trying to interact with a male partner. Women become much more upset with stonewalling men, than men do with stonewalling women.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. John Gottman, Ph.D., Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... And How You Can Make Yours Last. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994. Also, The Gottman Institute, Available online: <<http://www.gottman.com/research>>.
2. “Relationships, Couples, Letting Go,” Available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/couples/heartaches_lettinggo.shtml>

(This newsletter was prepared by Gabrielle Gurley)

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

⇒ Outlook Associates of New England now includes on its website the results of satisfaction surveys that are given to individuals who participate in our 12-week anger management program. The results of the survey identify how participants feel that they have been helped by the program in a number of areas related to anger. Please go to our website at **www.outlookassociates.com** and click on the page for anger management pgm satisfaction.

Anger and Alcohol Connection

Trait anger— a tendency to experience frequent and intense episodes of anger has been identified as a risk factor for alcohol-related Aggression. A study in the June 2004 issue of Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research finds that a person’s inability to control the outward expression of their anger plays a role in alcohol-related aggression.

Robert O. Pihl, professor of psychology and psychiatry at McGill University notes that the study “suggests that the inability to control anger is an important factor.” Dr. Pihl notes that for individuals who fit the characteristics of the study—the combination of high trait anger and low anger control—“drinking during emotionally provocative situations *de facto* is a license to aggress. Just like in the case of driving, this is a time these individuals should avoid alcohol.”

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