Understanding and Processing Anger

Excerpt from 10 Great Dates to Energize Your Marriage

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Two thousand years ago the apostle Paul had some good

advice for the church of Ephesus: Don’t sin when you’re

angry, and don’t let the sun go down on your anger. That’s still

good advice for us today, but how can we possibly do this?

There are two significant strategies that help us process

anger positively – identify the primary emotion and make an anger contract.

Identify the Primary Emotion

Did you realize anger is actually a secondary emotion? That means we feel it *after* feeling a primary emotion like fear, frustration, or hurt. For instance, consider the stormy night when your spouse was late coming home and didn’t call or text you to let you know he/she was going to be late. When your spouse didn’t show up as expected, you were likely fearful your spouse had possibly been in an accident. By the time your spouse finally walked in the door, you were no longer concerned about your spouse’s safety; you were just very angry that your spouse hadn’t called. Or consider the husband who goes from feeling frustrated to angry when his wife spends hours on social media after the children are in bed even though it’s supposed to be their time alone together. Or think of the wife who felt hurt because her husband said something that left her feeling devalued and unappreciated. Yes, his words hurt, but now she’s angry.

Think back to the last time you were angry. Was your anger the result of fear? Were you frustrated to the point of becoming angry? Or were you hurt? Taking time to identify the primary emotions behind your anger will help you process it together. By understanding the root of your anger – that is your primary emotion – you can more easily determine the best way to process your anger and facilitate thoughtful action. So the next time you’re feeling angry, pause for a moment and see if you can identify the primary emotion driving your anger.

Make an Anger Contract

An anger contract can be a very useful tool helping couples calm down and process anger before it gets out of control. An anger contract can be an actual signed contract by husband and wife and should contain three commitments:

1. I will tell you when I am getting angry with you.
2. I will not vent my anger on you.
3. I will ask for your help in finding a solution for my anger.

Here’s how the contract can work. The couple agrees to tell each other when he/she is getting angry. Otherwise, one partner could be angry and the other wouldn’t know it. Then, agree you won’t lash out or attack the other, but instead will ask for help in dealing with whatever is causing the anger. One caution: Make this contract with each other when you are not in the middle of dealing with an issue.

Take Turns Talking

To help you define the issue, experts suggest a simple exercise that will help you get on the same page. For this exercise, you’re only talking about the problem or issue, not trying to resolve it. This process involves expressing negative feelings, and for that you need a structure. One suggested great tool is to use the speaker/listener technique as a way to “share the floor.”

As in parliamentary proceedings, the speaker has the floor. You can pick up a pen, your glasses, a book, a cup – anything – and say, “I have the floor.” You are announcing that you want to use this tool to talk about the issue at hand. The person with the floor is the speaker. The person without the floor is the listener.

The goal is to discuss the issue, stay on topic, and get to the point where you both understand the other’s feelings and viewpoints. Again, the goal is not to solve the problem. This exercise works because it separates defining the problem from trying to solve the problem. Sharing the floor gives you the structure you need to do the hard work of talking about the issue and the feelings formula keeps you safe by avoiding attacking statements.

*A Word of Caution for Guys*

Guys naturally want to solve the problem. That’s what they do; they fix things. But first you need to discover what the real issue is before you can work together with your wife to find a solution…together.

Once someone takes the floor, they are the speaker. Then they can pass the pen back and forth so the listener becomes the speaker and so on. Here are the rules for the speaker and the listener:

Rules for the speaker:

* Speak only for yourself. Don’t engage in mindreading!
* Keep statements brief. Don’t go on and on.
* Stop and let the listener paraphrase what you just said.

Rules for the listener:

* Paraphrase what you hear the speaker say.
* Focus on the speaker’s total message, not just the words.
* Don’t rebut.

Rules for both:

* The speaker has the floor.
* The speaker keeps the floor while the listener paraphrases.
* Share the floor.

Four Steps to Solving Problems Together

1. **Define the problem**. Write down the issue you want to resolve.
2. **Identify who has the need**. Note who has the need for a solution to the problem and also how the other person contributes to the problem.
3. **Brainstorm solutions**. Make a long list – don’t stop with a few ideas. Brainstorm all kinds of solutions, even the crazy ones – humor helps relieve tension.
4. **Identify a plan of action**. From your list of possible solutions, choose one you both would like to try. If it works, great. If not, go back to your list and try another one.

Once you get to steps 3 and 4, you’ll likely discover most solutions involve compromise. This is when you have the opportunity to give each other one of the three gifts below to reach a resolution:

1. ***Defer with the gift of love***. You could say, “This is just more important to you than it is to me, so I’ll choose to go along with what you want to do.” Over time, both partners should be giving gifts of love.
2. ***Agree to disagree with the gift of individuality***. We don’t have to agree on everything. In some areas it’s okay to agree to disagree. This may include some perpetual issues we need to let go of so we can move on with our lives.
3. ***Compromise with the gift of mutual giving***. We each can give a little and meet in the middle on this issue.

Problems that took years to develop won’t be resolved in one four-step exercise – or in one day or week. But you can turn the corner and together begin to work on resolving them. Remember, not all problems have a permanent solution. This is especially true if the issue is something only your spouse has the ability to address. And it’s important to note that there are some issues that should never be tolerated, such as verbal abuse, domestic violence, and chronic adultery. However, for most disagreements and issues, working through problems together can be a great opportunity not only to strengthen your marriage, but also to experience the healing power of forgiveness.

So what do you do if you reach a stalemate and you just can’t seem to work things out? A professional counselor may give you short-term help. If you’re going down a one-way street in the wrong direction, you don’t need a pedestrian shouting at you that you’re going in the wrong way. What you really need is a friendly policeman to come along, stop the traffic, and help you get turned around. That’s what a counselor can do for your marriage. But in most instances, if you are willing to pull together, to attack the problem and not each other, to process anger and work together at finding a solution, you can find one.

A Few Cautions

* **Caution #1**: Even if you’re managing your conflicts well, there may still be issues to deal with. For example, it’s a problem if just one of you is continually giving in to the other. It’s also a problem if you consistently choose to coexist on everything, or if you use compromise as a means of “horse trading” and manipulation. Power plays and attempts to manipulate destroy the potential for love and closeness in a relationship.
* **Caution #2**: Deal with what you can and accept what you can't control or change.
* **Caution #3**: Choose your timing wisely. Avoid raising emotional issues late at night or when you’re tired, hungry, or already out of sorts. Your marriage will be stronger for it.
* **Caution #4**: When appropriate, look to the one with more expertise in an area to find the best solution.

You may notice that there’s no talk about conflict resolution in terms of winning and losing. When one “wins,” both lose. It might work in the short term, but the long-term consequences are never worth it. Plus, it leads to resentment that can sabotage your relationship.