

# DEALING WITH ANGER & RESENTMENT IN YOUR MARRIAGE

*MEND THE MARRIAGE: ADVANCED COURSE*

*BONUS BOOK #1*

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Divorce, separation, and relationship conflict can lead to sadness, depression, and a wide range of other difficult emotions. This is to be expected and is normal for most people.

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Regardless of where you live, there are mental health resources and assistance available to you. Contact your doctor or phone your local health care provider to find the help you need in your local area.

[Click here to see a list of symptoms associated with depression.](#) If you encounter any of these symptoms, seek help from a certified mental health practitioner.

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# DEALING WITH ANGER AND RESENTMENT IN YOUR MARRIAGE

Resentment is a submerged, rocky reef that can sink the ship of any marriage, even the strongest. If you don't deal properly with your resentments (and they're bound to come up in any relationship between human beings), they will grow and poison many aspects of your marriage. Squeezing them down and ignoring them – “stuffing them” – is like trying to compress a water-filled balloon, which just bulges out in other places.

Although a marriage is meant to be (and often is) a harmonious whole, a relationship where two people become a single entity and act as one



mind, it's still composed of two independent people with two different minds and two different emotional landscapes. Those differences, which are part of the beauty of marriage, are also where resentment comes in.

A resentment is, shall we say, a small bit of anger, or a little grudge that can grow into a mighty anger, the way an acorn the size of your thumb can grow into an oak tree bigger than your house. Except it doesn't take nearly as long.

Since anger grows from and is fuelled by resentment, let's start with resentment as the problem to recognize and deal with.

## For better or worse

Consider the following case study, if you will. A husband and wife have been happily married for many years. They've grown older, and now the husband has developed some health problems. He's having trouble with his feet and he can no longer walk very easily. It hurts him to stand up for any length of time. And he's gained weight as a result of not being able to exercise, so he is somewhat depressed and self-conscious about his size and disability.

In the past, this couple took daily walks, went out to restaurants several times a week, and enjoyed trips to the cinema to watch current movies.

The wife, remembering and respecting her wedding vows of "for better or worse, in good times and bad," does everything she can to help her



husband. Instead of walking to the store or taking other trips on foot, they now drive. Because his feet hurt and he can't get in and

out of the car easily, she drives him everywhere.

So far, so good, right? The wife has stepped up to loyally support her husband. That's part of what marriage is, right?

But other things have changed – little joys have disappeared from their marriage. She asks him out to a restaurant. "Let's go to that little café we love and have lunch today." But he's not feeling up to it, and they stay home instead.

“There’s a great new movie at the neighborhood theater,” she says. “I’d love to go see it with you today.”

But he feels uncomfortable and wants to stay home, so they stay home and watch a movie on TV instead.

Eventually, the wife notices she’s feeling a bit more tired and grouchy. One day, when she suggests going out, her husband again demurs. “I’m sorry, honey, but my feet hurt too much and I’m tired,” he says, perfectly reasonably.

But she explodes in anger. “I feel like a shut in!” she shouts. “We never go *anywhere* anymore because of you! It’s your fault!”

What’s happened here? Who is to blame for this painful incident that leaves both spouses feeling terrible?

Is it the husband's fault for telling the truth – “my feet hurt and I don't want to go out”? He isn't lying. He's telling her the honest truth.

Is it the wife's fault? What could this saintly woman have possibly done wrong? Isn't she a true hero who has set aside her own needs and sacrificed nobly for her husband?

But there is a little bit of tarnish on her angelic halo. The key to the problem is that bit about setting aside her own needs. She's set them aside completely, and the result has been a build up of resentments that she may not have even noticed.

The difference, in a word, is between being *loyal* and being a *martyr*.

What, perhaps, should she have done?

One thing she probably should have done is to pay some attention to her own needs and to take better care of herself. Even if her husband doesn't want to go out to a restaurant or a movie, she can still go on her own, or with a friend. There's nothing disloyal about that – her husband can stay home by himself for a few hours, no problem.



Just because her husband can't go on walks with her doesn't mean she needs to give up walking herself. If she cuts all the joy out of her own life the result will be two miserable, unhappy partners shut up together in the house, a combination that's sure to be explosive. Part of her responsibility as a wife is to take care of herself, to enjoy her life as much as she can and thereby be a happier, more energized person when it comes to helping her husband.

Remember the instructions given on a jet plane – if the pressure drops and the oxygen masks fall, put your *own* mask on first, before you try to help someone else. Otherwise you may pass out and be unable to help anyone, even yourself.

