

Managing the Anger of Divorce

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“If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow”
-Chinese Proverb

Escalating anger causes much of the sorrow of divorce. How can you deal effectively with the ire in divorce? Don't you have a right to be upset? Of course –anger is a natural emotion like an alarm meant to protect you from further hurt! Even the most agreeable people have legitimate feelings of hostility in divorce. Why? Because your expectations, dreams and hopes about your life with your spouse are dissolving with the divorce, and that is *painful*. Your wrath grew out of the feelings of disappointment of perceived wrongs by your “worse” half.

Since anger is unresolved hurt, without an outlet for its healthy expression, repressed hostility causes escalation of conflict. As a result, the legitimate suffering that both parties' experience in marital discord easily transforms into a stressful, expensive, “bloody” courtroom battle. The litigated divorce provides a costly forum for acting out destructive animosity.

Mediation, a dynamic alternative to litigation, is facilitated negotiation. Focusing on problem solving, instead of arguing positions, successful mediation de-escalates the hostility. The mediator sifts out blame and helps the parties discover mutually acceptable solutions. Because the emotions are intense, and the legal issues so complex during divorce, the parties need a qualified neutral attorney/ mediator to educate them as to the family law issues. This empowers both parties to make informed decisions about their children and their finances. The expert mediator facilitates the transformation of conflict into a “solutioneering” process, and teaches the parties how to manage their own anger. This process builds trust and guarantees satisfying results. Handling your own anger effectively is a challenge at any time, but it is an especially important accomplishment during the heat of divorce.

Whether you are in litigation or mediation, it will be to your financial and emotional advantage to understand how to control your frustrations. You can achieve greater financial benefits, save yourself stress, and “win” more of what you want if you can increase the satisfaction in your communications with your spouse.

For a long time you and your spouse have pushed each other's ‘buttons’ and have *reacted* to conflict by either fighting, fleeing, submitting, or freezing. When you repress anger, you feel diminished, yet if you meet hostility with aggression; it fuels the flame, which may lead to violence. There are better options.

Our goal is to *consciously respond –not instinctively react*. If your spouse gets you mad, you have lost control of yourself. As Elizabeth Kenny once said, “He who angers you, conquers you”.

When we allow our anger to rule our reasoning, we lose our ability to make reliable decisions. We lose our sense of self, our thinking becomes impaired, and we "lose it." That's when we make "the greatest speeches we'll ever regret!" We voluntarily give away our power when we delegate authority to anger to rule our reason.

Try the following proven strategy anytime your spouse (or children, boss or anyone) attacks your ideas, actions or beliefs. To help you remember this ten-step strategy, you may find the acronym **HARD LOVING** helpful and apropos.

THE HARD LOVING STRATEGY TO DEFLECT CONFLICT

1. H - HALT

Halt- Stop yourself from reacting –don't say anything, Listen, don't express negative emotions, and consciously breathe slowly. If you react in anger, you will invite more hostility.

2. A - ANGER CONTROL

Anger is a negative emotion, which you can actually feel in your body. Immediately direct your mind to your physical sensations. Some typical reactions are dryness in the throat, tightness in the neck, knife in the solar plexus, etc.

Take a moment to close your eyes (to focus) and imagine your spouse saying something that "pushes your buttons". Identify your physical reaction to verbal battle. Once you recognize your body's auto-reply to verbal pain, you gain the key to override its power over you.

3. R - REVERSE REACTION

You can consciously reverse this auto-reaction by your awareness. For example if you feel a knife in your solar plexus when you feel accused, gently "remove the weapon". "Drink "refreshing water for your dry throat.

Deliberately take calm slow breaths as you make this reversal until you are calm and centered. You have still not said a word yet to the "attacker". With practice, this gentle dissolving of your auto-reaction to conflict will take just a split second. Once your body is tranquil, you regain your composure.

4. D - DISENGAGE

Now that you have detached physically, you are ready to disengage mentally. Focus on the issue, not the person's words or behavior. Separate the person from the problem. Just because your spouse says something offensive, doesn't mean it is true or you have to accept it as a fact. His/her perceptions are just thoughts. You don't have to be defensive or convince him/her otherwise. Release any need to prove you are right- from your perspective you *are* right. Disengage from the tornado of hostility

and the storm must stop- if you don't engage, the fight has ended. When you 'let go', you dis-empower your "opponent" because he/she cannot control you if you don't get upset. In essence, you win control, since the other person has succumbed to his/her own anger.

5. **L - LISTEN EFFECTIVELY**

Listen to every word without resistance. (This doesn't mean you agree!) Don't be thinking of your response. Listening demonstrates a willingness to understand which promotes a reciprocal receptivity. Non-contentious listening deflects hostility, and gives you powerful information to resolve the real issues.

6. **O - OPENLY MIRROR**

Restate in a calm, neutral tone, the essence of what was said. For example "You stated that you were angry because you felt I spent too much money for the children". Or "You are concerned that you will have to live in an unacceptable place because of the divorce"- By mirroring what the other person said you have not agreed. You are just demonstrating your understanding of what you heard.

7. **V - VOICE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS**

Follow up a mirrored statement with open-ended questions such as: What do you think is an appropriate amount to spend for the children? Please clarify.

Information questions are simple, but formidable. Pose clarifying questions like, What do you mean? How will that work? When can you do that? Tell me more about your proposal. What is the basis for your reasoning? These types of questions open the door to mutual understanding and problem solving.

8. **I - IMAGINE SOLUTIONS**

Upon hearing responses from the open-ended questions, the parties can shift to the brainstorming stage of proposing various options for settlement. Both spouses need to share:

1. What they believe would be fair under the circumstances.
2. What they really need – and the basis for their suggested solution to the conflict.
3. What would resolve the issues for everyone so that both parties and others involved would be able to accept the decisions agreed upon.

9. N - NON-AGRESSION

No matter how aggressive the other person may get, stay calm, keep breathing slowly, and listen without engaging in anger. You may have to keep repeating steps 1-4 throughout the discussion.

10. G – GO AWAY

If you find that the other person cannot act appropriately, remove yourself with dignity, *before* you get hooked into their frustration. Leave the situation (or calmly get off the phone) allowing the other party to re-convene without groveling. You will have to deal with your spouse again, so release your anger before you speak again. Then start from step 9 and revive the problem-solving stage. Take a time-out, if necessary, to make sure you both manage your own hostility.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

Anger is a tough feeling to understand. Sometimes you may believe you are furious at your spouse, but the problem is similar to an issue that you had with a parent when you were a child. Our emotions of challenging relationships need to be analyzed so we can learn important lessons in life. Emotional counseling during divorce is a helpful way to clarify what issues belong to you and what issues are really dilemmas for your spouse. You are only responsible for 50% of the problems in your marriage-no more, no less.

Seek quality individual therapy for yourself. If you and your spouse are in agreement, try marital counseling to work on your joint issues. If you are beyond the point of marriage therapy, interview qualified attorney/mediators who have the skills to help you to resolve the legal issues of the divorce and decrease the hostility between you. With an innovative, holistic approach, you will ‘heal’ the conflict so that you both may release the hurt, forgive each other, and move on with your lives productively to find new, healthy relationships.

Mari Frank is an attorney-mediator in Laguna Niguel, Ca. She is a certified trainer for the State Bar of California, and has taught negotiation and mediation as a professor of law. Mari has successfully mediated hundreds of divorces, has appeared on dozens of national television shows, has been interviewed on over 100 radio shows, and has been featured in newspapers and magazines across the nation.