

Getting Connected, Staying Connected

The Truth About Anger

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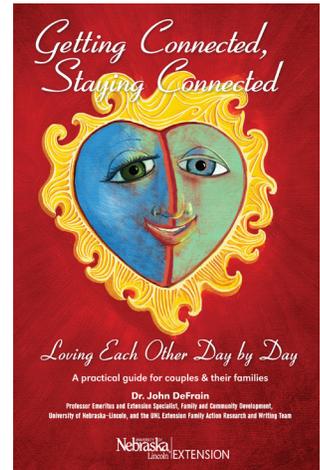
Differences lead to conflicting ways of looking at the world and our life together as partners, and these conflicts often generate anger. The solution to this problem that all couples face is learning to communicate well with each other: listening with our hearts, speaking in a loving way, and creating a future of realistic expectations. This is No. 7 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

What Do Couples Say About Anger?

- **“He enjoys getting mad.”** For many partners, this is true. Being angry can be fun. They feel powerful and self-righteous when they are angry. They feel as if they are winning an argument when their partner cringes or hides or runs away in fear. They feel in control. But, this kind of behavior is nothing more than *emotional abuse* and has no place in a loving relationship.
- **“She made me mad. It’s her fault!”** The truth is no one *makes* us angry. *We let ourselves become angry* as a response to others’ behavior. There are better ways to respond besides anger: Take a brief time-out, calm down, and return to the discussion when both can be rational.
- **“She made me mad. That’s why I hit her!”** Again, our partners do not *make* us angry. We can choose how to respond. If we want a loving and caring partnership, violence has no place.
- **“She’s not an angry person. The alcohol made her angry.”** This is a common belief that can be deadly. Somehow the drinker is not responsible for her or his behavior. The fact is that no one else *made the individual drink* and, therefore, no one should be abused emo-

tionally or physically because of another person’s drinking. Drinking is no excuse for bad behavior.

- **“I had to yell at her. If I didn’t, I might have exploded.”** Some partners rationalize their anger by saying that it is better than the explosive violence that would inevitably follow. This is nonsense. Angry words tend to lead to violent behavior, rather than prevent violent behavior. Instead, learn to work things out in a positive, win-win fashion. If this is difficult to do, take a *time-out* by yourself and organize your thinking. It can even help to write down your thoughts so that when you come back to talk with your partner you have clear ideas of what you believe can be done to make things better. Remember: You’re on the same team.
- **“Go outside and run around and play football and get rid of all that anger.”** Going out to play football or running around the block a dozen times may wear a person down physically, but it doesn’t do anything to solve the root problem. Doing something that is soothing, such as going for a walk or listening to pleasant music, won’t solve the problem either. But they *can* help a person calm down enough to think clearly. Remember, only good communication and conflict resolution skills will *really* solve the problem.



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at amazon.com.

- **“She’s so nice. She never gets angry.”** Women have been socialized in our culture to react in a less visibly angry way than men, but women still get angry and they need to find ways to resolve the conflicts they have with their partner.
- **“If you don’t get angry, she’ll walk all over you.”** Partners often fall into the trap of believing that anger is the only protection they have from their partner. This view of the world turns a couple’s relationship into a battleground. Again, the only genuine solution is to view a couple’s relationship as a partnership, to be best friends, to be members of a two-person team in which both individuals are on the same side and the goal is relative happiness for both.
- **“Well, everybody gets angry. So there!”** Yes, everybody gets angry, but not everyone acts on their anger. Those who want to build positive emotional bonds with their partner find creative and soft-spoken ways to deal with their anger.
- **“I was just kidding.”** Many people enjoy putting others down and say they are just joking. But put-downs are hurtful and humiliating. Relationships in which put-downs are common are likely to be troubled and unhappy relationships.
- **“Anger, actually, can be a good thing.”** In a couple relationship, not really. The underlying conflict can be resolved much easier and more quickly by forgetting about anger and getting right to the discussion phase: the talking and listening and building understanding between each other that is necessary if the relationship is to survive and thrive.

To sum it all up, anger is a waste of time and energy and does terrible damage to loving relationships.

“You Always Hurt the One You Love”

As the old song lyric goes, human beings have an amazing ability to hurt each other, especially to hurt the ones to whom we are the closest, the ones we should be treating with the most respect, love, and kindness.

Why are we nicer to our boss, our teacher, our school bus driver, the stranger on the corner, than we are to our partner?

The answer to this question is similar to the answer to another very difficult question, “What’s the main cause of divorce in the world today?”

And the answer is: “Marriage.”

We are nicer to strangers and other acquaintances in our lives because the stakes are so much lower, because there’s not much riding on these kinds of relationships, because it’s easier to be nice when we aren’t locked into the relationship day-after-day, year-after-year, till death do us part. The stakes for a long-term, committed marital relationship are exception-

ally high, and we have extremely high expectations in our culture today for marriage.

We expect that:

- the marriage will be a stable economic relationship in which the partners always support each other through financial thick-and-thin.
- the couple, if they choose to have children, will be great parents and love their children as they would love themselves, every minute and all the time.
- the couple will be best friends, loving lovers, and always *up* for each other when they might really be feeling *down*.

These are incredibly high expectations for couples. No couple has ever succeeded in meeting such high expectations 100 percent of the time. One thing we can do to solve this problem is become more realistic about all this. We need to scale down our expectations a bit.

In Garrison Keillor’s fictitious small town, Lake Wobegon, a fellow named Floyd wanted to build a grocery store for the people of the town. Floyd was a bit leery of setting his sights too high, especially in such a modest village as Lake Wobegon, population a few hundred, so instead of aiming for a *supermarket* he decided to call his business *Floyd’s Pretty-Good Grocery Store*. The expectations for a *supermarket* were just too high, but a *pretty-good* store seemed just about right to Floyd. In this more modest endeavor he succeeded and he ended up quite happy with the result, and the town did, also.

So why do we always hurt the one we love? Because we are human and because we set impossible goals for ourselves and our marriage partner in our relationship. We are unrealistic and we inevitably fail to meet our elevated expectations, we blame and then try to hurt our partner. If we were to become more realistic about our partnership, in Floyd the grocer’s term, we might aim for a relationship that is “very good,” “very satisfying,” or “pretty good.”

For greater understanding of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

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