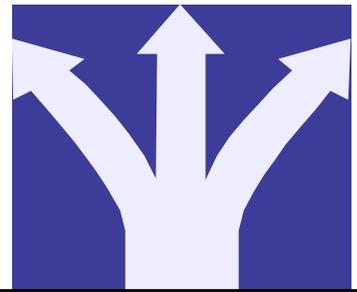


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Couple's Anger: The Beginning of the End of A Relationship?

Part Two

The last issue of the newsletter focused on dynamics of anger that contribute to difficulties in the marital relationship. This issue will look at look at anger in Gay/Lesbian couples as well as steps to avoid the destructive aspects of out of control anger.

Anger in Gay/Lesbian Couples

John Gottman who has done extensive research on marital relationships also discovered that although same-sex relationships are similar in many respects to heterosexual ones, gays and lesbians have distinctive ways of expressing and coping with anger.

"When it comes to emotions, we think these couples may operate with very different principals than straight couples," Gottman says.

Specifically, Gottman and his research partner, Dr. Robert Levenson, a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, found:

- Gay and lesbian couples use humor and affection to defuse arguments, and partners are more receptive to it. The end result? Same-sex couples are more positively disposed to each other after a fight.
- Same-sex couples are less likely to engage in negative, controlling behaviors, which suggest these couples possess a more finely tuned sense of fairness and awareness of the importance of power sharing.
- During arguments, gay and lesbian couples accept some negative comments without taking those comments personally (although Gottman noted that this observation would require

additional investigation).

- Unlike straight couples, flooding is less pronounced among gay and lesbian couples. Reduced levels of physiological stress means same-sex couples can comfort one another and relax.

Defusing Anger

All couples can work on defusing their anger by learning how to disagree constructively.

Psychologists Kim Paleg and Matthew McKay suggest using respectful anger during arguments based on "I messages" such as, "I need help with chores around the house," rather than "You never do anything to clean up around here," which allows an individual to voice for his or her own feelings without belittling or blaming the partner.

They have developed a four step "anger coping plan," based on research showing that planning responses to frequently encountered problems during arguments helps individuals find improved ways of handling conflict.

The first step to handling angry confrontations is to **relax** through breathing techniques (such as pausing and taking deliberate breaths).

Next, a partner should plan an **assertive request**, comprised of a facts only-based summary of the problem at hand; how one feels about the problem, beginning with the word "I" and a detailed request of what needs to be addressed.

Third, a partner should work toward a **de-escalation** of tensions by choosing a suitable calming strategy: validating the other partner's feelings and needs; working to cool down an argument before it gets out of hand by apologizing or proposing

(Continued)

a specific solution aimed at addressing a partner's needs; or suggesting a time-out: leaving the room, listening to music, taking a walk to reassess the situation with the goal of reconvening to find a mutually agreeable solution.

Last, partners should engage in **prevention problem solving** by negotiating solutions that address concerns of both partners when both individuals are in a receptive frame of mind.

Paleg and McKay's strategy rests on individual initiative: One of the most effective ways to reduce anger in a relationship is for one partner to take steps to examine his or her own behavior.

Trying to modify another person's actions serves only to frustrate the person seeking change.

The person who takes steps to manage his or her own anger can expect to sow the seeds for more positive outcomes in interactions with their partner.

Skills and Expectations Should Match

Recent research has found that if you're a newlywed, the better you're able to expect marriage blips, instead of around the clock bliss, the better your relationship's chances are to successfully reach that famous closing line: "So long as you both should live."

The May 2004 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology published a study that indicated a spouse's expectations of "ever after" must accurately reflect the skills or lack thereof that they and their mate have in handling relationship curveballs.

James McNulty, PhD of Ohio State University, one of the authors of the study was quoted by WebMD as stating; "For some couples that means lowering their expectations, and for others, raising them. It depends on the skills you have, or don't have, at handling conflict. Marriage satisfaction goes down when a spouse's expectations don't fit with reality."

Dr. McNulty goes on to say, "You need to understand that when a partner is going through stress, he/she will not be perfect. Many people especially newlyweds, expect their relationships will be perfect, even in times of stress. But when it isn't they become disappointed, and as a result have more stress and dissatisfaction.

So while a relationship might not set any records, by having certain expectations and following certain rules for engagement it can become a more pleasurable one for a couples.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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Also, The Gottman Institute, Available online:
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2. Kim Paleg, PhD & Matthew McKay, When Anger Hurts Your Relationship: 10 Solutions for Couples Who Fight. New Harbinger Publications, 2001.

BOOK RECOMMENDATION

Difficult Conversations, How to Discuss What Matters Most. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. 1999. Penguin Books.

In the work to help individuals address anger management concerns, one of the most difficult skills to learn is the ability to be assertive as one is feeling angry. At Outlook Associates we define assertiveness as, "stating one's feelings, needs, and/or wants in a manner that does not harm one's self, others or the environment." When one is angry this often is a challenge because one is so ready to attack the other person because of the injustice that is perceived or the hurt that is felt.

Douglas Stone and his colleagues at the Harvard Negotiation Project have written a book that offers advice for handling disagreeable exchanges in a way that accomplishes their objective and reduces the possibility that anyone will be needlessly hurt.

They point out that dialogues are made up of three separate components: 1) the "what happened" conversation-verbalizing what we believe was really said and done; 2) the "feelings" conversation-communicating and acknowledging each party's emotional impact and; 3) the "identity" conversation-expressing the situation's underlying personal meaning.

They offer specific recommendations about how to frame a conversation and provide concrete examples of conversations that end up being destructive as well as clear ways to move the conversation to a more productive and constructive outcome. The book's proposed strategies can be used in both the workplace and home settings.