

Managing the Anger of Divorce

"If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow." - Chinese proverb

By Mari J. Frank

IT'S A FACT: escalating anger causes much of the sorrow of divorce. You have the right to be upset -- but how can you deal effectively with the ire in divorce? First, it's important to realize that 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 grows out of the feelings of disappointment of perceived wrongs by your "worse" half.

Since anger is really unresolved hurt without an outlet for healthy expression, repressed hostility causes an escalation of conflict. As a result, the legitimate suffering that both parties experience in marital discord often 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 a facilitated negotiation. Successful mediation de-escalates the hostility, focusing on problem solving instead of arguing positions. The mediator sifts out blame and helps the parties discover mutually acceptable solutions. Due to the intensity of the emotions -- and the complexity of the legal issues -- during divorce, the parties need a qualified neutral attorney/mediator to educate them about family-law issues. This process empowers both parties to make informed decisions about their children and their finances.

The expert mediator facilitates the transformation of conflict into "solutioneering" and teaches the parties how to manage their own anger. It's a process that 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 from stress, and "win" more of what you want if you can communicate effectively with your spouse.

For a long time, you and your spouse have pushed each other's "buttons" and reacted to conflict by fighting, fleeing, submitting, or freezing. When you repress anger, you feel diminished, yet if you meet hostility with aggression, it fans 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 the authority to anger to rule our reason.

Try the following proven strategy anytime your spouse (or children, boss, or anyone else) attacks your ideas, actions, or beliefs. To help you remember this 10-step strategy, you may find the acronym HARD LOVING helpful and apropos.

THE HARD LOVING STRATEGY TO DEFLECT CONFLICT

1. 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. Anger control

Anger is a negative emotion that 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 (focus), and imagine your spouse saying something

that "pushes your buttons." Identify your physical reaction to the verbal battle. Once you recognize your body's auto-reply to verbal pain, you gain the key to override its power over you.

3. Reverse reaction

You can consciously reverse this auto-reaction through your awareness. For example, if you sense a knife in your solar plexus when you're feeling 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 still have not said a single word to the 'attacker'. With practice, this gentle dissolving of your auto-reaction to conflict will take only a split second. Once your body is tranquil, you will regain your composure.

4. 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 will stop. If you don't engage the fight has ended. When you let go, you disable your "opponent." 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. Listen effectively

Listen to every word without resistance. (This doesn't mean you agree!) Don't think 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. 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 on 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 merely demonstrating your understanding of what you heard.

7. Voice open-ended questions

Follow up a mirrored statement with an open-ended question, 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?" "Can you tell me more about your proposal?" and "What is the basis for your reasoning?" These types of questions open the door to mutual understanding and problem solving.

8. 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:

- a) what they believe would be fair under the circumstances;
- b) what they really need -- and the basis for their suggested solution to the conflict; and
- c) what would resolve the issues for everyone, so that both parties and others involved would be able to accept the decisions agreed upon.

9. Non-aggression

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

10. 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 reconvene without groveling. You will have to deal with your spouse in the future, so release your anger before you speak again. Then start from step nine, and revive the problem-solving stage. Take a time-out, if

necessary, to make sure you both manage your own hostility.

Anger is a tough feeling to understand, but it's important to remember that you are not alone. 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 life lessons. Emotional counseling during divorce is a helpful way to clarify which issues belong to you and which 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 and, 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'll be able to "heal" the conflict so that you both can release the hurt, forgive one another, and move on with your lives, productively, to find new, healthy relationships. ■

Peaceful Divorce

Mediation can help you minimize the financial and emotional costs of divorce -- despite the hurt, anger, and lack of trust that usually accompanies the breakdown of a marriage. Here are some of the most important keys to creating a peaceful divorce.

By Mari J. Frank

"WE MUST PURSUE PEACEFUL ENDS THROUGH PEACEFUL MEANS."

— Martin Luther King Jr.

How is it possible to have a peaceful divorce when there is so much hurt, anger, and lack of trust? With the heartache of ending a marriage, how can you avoid the tremendous stress, pain, conflict escalation, and financial devastation of a courtroom battle? The key is to find a mediator whom you both can trust to educate you in the negotiation process, and to facilitate collaboration to resolve the conflict and create a satisfying settlement.

EFFECTIVE MEDIATION PROMOTES PEACE

"It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

— Eleanor Roosevelt

For both of you to feel comfortable in divorce mediation, you must have faith that the process will be fair and that your rights will be protected. You need to trust that your mediator has the negotiation skills, legal expertise, conflict management tools, sensitivity, and problem-solving