



Anger is not an aphrodisiac

These very wise words, "Anger is Not An Aphrodisiac" were uttered during a recent seminar on anger given by Raymond DiGuiseppe, Ph.D. It's worth spending some time talking about anger because as much as you love your partner, you will not always like his/her behavior or opinions. How you express your feelings of anger can make or break your ability to problem-solve and get along in your relationship.

Anger, like any other emotion, is there to give you information. Anger is elicited whenever you think or perceive that: 1) things are unfair; 2) you are being mistreated; or, 3) your "shoulds" or rules about the world are being violated (e.g., "You should notice the crumbs left on the counter and wipe up after yourself.") You get angry when you think someone is doing the above *on purpose*.

Anger is adaptive because it can motivate you to change what is unfair or to change how you are being treated, or to change your perceptions of what you think is unfair or mistreatment. But there is a big difference between being *assertive* and being *aggressive*. Telling your partner how you are feeling and what you need does not have to come out as nagging, criticizing, complaining, passive-aggression, or at its worse, physical and verbal abuse.

It is important to know that when you feel threatened or attacked, the fight-or-flight system kicks in – this is a biological drive that helps to prepare you to fight back or run away from potential threats or danger. This alarm system can

be triggered by a *real* threat such as a bear chasing you in the forest or by the *thought* that something is dangerous (e.g., a critical statement, having to speak in front of an audience).

Let's say you and your partner are having a disagreement. If you are feeling attacked, you will likely become defensive and fight-or-flight will kick in. Once that happens, the drive to fight or withdraw decreases the likelihood that problem-solving will occur. In the end, no one is happy because the original problem you had never got resolved and you and your partner feel disconnected from each other.

What leads to defensiveness? The following are some classic "unfair" fighting techniques.

Asking "why" questions. When asked, "Why...?" most people feel that they have to justify their opinions or come up with an answer that meets their partner's expectations. Instead, ask questions beginning with "how" or "what" or other question words. For example, rather than saying "Why did you do that?" ask, "How did you come to your decision to do it that way?"

Name-calling. Clearly a way to attack the other person!

Bringing up the past. Reminding someone of when or how often they have done something in the past will not help!

Comparing your partner to their mother, father, sister, etc. We do not need to be reminded that we have learned many of our behaviors and preferences from our families, especially if they are things we would like to change!

"You" statements. Statements telling your partner what they need to do (e.g., "You need to pay attention and clean those crumbs off the counter.")

Always or never statements. Combined with "you" statements, this is a deadly combination (e.g., "You always leave crumbs on the counter, you never wipe up after yourself.")

How can you effectively share and manage your anger?

If your arousal level (fight-or-flight) is too high – stop and do some deep breathing or take a "time out" to get back in control before you try to work things out.

Assertiveness means letting people know how you feel and what you need. Be clear and direct about how you feel about what is currently happening ("I feel...") and how you would like things to be different ("I want... I would like... I would prefer it if... I need...").

Stick to using "I" statements (e.g., "I'm feeling irritated because the laundry is still not done yet... I would prefer it if we could come up with a schedule and stick to it").

Remember that you will not get everything that you ask for – but it's important to ask!

When your partner is not willing to give you what you ask for, it's not okay to then use control tactics to get what you want (e.g., nagging, threatening, etc.) if you want to have a good relationship. At that point, it's up to you to figure out a way to get what you want on your own or to figure out how to live without it.

If you have been told by others that you have an anger problem, it may be worthwhile to seek some assistance from a licensed mental health professional to learn how to better manage it.

Don't let anger be the reason your relationship does not last – conflict is a normal part of a healthy relationship, but unhealthy expressions of anger do not have to be!

DEBORAH ANDERSON, PhD

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