



Managing ANGER

ANGER is a very familiar emotion for all of us, and in healthy relationships, it can be an overwhelmingly positive force in our lives. Healthy anger can tell us if there's something wrong, painful, or threatening that we need to take care of. It helps us protect ourselves and to know when people are crossing our boundaries.

But for couples who are going through separation or divorce, anger is often anything but healthy. In her informative book *The Good Divorce*, Dr. Constance Ahrons defines divorce-related anger as “an extreme rage, vindictiveness, and over-powering bitterness that is felt when a love relationship is ending. It is a special kind of anger that usually hasn't been experienced before.”

When anger is coupled with divorce, it's often used as a misguided means of hanging onto a failed marriage. After all, for many people, a bad relationship is better than no relationship at all. Divorce anger allows people to punish their ex as often as possible, all the while maintaining an ongoing (bitter) relationship with him/her. It's a situation that leaves both partners in divorce limbo, a perilous situation that obstructs growth and self-awareness. If you wish to move forward, you'll need to learn to handle your anger.

Some people hold onto their anger so tightly — stoking the fires on a daily basis — that their rage takes over their whole lives, coloring and informing all their thoughts and actions. They weigh every action to see how much emotional

Divorce-related anger can literally make you crazy, causing you to say and do things you'd never dream of if you were thinking clearly. Even though it's a normal part of the healing process, anger can become a destructive force in your life.

or physical harm it will inflict on their ex-spouse (even simply being a nuisance will do “in a pinch”) without seeing the injuries they may be inflicting on innocent victims. Using children as human shields in the divorce battle is a common way to fan the flames of divorce anger. Many scenarios are possible, all of which are damaging and punitive to the children: the custodial parent withholds visitation from the non-custodial parent; the non-custodial parent refuses to pay child support; the custodial parent “forgets” to pick the children up; or the non-custodial parent is hours late in bringing them back. “We forget what's best for the children because we are so intent on getting that other person,” writes Ahrons. But “getting back through the kids is hitting below the belt.”

Divorce anger is also often expressed through the legal process itself. Here, it's very important to remember that your lawyer is your advocate, not your therapist or your best friend. Expressing anger to your ex-spouse through the legal process invariably leads to

prolonged, emotional proceedings that will ultimately leave you and the family resources drained dry.

Using the court as a venue to vent your anger is a bad idea for a couple of key reasons: it's the wrong venue, and it's very expensive (financially and emotionally). Unfortunately, the legal divorce process itself tends to add fuel to the fires of anger. Dividing property (some of which has great sentimental value) and trying to prove your case for custody and/or support can be very emotionally charged because these issues underline what is being lost or changed because of your divorce. Some degree of upset is inevitable, but driving yourself alongside your ex into bankruptcy is truly cutting off your nose to spite your face.

So how can you cope with this new and intense anger? The key lies in understanding its roots and in finding constructive ways to express the hurt, disappointment, and loss that both you and your former spouse are feeling now as you proceed through separation and divorce.

Here's some advice about coping with your own and your ex-spouse's divorce-related anger.

If You're Angry:

Write it out. Work through your anger by keeping a journal or by writing letters you don't mail. By doing so, you can release your anger without engaging another person. Also, it is possible that

you maybe angry with yourself.

Shout it out. Roll up the windows in your car, or put your head in a pillow and scream.

Talk it out. It's important when you're angry to develop your own personal support system. Instead of directing your anger at your ex-spouse, talk to a good friend (or two), or find a therapist who specializes in anger management.

Get some professional help. Anger can suppress other emotions, both positive and negative. Talking to a professional can help you begin to feel those emotions you've been suppressing and move past the anger. You could also benefit from a support or anger-management group, where you can share your story of isolation and help people move to a position of growth and development.

Take responsibility for your part of the marriage break-up. "It's a rare couple in which both partners were exactly equal in the breaking of the marriage, but it's an even rarer couple in which one partner was solely at fault," writes Constance Ahrons in *The Good Divorce*.

When someone pushes one of your buttons, your response is going to be way out of proportion to the offense.

Do some personal growth work. Anger is a great motivator toward action and can propel you to take steps in your life to change situations.

Learn what "pushes your buttons." Try to understand your anger — and what triggers it — before you express it. Don't be afraid to say that you need some time to think about your response.

Protect your children. Never make them part of your conflict with your former partner by withholding visitation or support or poisoning their minds against your ex. "For the sake of the children, if for no other reason, learn constructive methods of expressing anger," Ahrons says.

Keep conflicts at a moderate level. Your ex will often match your level of intensity. And be sure to choose your battles carefully. Expressing every little irritation and disagreement provokes resentment. Think about the most important issues and let go of the small stuff.

Use "I-messages" when expressing anger. Say: "I feel disappointed when you don't call," not: "You stupid idiot, you're always late!"

Give yourself time to recover from the loss of your marriage. On average, experts say that the healing process takes at least two years, and often longer. "It's important to realize how sad you are," says Ahrons. "This won't necessarily make you more vulnerable to your ex-spouse; your successful handling of your emotions puts you in a more powerful position."

Forgive, let go, move on. Anger can become a comfort, a constant in our lives, but as long as you continue to nurse your anger against your ex, you will never have a happy, fulfilled, post-divorce life. Own your responsibility for the break-up, and realize that you have the power to make the choice to forgive and move on, or stay angry and remain

stuck. It doesn't matter what your ex does; you can still choose forgiveness.

If Your Ex Is Angry:

Listen to and validate your ex-spouse's comments. By really listening to his or her concerns, you may learn where the anger is coming from and identify what you can do to help. It also really helps to defuse the situation by saying something like, "I understand why you're angry with me."

Don't be afraid to take a "time-out." Walk away from an anger attack if you can't handle it. You can try saying, "I'm not going to talk to you until you

calm down." Put limits on what you'll take and how you'll be treated.

Get some assertiveness training to boost your self-esteem. "Anger is like a fire that must be burned up into the ashes of forgiveness," writes Ahrons. "If we are passive, it is like throwing more logs onto the fire."

Try not to take your ex-spouse's comments too personally. Remember that anger is a projection of one's own inner feelings and one's own world. Accept the fact that this person is angry because they're going through turmoil.

Stay calm. It can really help de-escalate the other person's anger. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, can be effective when you're listening to someone who's really angry.

Learn to recognize your own hot buttons. When someone pushes one of your buttons, your response is going to be way out of proportion to the offense.

Try to feel a little compassion — no matter how hard that may be. Your ex may be feeling fearful and threatened, so try to hear what's underneath the anger; quite often, it's fear, pain, or shame. Showing empathy or compassion for your ex can go a long way to defusing his or her anger.

Be honest with yourself. Recognize that when someone is angry with you, there may be something in what they're saying. If your ex is yelling at you, you can choose to think he/she's a jerk and start yelling back, or you can "dig for the gold" in what he/she's saying. Keep the gold; discard the dirt and rocks.

Value your safety above all else. If your former partner's divorce anger seems to be headed in a dangerous direction, put some boundaries in place and communicate through a third party. Threats should always be taken seriously: remove yourself from the situation and refuse face-to-face contact if you sense any danger at all. ■

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