

How To Deal With Defensive Anger in Response to a Raging or Critical Partner



-Anthony Fiore, Ph.D.

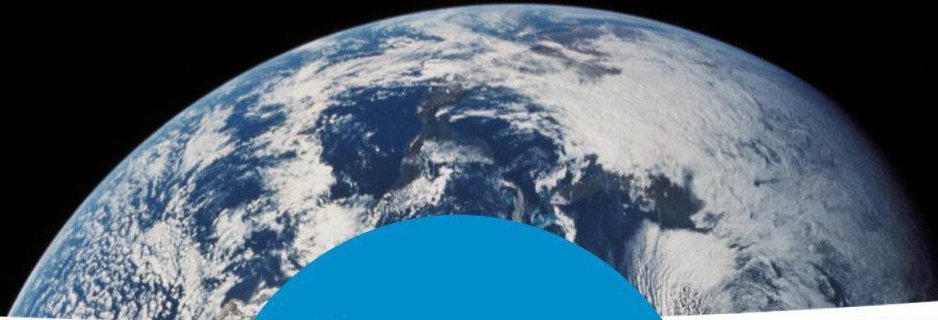
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What I have learned about anger between intimate partners from conducting over 1000 anger management classes

Most of the people in my classes are very nice people generally who somehow manage to pick a partner who irritates the hell out of them until they explode - from an earth population in 2016 of **seven billion**, 404 million, 976 thousand, 783 people to select from.



Often these people (mostly men) say that at work colleagues vote them the “calmest” employee there.

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A man in a suit and a woman in a necklace are shown in profile, facing each other. The woman is pointing her finger at the man, suggesting a conflict or argument. The background is a solid blue color.

Lesson 2

All Couples fight, have conflicts, and get pissed at each other.

All couples have anger in their relationship, it goes with the territory.
Couples adapt various ways of dealing with it.



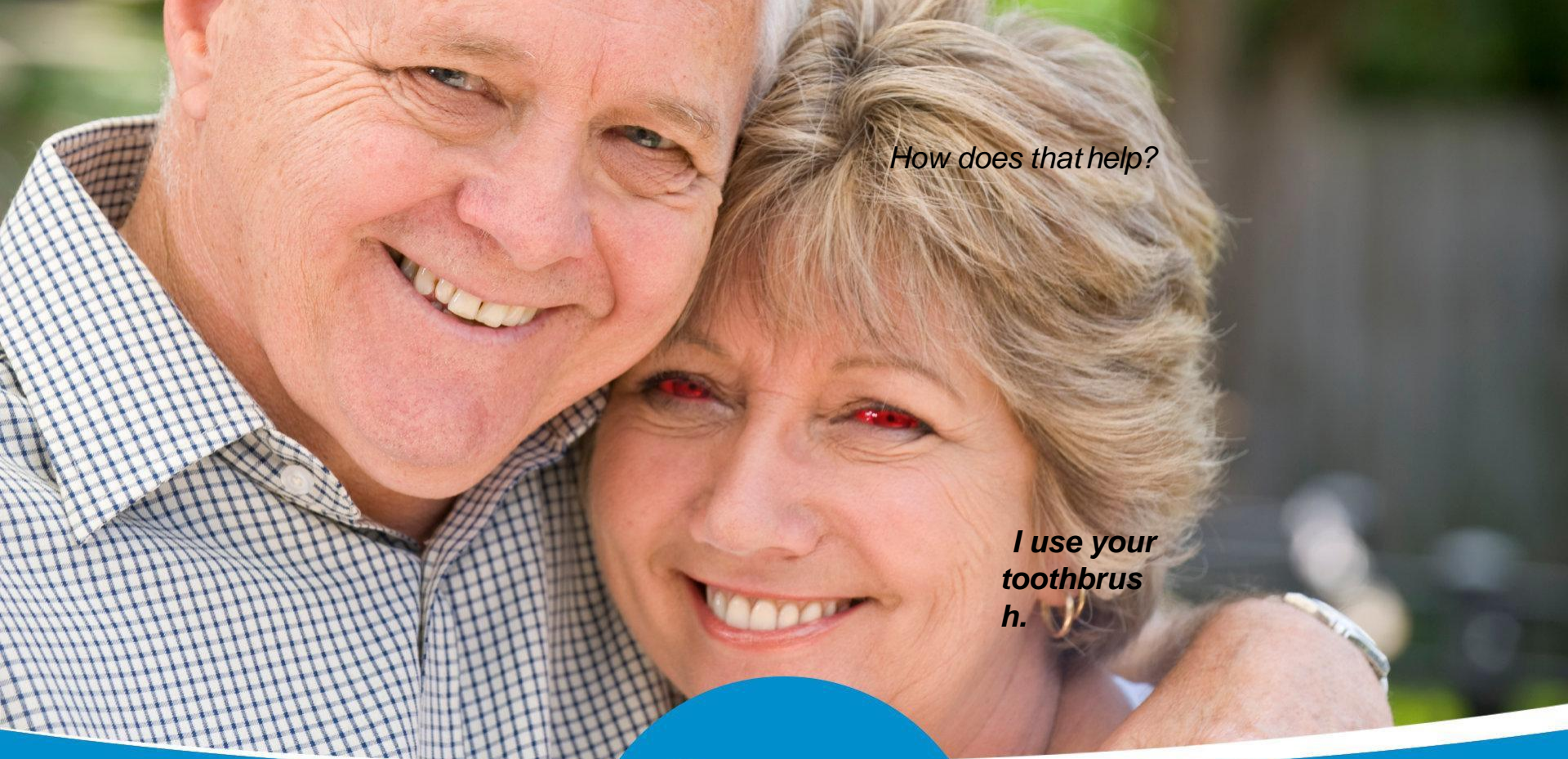
*Whenever I get mad at you,
you never seem to get
upset.*

*How do you manage to
control your temper?*

*I just go and
clean the
toilet.*

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How does that help?

