



FAMILY

Dealing With Couples' Anger

no. 10.238

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson ¹ (4/07)

Quick Facts...

Today, one of every two marriages ends in divorce. Of the 50 percent of couples who do not divorce, perhaps half are truly happy.

Distressed or abusive couples often inflict long-term pain and suffering on themselves and their children.

Physical or verbal violence is part of an estimated one-fourth to one-half of dating relationships.

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.

**Colorado
State**
University

Extension

© Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension. 4/95.
Reviewed 4/07.
www.ext.colostate.edu

Today, one of every two marriages ends in divorce. According to University of Denver psychologists Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, of the 50 percent who do not divorce, only half are truly happy. Also, distressed or abusive couples often inflict long-term pain and suffering on themselves and their children.

Even dating couples are at risk. According to Sam Quick, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension family life specialist, and the Human Abuse Prevention Council, physical and verbal violence is part of an estimated one-fourth to one-half of dating relationships. Women who marry abusive male friends and men who marry abusive female friends often are surprised to discover that the violent behavior does not stop with marriage.

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.

At the University of Denver, studies found that the major predictor of divorce and marital unhappiness was not disappointments over finances, lack of sexual attraction or lack of love. It was the way couples handle their disagreements and anger, and the way they communicate and fight about their disappointments. Markman found that couples with the best chance for a successful marriage are those who learn to successfully resolve problems when they develop.

If learning to manage conflicts is one of the best skills we can learn to prevent marital distress, divorce and violence, what do we need to know?

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 resolve their issues. Couples can benefit from seeing conflict and frustration as an opportunity for, rather than a failure in, communicating. Try the following in your relationship for a month and keep using what works for you.

1. As a couple, make a commitment to grow both as individuals and as two people in a relationship.
2. Be as calm and logical as possible.
3. Remember, when one wins and one loses in a valued relationship, both lose. Avoid statements like, "Prove it!" The goal of couple anger and conflict resolution is not to win but to reach a mutually agreeable solution with which you both can live.
4. Respect and value yourself and your partner.
5. 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.

6. 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?)

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

- The specific issue I want to resolve is _____.”
- 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. Three positive things we did in the past related to this issue were:
1) _____, 2) _____, and 3) _____.”
- I feel _____ (for example, “angry”).
- I need to use all five of my senses (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. The more specific I am about time, place and specific behavior, the better I communicate. For example, “I want to talk to you about last Thursday when we yelled at each other.”
- I think _____. For example, “screaming at you or hitting you is totally inappropriate.”
- As specifically as possible, I will ask for what I want for myself, my partner and us as a couple 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. For us, I want to work out a compromise.”

8. 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?

9. Ask for time to discuss the issue and set an appointment. “I want to talk with you about setting up a budget. Is now a good time to talk? How about Saturday night at 9:00 in our bedroom?”

10. Stick to one specific issue at a time. Complaining, griping, or bringing in non-related issues is counter productive.

11. Share your feelings, thoughts, wants, etc. (See #7 above.) 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.”

12. 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?”

13. Check out your impressions. “I see a scowl on your face and I sense that you’re angry at me. Are you?”

14. 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!”

15. Ask for what you want — you might 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?”

16. Stay in the here and now. “What I want from you right now is _____.”

17. Talk straight. Say yes when you mean yes, and no when you mean no.

18. 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.

“Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight.”

—Phyllis Diller

19. Negotiate a solution the two of you can live with:
 - a. Identify the specific problem and who is involved.
 - b. Answer the question, “What do each of us really want or need?”
 - c. Brainstorm as many alternatives as possible without evaluating any of them.
 - d. Evaluate the alternatives by talking about and/or listing the pros and cons.
 - e. 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).
 - f. Decide who will do what, when and how.
 - g. Put your plan into action on a trial basis.
 - h. Make a date in a month to figure out what worked and what didn’t.
20. Compliment the positive. “I appreciate your willingness to talk over this issue with me.”
21. Laugh at yourself. Genuinely funny, non-sarcastic humor can be an effective tension reliever.
22. Have a time-out rule. If you notice that one of you is beginning to become angry and irrational, you might first say in a gentle, nonblaming, and assertive manner: “I hear your voice rising and I wonder whether you’re losing control. Would you get yourself calm again so we can resolve this issue?” If not, then both of you can agree to take a “Time-Out!” without question. Later the two of you can negotiate a discussion about the sensitive issue.
23. Implement the action agreed upon. (See #19 above).
24. Review your progress after a month. Compliment positive actions taken. Renegotiate differences.