Marriage is like that. To best help your spouse, you must first help yourself.

Another thing this saintly wife could've done is to communicate honestly with her husband about how she feels and what she needs. Too often in marriage, a spouse will hide or lie about their own needs or feelings as a way of protecting their partner. But by denying our own feelings and not asking for what we need, we create these toxic resentments that end up in an ugly, angry explosion.

If she had expressed herself to her husband more clearly early on, things might never have gone so far as her angry outburst.

"I really miss our daily walks," she could've said. "And I miss seeing movies and going out to restaurants with you." Perhaps her husband would've then sensibly suggested she go out on her own, or with a friend.

Instead, by suffering silently, she took on more stress than she needed to.

She might also have said no to her husband sometimes. “I don’t want to take you to the store today,” she could’ve said. “Let’s see if one of our friends can drive you instead.” By saying this, she would remind her husband, and more importantly herself, that she’s not trapped by the obligations of her marriage. She has a choice. Maybe she doesn’t need to say no very often. But she needs to know that she can say no if she wants to.

## Asking or Nagging?

Resentments, small and large, arise in all aspects of marriage. Having to take out the garbage one too many times, or having to get out of work early to pick up the kids after school because your spouse couldn’t make it, or

having to put up with a dog (or a second dog) because your spouse really wanted one, or seeing your partner flirt with another person – these can all irritate you, get under your skin, and build up to an unhappy, unhealthy explosion of anger.



Communication is the key to drawing the poison from these resentments. But it has to be the right kind of safe, careful, healthy communication, and not everyone knows how to do that.

After all, screaming, “I hate you!” or “This is all *your* fault!” counts as communication. But it’s obviously the wrong sort. If you need to say those sorts of primal, hostile, violent things (and sometimes it is necessary), best to

do that when you're alone. Shouting them at your spouse just makes things worse.

The goal is civilized communication. Figure out what you want, what you need, and tell it to your partner. Ask for what you need.

An important aspect of marital communications is restraint. Asking for what you need is important, but asking too much or too forcefully turns quickly into nagging, something that's more likely to anger and alienate your spouse than convince them to do what you want.

A good rule of thumb is "I can say anything I want to my spouse, if I'm prepared to drop the issue after that."

Think about it. If you need to bring up an important issue with your spouse, by all means do so. That's the first step in clear communication.

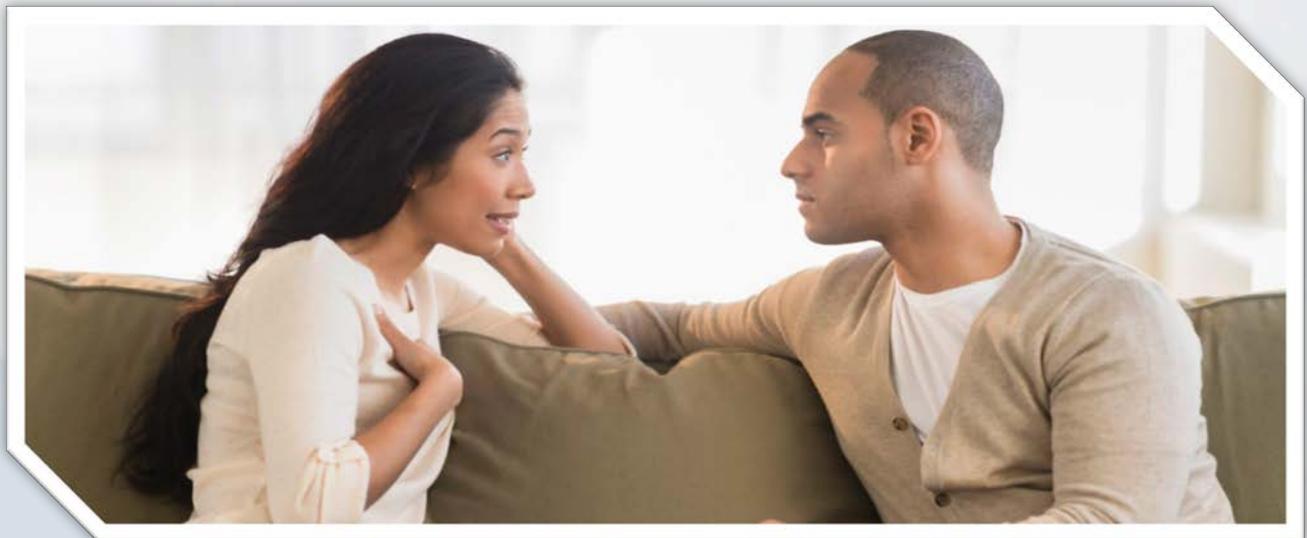
But after that, it's important to take your hands off the wheel, to let go of trying to control how your spouse reacts and responds to what you've said.

