

How to Control Your Anger in Conflict Situations

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All married couples have conflict. These skirmishes can take on many forms. Some end in a stalemate between spouses where one or both are stonewalling or withdrawing while others can become heated and this anger causes them to say things that they later regret. But what about those fights that end in some type of verbal, emotional or even physical abuse? This abuse can make it difficult for couples to recover. Trust is eroded and intimacy is thwarted. It is hard to believe that abuse like this can occur in families, yet research shows that 1 in 6 couples in America experience some type of violence. Even very loving couples can fall prey to verbal and physical abuse.

Zach and Kelly were one such couple. We met them at one of our Soul Healers Couple's Workshops. "I'm ashamed to tell you," Kelly said with her voice shaking, "but Zach and I can't seem to resolve our problems without resorting to some type of violence. We both know it is wrong but we just can't stop." Zach added, "We are so embarrassed that we have never told anyone until now. One of the main reasons we came to this workshop was to find a way to stop."

Marital violence is one of the toughest issues to deal with, but there is hope for these couples and others like them. Research suggests that as many as 80% of volatile couples suffered from some form of abuse as children. Zach and Kelly were no exception. They both grew up in homes where violence was present. These traumatized couples carry wounds from this abuse that we call *soul wounds* which cause them to over react in conflict situations. This tendency to give a situation more anger or emotion than it deserves is called *reactivity*. It causes couples to respond in a fight or flight manner when memories of past trauma are triggered. Self-protection becomes their main objective. Because of this, they are highly reactive to real or perceived danger. They also have trouble distinguishing between past trauma and current marital issues. Frequently violence seems to be the only way they can defend themselves.

A typical violent ritual for Zach and Kelly started when he would criticize and condemn her for being messy and not keeping the house clean. She would become resentful and retaliate by criticizing him for not helping. As the conflict escalated, both of them would slip into childhood memories of abuse. She felt threatened while revisiting memories of her father's abusive criticism, and would lash back verbally and at times physically. He would get overwhelmed with reliving his father's abuse, so to protect himself he retaliated physically. Ironically, their fighting replicated their own childhood experiences. They were re-wounding each other's souls in much the same way their parents did. Both saw each other as a perpetrator, an intimate enemy, and therefore violence seemed to be their only way of self-protection.

In our Soul Healers Workshops we give couples two basic techniques designed to lower their violent reactions (reactivity), and help them listen and understand each other. The first technique is called **The GIFT Exercise**. It is built on the premise that anger is not really the main culprit behind reactivity. It is only a secondary emotion, usually felt in response to a more primary feeling, which means that anger is more of the response, than the root of a particular situation. Submerged under anger are four basic feelings that help define or give purpose to our rage. Chances are, if you are feeling anger, you can trace it to any of these four emotions. They are as follows:

Guilt
Inferiority
Fear
Trauma or pain

We have developed an acronym for these underlying emotions so that you can easily trace them to their root cause. We chose the word GIFT because it would be a GIFT to you and your spouse to identify the root of your wrath. If you respond to your mate in anger, it tends to create a defensive or angry response from them in return. Healthy communication is thwarted, and conflict goes unresolved. By tracing the root of your anger, you may be able to share it more effectively with your mate.

We challenge you to think about conflict and communicate it, not in terms of anger, but in terms of the four basic emotions that are lurking underneath it. The second communication

technique is a spin-off of the first. This tool allows you to identify certain triggers in your current relationship, understand the feelings these triggers evoke, and attach those feelings to early childhood wounds. This helps you separate past issues from current interactional patterns in your marriage. The technique gives you a clear way of seeing how you can confuse childhood traumas with marital issues which cause a great deal of reactivity. It is aptly called **The Digging Deeper Exercise** because it enables you to find the deeper root of your conflicts.

In doing this exercise you need to answer the following questions.

1. What is the behavior that my mate does that triggers my anger?

When my mate does this.....I feel this.....

2. Identify the root of this anger using The GIFT Exercise.

2. Ask yourself, when have I ever felt this feeling before?

Look for a past occurrence, preferably in childhood.

4. What do I do when I feel this feeling? What is my behavior?

5. What do I really NEED?

Here is how it works using Zach and Kelly's marital conflict as an example:

Kelly's Digging Deeper Exercise

1. What does my mate do that triggers my anger?

When Zach criticizes me about how dirty the house is I feel put down and devalued.

2. Identify the root of my anger using The GIFT Exercise.

I feel put down, and hurt, the roots being---Inferiority and Trauma.

3. When have I felt this before?

As a child, when my father would constantly criticize me and order me to do chores, but would never help me do them.

4. What is my response?

To get angry, yell, and not do what was asked in rebellion.

5. What did I really NEED?

To be encouraged and complimented for what I do accomplish.

Zach's Digging Deeper Exercise

1. What does my mate do that triggers my anger?

When Kelly does not clean the house as I have asked, I feel that my needs don't matter.

2. Identify the root of my anger using The GIFT Exercise.

I feel unimportant, that I don't matter. The roots being---Inferiority and Trauma.

3. When have I felt this before?

When I would come home from school, often my father would be drunk on the sofa. The house would be a wreck, and he would make me clean it. If I didn't, he would beat me.

4. What is my response?

As a child, and now, I would hold in my frustration, and eventually explode.

5. What do I really Need?

To feel like Kelly is on my team and that she cares about how I feel.

As you can see from this exercise Zach and Kelly's responses to anger worked against each other. Both saw that they were responding to the frustration in their marriage in much the same way they responded as children. Zach would take it until he exploded, and then yell at Kelly. She would yell back, and then just ignore his implied or verbal requests for change. They both felt threatened, misunderstood, and disregarded. Their deeper feelings were inferiority and pain. As they began to work through this exercise, they could see that they were triggering each other's soul wounds. They were doing and saying the very things that would hurt each other the most. It became obvious to them that their responses to anger were actually fostering violence in their marriage.

By using these two simple yet powerful tools several major things happened to this couple in a short period of time. They learned to share calmly and rationally without reactivity which perpetuated verbal and physical violence. Because there was no reactivity, they could more easily hear what each other was saying. Both Zach and Kelly understood for the first time why these issues impacted them so deeply and what was behind their frustration. They learned a great deal about each other's soul wounds and the childhood traumas that their marital conflicts triggered. Lastly, they determined what each other's needs actually were. Kelly saw that rather than her need being for Zach to stop criticizing her, she actually needed him to compliment and affirm her. More than a clean house, Zach realized that he wanted to feel that Kelly really cared about his needs

As a result of their deep sharing, both Zach and Kelly saw empathy from each other for the first time in years. Kelly said it best when she reported, "We actually listened to each other with our hearts, not just our ears. It created a "healing feeling" in our relationship that made us want to meet each other's needs. It helped us heal our souls."