Health Effects

Unhealthy fighting with one’s mate can affect both partners’ health. In a study by Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues, the effects of a 30-minute discussion of marital problems was measured for a 24-hour period. The more negative or hostile behaviors partners exhibited during the discussion, the greater the effects were on the immune system. The discussion led to greater increases in blood pressure that remained elevated for longer periods in high negative people than in low negative people. Women were more likely than men to show negative immunological changes, thereby making them more vulnerable to colds, heart disease and cancer. These findings provide support for the link between personal relationships and immune functions.

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.

References

- Bach, G. R., & Wyden, P. (1970). *The Intimate Enemy: How to Fight Fair in Love and Marriage*. New York: Avon Books.
- Gottman, J. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Halpert, S. (Producer). (1992). “Fighting for Your Marriage: The PREP Approach” [Film]. Denver: Educational Videos.

- Human Abuse Prevention Council. (1986). "Breaking the Cycle of Abuse: A Positive Approach." Author: Lexington, Ky.
- Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., Malarkey, W. B., Chee, M. A., Newton, T., Cacioppo, J. T., Mao, H. Y., & Glaser, R. (1993). "Negative Behavior During Marital Conflict is Associated With Immunological Down-Regulation." *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 55, 395-409.
- Markman, H. J. (1987, November). "The Prediction and Prevention of Marital Distress: Summary of Results." Research reported to National Institute of Mental Health. (Available from author, Department of Psychology, University of Denver, 2450 S. Vine St., Denver, CO 80208.)
- Markman, H. J. (1992). "Marital and Family Psychology: Burning Issues." *Journal of Family Psychology*, 5, 264-275.
- Markman, H. J., & Hahlweg, K. (1993). "The Prediction and Prevention of Marital Distress: An International Perspective." *Clinical Psychology Review*, 13, 29-43.
- Markman, H. J., Renick, M. J., Floyd, F. J., Stanley, S. M., & Clements, M. (1993). "Preventing Marital Distress Through Communication and Conflict Management Training: A Four and Five Year Follow-Up." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 61, 70-77.
- Markman, H. J., Stanley, S., Storaasli, R., and Clements, M. (1992). "Destructive Conflict Predicts Divorce: Results of a Six-Year Follow-Up." Unpublished manuscript.
- Miller, S., Wackman, D., Nunnally, E., & Saline, C. (1982). *Straight Talk: A New Way to Get Closer to Others by Saying What You Really Mean*. New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers.
- National Center for Health Statistics. (1989). "Births, Marriages, Divorces and Deaths for October, 1988." *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, 37(10). DHHS Pub. No. (PHS) 89-1120. Hyattsville, Md.: Public Health Service.
- Paul, J., & Paul, M. (1989). *From conflict to caring: An in-depth program for creating loving relationships*. Minneapolis, MN: CompCare.
- Powell, D. (1993). "The Psycho-Social Factors Affecting Health and Wellness." Workshop presented at the National Wellness Conference, Stevens Point, Wis.
- Renick, M. J., Blumberg, S. L., & Markman, H. J. (1992). "The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP): An Empirically Based Preventive Intervention Program for Couples." *Family Relations*, 41, 141-147.
- Sabourin, S., Laporte, L., & Wright, J. (1990). "Problem Solving Self-Appraisal and Coping Efforts in Distressed and Nondistressed Couples." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 16(1), 89-97.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to the following reviewers: Patricia A. Johnson, former Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies specialist; Toni S. Zimmerman, professor, human development and family studies; and Ben Silliman, North Carolina State University youth specialist.

¹R.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.

Colorado State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Colorado counties cooperating. CSU Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. No endorsement of products mentioned is intended nor is criticism implied of products not mentioned.