By asking for something important to you, you have avoided developing a resentment yourself. And by giving your partner a chance to think over what you've said and respond in their own way, you've treated them like an adult and helped them avoid another resentment.

If instead you watch like a hawk to see if your spouse does what you want, if you constantly judge them, supervise them like a child, and return

repeatedly to the same issue, your spouse, feeling rather hen-pecked, is likely to resent it.

Checking in regularly with each other about how things are going is a great way to head off resentments before they get any bigger and more dangerous. One tool healthy couples use is setting aside a time, even just a few minutes, once a week or even more often, to just talk honestly with each other.



A weekly walk around the neighborhood is a great time to chat about what's on your mind, but you can also do it in the car or even just for a few minutes before going to sleep at night.

The important thing is to express what's on your mind in a quiet, undemanding way. Let your spouse listen to what you have to say, and be sure to listen respectfully to them when it's their turn. Though it sometimes takes some training to learn to listen without interrupting your spouse, it is possible to do it, and it really helps.

## Awful Anger

No matter how diligent we are, no matter how well we communicate, we can't always avoid anger, nor should we.

Anger, as unpleasant as it is, must be respected as part of our emotional

makeup. Everyone gets angry – you wouldn't be human if you didn't. You'd be a robot.



Everyone expresses anger in different ways, too. But even though everyone's different, there are *good* and *bad* ways of expressing anger.

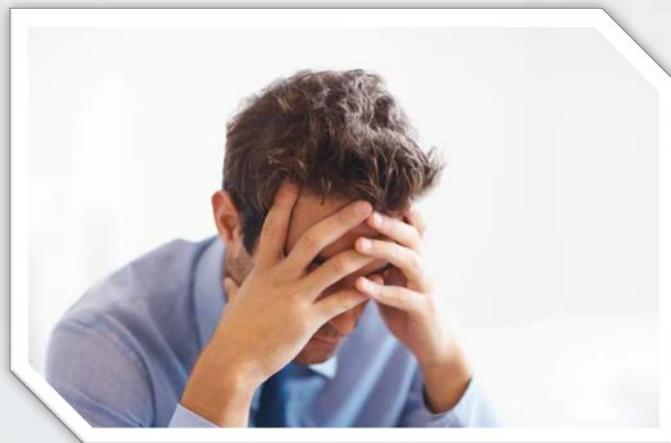
Violence, whether physical or even just verbal, is not a healthy way to express anger to another person. Verbal violence and bullying, even without any physical touch, can be abusive and destructive.

Here are some guidelines, taken from *Mend the Marriage*, which can help you avoid expressing anger in negative ways and focus on a healthy expression of this powerful, frightening emotion.

*Think before speaking.* Give yourself a few seconds or a minute to think before opening your mouth to respond to whatever has made you angry. Even a few seconds can help – your mother’s advice to count to ten before replying applies very well here.

*Take some time out.* Time outs aren’t just for children who lose their tempers on the playground. Time outs work well for adults, too. Give yourself the chance, if you feel out of control due to anger, to step away to a safe, quiet place and pull yourself together.

*Respond when you're calm.* If it takes 30 seconds, 30 minutes, or 30 hours, you will always do a better job of responding and expressing yourself when you've calmed down. Give yourself the gift of that time.



*Avoid triggers or 'hot buttons.'* You should have a pretty good idea of the particular things that drive you crazy, that really make you angry. Work together with your spouse to avoid the particular stresses that bother you the most.

*Change your thinking.* "Thinking" may not even be the right word here. When we get really angry, the most primitive part of our brain stem – the so-called "reptile brain" – takes control and it can be very difficult to recover.

But it is possible to change the pattern of anger, with effort. Consider role-playing or rehearsing situations that make you angry, and look for different ways to respond. If you tend to blame others and lash out when you're angry, work on reminding yourself of positive steps you can take to move on. Look back at temper tantrums you've had in the past, and see how you would prefer to have reacted.

*Check your facts.* Be sure, before you blow up, that you know the facts.

Too often, couples fight over misunderstandings. Don't assume you know what's happened. Taking time to get the facts straight also has another advantage – it gives you time to cool down and respond more appropriately.

