

How Misunderstanding Anger Can Harm Your Marriage

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Marriage educators and therapists are often faced with the difficult task of helping couples deal more successfully with challenging emotions like frustration and anger in order to help prevent such emotions from spilling over into negative and harmful interpersonal behavior. It is all the more unfortunate, and makes our task even more difficult, when stories or articles appear in the media that undercut those efforts.

One such article was published online at ABCnews.com. The article was authored by Lee Dye and is entitled “Angry With Your Spouse? Let It Out: Researchers Say Keeping Anger in Can Shorten Your Life” (ABC Internet Ventures, January 30, 2008). (To read the article, go to: <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/DyeHard/story?id=4212899&page=1>)

Dye’s article has a catchy title and an even catchier opening: “Here’s the latest word on surviving an angry marriage: have a fight. It could save your life.”

Unfortunately, a careful reading of Dye’s article, and the research upon which it is based, reveals that Dye has seriously misrepresented the nature of the findings of the research study he is reporting on. Moreover, his misinterpretation is contradicted by the best recent research that the uncontrolled venting of anger is *not* a good thing. (As one of the comments on Dye’s online article wryly noted, this had just been reported on ABC Internet Ventures only the preceding week.)

Worst of all, Dye’s misinterpretation also reflects common misperceptions about anger that only serve to reinforce out-of-date stereotypes about anger, what it represents, and how best to deal with it, both for yourself and interpersonally. On this level, Dye’s article is of profound disservice to the general public.

At the heart of Dye’s misinterpretation is his failure to distinguish between anger as a legitimate emotion versus so-called “anger” that refers (misleadingly) to interpersonally destructive or verbally abusive behavior that is best captured with phrases such as “the uncontrolled venting of anger” or the “dumping of anger” on another person. This common dual use of the word “anger” to refer to a natural human emotion versus undesirable behavior is the source of much confusion and misunderstanding.

As a legitimate emotion, anger serves as a signal that a person is being mistreated or treated unfairly. What the research study that Dye is reporting on is saying (as accurately captured in the subtitle of his article), is that it appears to be unhealthy to “keep in,” i.e., to not express, your anger when you feel that you are being mistreated by your spouse. The failure to communicate your anger results in the internalization of the anger. The internalized anger in turn eats away at a person’s peace of mind, leading to an intensification of the (unexpressed) anger and a build up of resentment that is both emotionally debilitating and, the research appears to indicate, physically harmful, even to the point of contributing to a shortened life span. If that had been the focus of

Dye's article, then he would have accurately represented the research findings and he indeed would have performed a public service.

However, what Dye did was to confuse the expression of anger to one's spouse over feeling mistreated with something quite different, namely (as expressed in his opening paragraph), "hav[ing] a fight" in order to "save your life." Expressing anger (skillfully and respectfully) when a person feels mistreated by his or her spouse is not the same thing as having a fight that involves uncontrollably venting or "dumping" anger on the spouse, as the picture at the lead of the story all too vividly conveys as it depicts a couple screaming at one another.

Now Dye does report that the research study's author, Ernest Harburg, stated that expressing anger "doesn't mean that if a husband and wife get into a dispute they should declare war on each other." But if that is the case, then Dye's opening paragraph ("Here's the latest word on surviving an angry marriage: have a fight. It could save your life.") represents a gross distortion of the research study's results and their interpretation. Unfortunately, that opening paragraph in Dye's article and the picture of the couple screaming at one another is what the public is most likely to (mistakenly) believe is what Harburg's research study concluded.

Here is a more accurate interpretation of Harburg's study that also dovetails with the growing research about the negative effects of the uncontrolled venting of anger:

Not communicating and suppressing feelings of anger when a person feels mistreated by his or her spouse appears to have negative emotional and physical health consequences, even to the point of shortening one's life span. This can be understood to be the byproduct of the cumulative negative effect of persistent rumination over the experienced injury and the consequent anguish and loss of peace of mind that results from the injured person depriving him or herself of the opportunity both to express legitimate emotion and to potentially receive redress to the experienced injury.

This conclusion is not to be construed, however, as advocating that the person experiencing anger should turn around and vent that anger in an uncontrolled manner at the spouse or "dump" that anger on the spouse in the form of interpersonally destructive and/or verbally abusive behavior that likely would result in a screaming match and verbal fight. The reason, as other recent research has consistently demonstrated, is that the uncontrolled venting of anger is now recognized to have the negative effect of simply reinforcing the emotion of anger in a manner that creates a vicious cycle of intense negative emotion perpetuating itself while also rendering virtually impossible any constructive communication that is the precondition for collaborative problem solving designed to resolve an interpersonal injury and restore positive feelings in the relationship.

So if you are feeling angry over being mistreated by your spouse, then the recommendation is to initiate a dialogue with your spouse in order to communicate your feelings skillfully and respectfully, i.e., in a manner designed to minimize the likelihood that your spouse feel defensive. The goal here is to give your spouse a chance to hear your anger so that he or she hopefully is able to respond in a manner that leaves you feeling understood and acknowledged with respect to the injury, and with an increased prospect that the situation can be resolved in a

manner that restores positive feeling and a sense of connection in the relationship. In this way, both your emotional health and physical well being will most likely be preserved, with the added bonus that you are more likely to live longer and to have happier lives together.

To sum up: Express your anger skillfully and respectfully whenever you deem the issue to be important enough to you that failing to do so would compromise your peace of mind; but never vent your anger uncontrollably at your spouse or dump your anger on your spouse because that will only intensify your anger and further harm your relationship.

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