

Dealing With Couples' Anger

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Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson*

Revised by A. Quinn, C.J. Kemp, and C.A. Fruhauf**

Today, a little less than one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. The divorce rate has fallen slightly over the past five years, but still remains startlingly high. According to University of Denver psychologist Howard J. Markman, of the 50% of couples who do not divorce, only half are truly happy. These findings suggest that couples in the United States are lacking in the skills to have happy, successful marriages.

On a more extreme tangent, around 40-80% of couples who divorce have had one or more incidents of violence or abuse in their relationship. Abusive couples often inflict long-term pain and suffering on themselves and their children. Therefore, out of the subset of unhappy marriages, those couples who are experiencing violence and abuse from one or both partners may need more specific assistance in creating happy, successful marriages than couples who have unhappy marriages but are not violent. Partner violence has verbal, emotional, financial, and physical forms and couples experiencing issues with violence should seek the guidance of a licensed therapist, psychologist, or counselor.

In spite of the enormous economic and social costs of divorce, there is little long-term research on the causes of marital distress. However, a few studies help us identify some causes.

Markman and Colleagues and John Gottman have separately conducted studies that found that the major predictor of divorce was the way couples handle their disagreements and anger, and the

way they communicate and fight about their disappointments. Additionally, John Gottman, a foremost relationship researcher, would add divorce can be predicted from four forms of negative communication found in one or both partners: criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and/or contempt. Markman found, and Gottman's research agrees, that couples with the best chance for a successful marriage are those who learn to successfully discuss their problems and when possible, reach solutions.

Unhealthy fighting with one's partner can affect both partners' and their children's mental and physical health. It is important that couples avoid the negative (being defensive, sarcastic, withdrawing) while building positive skills. Long-term studies have found that couples who practice effective communication, anger and conflict management strategies in programs like the Denver-based Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program see many positive changes. Results include constructive arguing, effective communication, greater relationship satisfaction, fewer sexual problems, fewer instances of physical violence, less dominance, and greater use of problem-solving behaviors.

If learning to manage conflicts is one of the best skills we can learn to prevent marital distress, divorce, and mental and physical unhealthiness what do we need to know? Please note that when violence and abuse are found in a romantic relationship, that the following skills **might not** be useful.

Managing Conflict

There is no one perfect set of rules that is guaranteed to work with every valued relationship. Each couple should use ways that work best to help them talk about problems and try to resolve their issues. Couples can benefit from seeing conflict and frustration as an opportunity for, rather



Quick Facts

- Today, 45-50% of first time marriages end in divorce. Second and third marriages have a significantly higher rate of divorce.
- Of the 50% of couples who do not divorce, perhaps half are truly happy.
- The major predictor of divorce and marital unhappiness is not disappointment over finances, lack of sexual attraction, or lack of love—it is the way couples manage conflict.
- Verbally and physically abusive couples often inflict long-term pain and suffering on themselves and their children. Verbal or physical violence is part of an estimated one-fourth to one-half of dating relationships.

*R.J. Fetsch, Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies specialist and professor, human development and family studies; and B. Jacobson, retired Extension family and consumer sciences agent, Douglas County. 4/2007

** A. Quinn and C.J. Kemp, doctoral students, human development and family studies; C.A. Fruhauf, associate professor of human development and family studies, and director, HDFS Extension. 11/2013



than a failure in, communicating. Try the following skills in your relationship for a month and keep using what works for you.

Skills for Maintaining Positive Communication during Arguments:

1. As a couple, make a commitment to grow both as individuals and as two people in a relationship. Often knowing what one needs to do individually to grow can be difficult and you may want to visit a therapist, counselor, trusted friend, and/or a spiritual leader to have greater insight into this area.
2. Be aware of your thoughts and emotions throughout all arguments. Realize that you do not need to act in physically or verbally violent ways just because of your feelings and thoughts. Couples have many different arguing styles and the main goal is for both partners to feel safe at all times during the argument and to share their points of view and emotions with each other to try to reach a solution.
3. Remember, when one partner wins and the other loses in a valued relationship, both lose. The goal of couple's anger and conflict resolution is not to win but to reach a mutually agreeable solution with which you both can live. Competitive couples often like to think of this as letting their relationship win.
4. **Respect** and value yourself and your partner, even when you are angry with her/him. This can be difficult when angry, so when you think a negative thought about your partner, follow it with a positive thought about a skill or characteristic you like about your partner. This will combat the feeling of overall negativity toward your partner so you can maintain respect for each other.
5. During arguments try these skills:
 - **Compliment** the positive. "I appreciate your willingness to talk over this issue with me."
 - Laugh at yourself. **Humor** can be an effective tension reliever.
 - Have a **time-out** rule. If you notice yourself or your partner becoming too angry, then say "I need a time out for 10 minutes. Let's meet in the kitchen after that time." To make an effective time-out, your partner

needs to know what is going on (i.e. DO NOT just walk away; verbalize the need for a time-out), there needs to be a set time limit on the time out, and each partner needs to know where to meet after the time out to continue the discussion. Taking a time out and never continuing the discussion will make the couple feel as though they never resolve anything. Also, during the time out, each partner needs to do something to cool down and take their mind off the argument – if after the time out period is over and one or both partners are still too upset, then the time out period needs to be extended. NEVER call a time out on your partner, even if they are becoming upset, as this will only serve to increase the negativity in the relationship, simply say "Let's take a time-out."