*Laugh.* A sense of humor is one of the greatest assets in life. Look for the funny side of situations that upset you. Watch some stand up comics or television sit-coms that deal with issues you get angry about. There are many sit-coms about family issues because so many people get angry with their family members. By watching some of these shows, you may learn to see the humor in your own situation.



*Use logic and tell the truth.* The “reptile brain” doesn’t do logic. It sees everything in black and white. When it’s bossing us around, we say extreme things like “You *always* do this!” or “You *never* do that!” As

good as it may feel to fire a broadside like that, it doesn’t help because it isn’t true. It may seem like your husband “never” puts the toilet seat down, but surely, if you think about it, you’ll remember that sometimes he does. Try to use language honestly. Instead of saying, “I hate you!” or shouting some expletive, say what you really feel. “I am angry because you left the toilet seat up!”

*Exercise and relax.* When you’re angry, exercise and relaxing meditation are great ways to feel better. A hard run or bike ride or a hundred pushups

or half an hour punching the heavy bag will always help you release your anger. So will deep breathing and sitting quietly for a while. But don't keep these tools in the box until you get angry – they both work very well in everyday life. Getting regular workouts and taking some time every day to relax and meditate will help prevent you from losing your temper other times. And they'll help you recover more quickly when you do get upset.

*Don't be afraid to get help.* Be honest with yourself about your anger. If it's a serious problem, particularly if you feel you might lose control and hurt someone (or yourself), or if you regularly say terrible things you can't take back, seek professional help. A good therapist is worth their weight in gold if they can help you avoid such destructive anger. There are also plenty of anger management groups around – check out your local hospital or community center, or ask a therapist to suggest something. Meeting other

people who get angry like you do, and seeing how they're learning to deal with it, is incredibly helpful. One of the first things you'll learn is that there are solutions out there to help you deal with your anger. You'll meet people who've used them successfully.

## Anger's Aftermath

Despite all our good intentions and careful strategies, we will still lose our temper sometimes. It's inevitable and it's part of being human.

Angry outbursts and fights leave long-lasting scars. It's important to do as much as possible to repair the damage afterward. Issues and hurt feelings that aren't dealt with qualify as resentments, and they can lead down the road to even more anger.

Apologizing isn't easy. Though it's pretty easy to say the words "I'm sorry," it isn't quite so simple. Apologizing in a healthy, healing way takes more work and more thought.

A proper apology doesn't just help the person we've hurt through our anger. It doesn't just soothe our spouse's hurt feelings after we've yelled at them. It also helps us.

A husband loses his temper and blows up at his wife. "We haven't had sex in six months because you never want to! What's wrong with you? Don't you care about me anymore? Or are you having an affair with somebody? Is that it?"

Having said so many truly hurtful things, having dropped so many emotional atom bombs, this guy's gotten into serious trouble. He's really hurt his wife – even if the no-sex issue is a real problem, this was not at all a good way to address it – and he's now associated any future sex they may have with this painful outburst. His wife may feel confused and upset, and think she needs to have sex with him out of some obligation, rather than because she loves him and wants to.



He may also carry the burden of this fight into the bedroom, feeling guilty when he and she have sex, because subconsciously (or quite consciously) he feels he bullied her into it.

How can apologizing remedy this painful situation?

Just saying, “I’m sorry I yelled at you” is barely adequate. Sure, it expresses regret, but only perfunctorily. This is a serious injury to his wife, and a serious injury to their marriage, and he needs to heal them both.

To make a proper, helpful apology, the husband needs to sit down and really think about what happened. There are two issues – he and his wife aren’t having as much sex as he would like, and he lost his temper and screamed at her about it. A good apology addresses both.

He needs to look carefully at his own behavior around the sex issue. Perhaps he didn’t communicate clearly with his wife about the problem. He may not have openly discussed it with her, or asked her to work together with him to figure out a way to increase intimacy and have more sex. Because he didn’t express himself, because he didn’t ask for what he

needed, he allowed his resentment to build up until he lost control and shouted abusive things at his wife.

After acknowledging his own part in the problem, the husband can then also apologize for his inappropriate anger. He should let his wife know that he loves her and worries that they aren't having sex very often, and that he wants to change that. And he should admit that shouting isn't a good way to solve the problem.

A serious, thoughtful apology like this is a powerful weapon against the resentments that build up after arguments in a marriage.

By using all these tools to deal with anger – before, during and after it occurs – you can make your marriage much stronger and healthier.

Wishing you all the best in your romantic endeavors!

Sincerely,

*Brad Browning*

Brad Browning

**Brad Browning**

Relationship Coach | Divorce & Breakup Expert

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