

Feel a Fight Coming On?

Find the Clues to Transform Your Intimate Partner's Anger into an Opportunity for Connection and Growth

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The most common emotion I've seen couples struggle with is anger. This is what often happens: Someone gets angry (usually because they are hurting or afraid). The couple comes together to try to resolve the anger. So far so good. But then the trouble starts -- their dialogue is filled with ways of speaking and thinking that tend to make matters worse, like blaming, shaming, accusation, criticism, name-calling, defensiveness, and even silence.

Stop the Cycle When caught in that spiral of pain, some couples break off all communication, leaving the initial issue unresolved. Remaining unresolved, the issue can become an irritant that continues to show up in future conversations. As unresolved issues pile up, it becomes even harder to resolve new ones. Nonviolent Communication can help us stop this cycle from beginning in the first place.

Marshall Rosenberg has an insight into anger that I love. He believes that when we are angry, three things are true:

We are experiencing a strong need and feel an urgent desire to have it met. (We may want to feel safe, valued, or connected to others; we may want to make our own choices, to believe we matter, to be heard, etc.).

Because our need is so important, we don't want others to have a choice about meeting it, so when we talk about our need we apply moralistic rules that we hope will compel others to meet our need. (These rules sound like: "I deserve... You should... The right way is... That's not fair, You're supposed to...").

Because we believe our rules are correct, we feel justified in treating others in unpleasant ways that will almost guarantee that they won't care about meeting our needs. Oops.

This is a sorry cycle, but it does reveal how we can convert anger into understanding and connection. First, we can recognize that the moralistic rules our partner has about how we should or shouldn't act are just their attempt to compel others to meet their needs. The rules themselves don't really matter. What does matter is to identify the unmet needs that are embedded within these rules.

How I do this? Look Beyond the Rules The first thing I do, is set aside my reaction to what the person has said, if I can. Then, I begin my search to identify their unmet needs by saying something like this, "When I hear that you are upset about this, it tells me there was a way you wanted to be treated that didn't happen. Am I right?"

This usually brings an affirmation and another round of venting. Then, I deepen my search for their unmet needs by asking a question something like this, "If you could have been treated in a way that was perfect for you, what would that look like? What would have happened?"

Connect to the "Dream" This gets them thinking about a positive, the dream they have for how they would like to be treated. I often have to help people develop the details of this dream because most people are more used to knowing what they don't want, rather than what they do.

I then try this question, "If your dream happened, if you were treated exactly as you would like to be, how would that be better for you? What would make that way of being treated a lot more satisfying, valuable or comfortable for you?" These questions usually evoke responses like, "Then I would know that my feelings mattered," "I wouldn't be yelled at," "Then I would feel respected," "Then I wouldn't be so scared." Now their needs are beginning to show.

Use the Clues to Find the Need Luckily, their answers are really clues -- I can use them to begin guessing what their unmet needs might be. Like presenting a person with different clothes to try on, I present my guesses and let them decide what fits. We keep trying different possibilities, narrowing the search, until we have a sense that, yeah, that's it.

Here's an example: They say, "I want my feelings to matter too." I respond, "So it's important that you are listened to?" "Yeah, why does everybody else get to have their say and I don't?" I respond, "I think you're telling me that you too want to have a say in choosing what we do." "Yeah." "OK, I can understand you'd like the power to influence our decision just as much as anyone else" "Yeah, what am I, chopped liver?" "You certainly aren't, and I very much regret that you got that impression." "OK, thanks."

See the Potential Beyond the Fight In this dialogue, you can see that I start with what they say they want, and then burrow my way down until we are talking about some basic need - like the need to be heard, to be valued. I know when we've gotten to the heart of their anger when we both feel a deep sense of relief and relaxation. This is the deepest form of empathy I know and it transforms the alienation of anger into the joy of connection. While it took me a while to learn how to do this, I not only have less fear of anger, I have a sense of eagerness about what needs our search will reveal, and the sense of closeness that search will create.