- Stick to one specific issue at a time. Complaining, griping, or bringing in non-related issues is counter productive. Sometimes partners are trying to communicate their emotions and thoughts when complaining or criticizing – so try focusing on the emotions or thoughts when arguing. For example if you were to say, "You never pick the children up from their sports activities even though you have tons of time", this is going to come across as a criticism and your partner will just in turn act defensive. However if you were to say "I feel hurt and angry that I am the parent who picks up the children from sports activities the majority of the time" then your partner can hear how you feel as she/he is not feeling personally attacked at the same time.
- Share your feelings, thoughts, and needs during the argument. Use **I-statements** rather than you-statements. "I want you to help me set up and follow a monthly budget," rather than, "You always spend money recklessly."
- Ask for and give feedback to see what your partner heard your viewpoint to be and what you heard your partner's viewpoint to be. "It sounds like you're irritated because I bring home my office work. Right?"

"Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight."

– Phyllis Diller

- Check out your impressions. "I see a scowl on your face and I sense that you're angry at me. Are you?"
- Respect belt-lines. **Do not hit below the belt** by attacking tender spots and personal vulnerabilities. Avoid statements like, "Gee, for a bald guy, you don't look that old!"
- Ask for what you want—you might just get it! "What I want from you is a commitment to follow a budget for six months." Also ask your partner, "What do you want from me?"
- Stay in the **here and now**. "What I want from you right now is _____."
- Talk straight. Say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no.
- Practice the art of effective **compromise**. Arrive at a solution the two of you can live and experiment with for a month without either of you sabotaging the results.

Steps to Problem Solving/Reaching a Solution:

1. Take the time to identify a specific issue you want to resolve. If you are anxious about discussing it with your partner, ask yourself what is the best and worst outcome of a discussion, and if you are willing to accept either outcome. "**The specific issue I want to resolve is...**"
2. Decide if the issue is worth discussing. How much energy are you willing to invest in this relationship? How big is the issue and what are your intentions? (To blame, resolve, place guilt, understand?) "**I know we'll do better if we plan ahead to resolve this issue. Locking heads or getting into power struggles won't get us anywhere.**"
3. As a couple, decide when the two of you can talk. Pick a good time—not during meals with guests or right before one of you leaves for work. How much time will you need? How much privacy do you want? "**We could talk on Saturday after dinner in the kitchen—does that time and place work for you?**"

4. Get focused before talking. Take time to discover your true feelings, thoughts, impressions, wants, and past actions related to this specific issue before you discuss it.

5. Start the discussion what you think is positively occurring with the issue. **“Three positive things we did in the past related to this issue were: (1) _____, (2) _____, and (3) _____.”**

6. When discussing the problems with the issue, state how you feel or think about the issue first. **“I feel angry and sad when I see...”** Or **“I think you don’t love me when...”** I need to use all five of my senses (i.e., see, hear, touch, taste and smell) to figure out what’s happening with my partner and me. We need to make “sense statements” to help us answer questions about who, what, where, when and how.

7. Be specific when giving examples of the issue. Saying **“I want to talk to you about last Thursday when we yelled at each other” will help your partner understand you more clearly than saying “We always get into arguments!”**

8. Ask for what you want for yourself, your partner, and the relationship relative to the issue at hand. **“For you, I want you to sit down and talk. For me, I want you to listen to my viewpoint and I will listen to your viewpoint. For us, I want to work out a compromise.”**

9. **Negotiate** a solution the two of you can live with:
 - Identify the specific problem and who is involved.
 - Answer the question, “What do each of us really want or need?”
 - Brainstorm as many alternatives as possible without evaluating any of them.
 - Evaluate the alternatives by talking about and/or listing the pros and cons.
 - Select the best alternative(s) for the two of you based on what each person is willing to do (make I-statements, listen well to each other).
 - Decide who will do what, when and how in the plan.

10. **Implement** the action agreed upon.
11. **Review** your progress after an agreed upon amount of time (for example, one month). Compliment positive actions taken. Renegotiate differences.

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