*I use your
toothbrus
h.*

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RETRIBUTION/REVENGE

Getting even. Retribution. An “eye for an eye”.
Strike back. Hostility begets more hostility. Wanting to balance things by taking an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth leads eventually to both of you being blind and toothless.

- She had an affair; you have one too
- He insults you in front of the children; you tell them what a lousy father they have
- They disrespect you; you withhold sex



STONEWALLING

You are pissed, so you go underground and do not talk to your partner for days, or you simply emotionally disengage. This of course, usually makes things worse as resentments build and the emotional connection between you loosens.



Lesson 3

DEFENSIVE ANGER

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I have observed through the years that a certain percentage of anger management participants have what I have come to call “Defensive” anger rather than primary anger.

Defensive anger arises out of trying to dodge arrows rather than shooting them first. They dodge and weave trying to go along to get along. This works - *until their coping ability is surpassed*, at which time they lose it.



They aren't that angry to begin with and wouldn't be angry at all if it weren't for a partner who awakens and brings out the "warriors" in their brain. Because they don't have sufficient coping skills to deal with their partner, they defensively fight back using ineffective tools that usually make things worse.



“It’s only when a mosquito lands on your testicles that you realize there is always a way to solve a problem **without** using violence”

What Triggers Defensive Anger?

Examples of things that often trigger Defensive Anger in our clients:

- Partner **raging, yelling, screaming** over an issue
- One partner trying to **over-control** the life of the other
- Partner **sabotaging** other's parenting style or decisions
- Partner **bringing up past issues** that nothing can be done about

What Triggers Defensive Anger?

- One partner driven to always be “right”
- **Bad behavior** on part of a partner
(*e.g. drinking, overspending, perceived betrayal*)
- Perception by one or both of **not being loved, cherished, respected, protected, or cared for.**
- Dealing with “mess” in the home
- One parent **protecting** a child from the other parent

FIVE STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH DEFENSIVE ANGER

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Five things **NOT TO DO** while dodging arrows:

- Do NOT argue or nitpick the facts. Do not point out how illogical you think they are. Do not try to justify your position yet. Your raging partner is operating from a part of their brain (the primitive limbic system) that does not accurately process facts under these conditions
- Do NOT respond with more hostility because hostility begets more hostility
- Do NOT name-call, insult, bring up issues from 20 years ago, attack by pointing out the things they do that are worse than what you do, threaten divorce
- Do NOT in a nasty tone, question their mental health, their suitability as partner, or your assessment of their intelligence level
- Do NOT give them the silent treatment for days or weeks on end



Strategy 2

Agree to retreat and think things over

- Agree to let things cool down before dealing with it. Research shows this takes **20 minutes to one hour**.
- Do NOT just leave but say something like “We can’t deal with this right now. Let’s take a break, think things over, and I promise we’ll deal with it within an hour.”
- Try to get “buy in” from your partner on this strategy **BEFORE** the fight. “Hey..honey. The next time we are about to get into a fight, let’s agree to do this...OK?”

A close-up photograph of two children's faces, one on the left and one on the right, looking towards the camera. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. At the top center, there is a white semi-circular shape. At the bottom, there is a blue curved banner containing the logo and website information.

Strategy 3

WORK ON YOUR EMPATHY SKILLS

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Strategy 3

WORK ON YOUR EMPATHY SKILLS

Not being understood, validated, or acknowledged by a partner is a major source of rage in couples. The following “empathy” questions developed by “The couples Institute” (www.CouplesinstituteTraining.com) is extremely helpful to the partner who needs a tool to deal with a raging or critical spouse.

Teach your clients to ask the following questions and to ACTUALLY LISTEN TO THE ANSWERS WITHOUT DEFENDING, CORRECTING, OR ARGUING BACK.

ONLY DO THIS IS WHEN YOUR PARTNER IS NOW IN A CALM STATE
(to prevent it happening again)

Strategy 3

Eight empathy questions

- Why is that (whatever issue is) a problem for you?
- How big a problem is that for you?
- When did you first begin to feel concerned about this problem/situation/issue?
- Is this something that you can resolve on your own without any support or encouragement from me?
- Is this issue something that you would like me to fix without any support or encouragement from you?
- What does this problem or situation symbolize to you?
- What is your main intention for bringing up this topic?
- What else would you like to tell me that I haven't already heard?

Strategy 4

Learn to recognize your partner's needs and how lack of satisfaction may be fueling their rage or criticalness

Principal 1: Most partners pick each other because they somehow satisfy each other's needs, even if some partners are not consciously aware of this or have no clue as to what their needs are.

Principle 2: On the average, while men and women have many needs in common, there do seem to be some gender differences which come up time and time again in anger management classes and couple therapy sessions.

Strategy 4

Principle 3: Remember: It's **NOT** about the nail

What do you think her needs are? What do you think his needs are?

It really helps to teach your defensive clients to ask themselves what needs in their partners are not being satisfied which fuels the rage.



Strategy 4

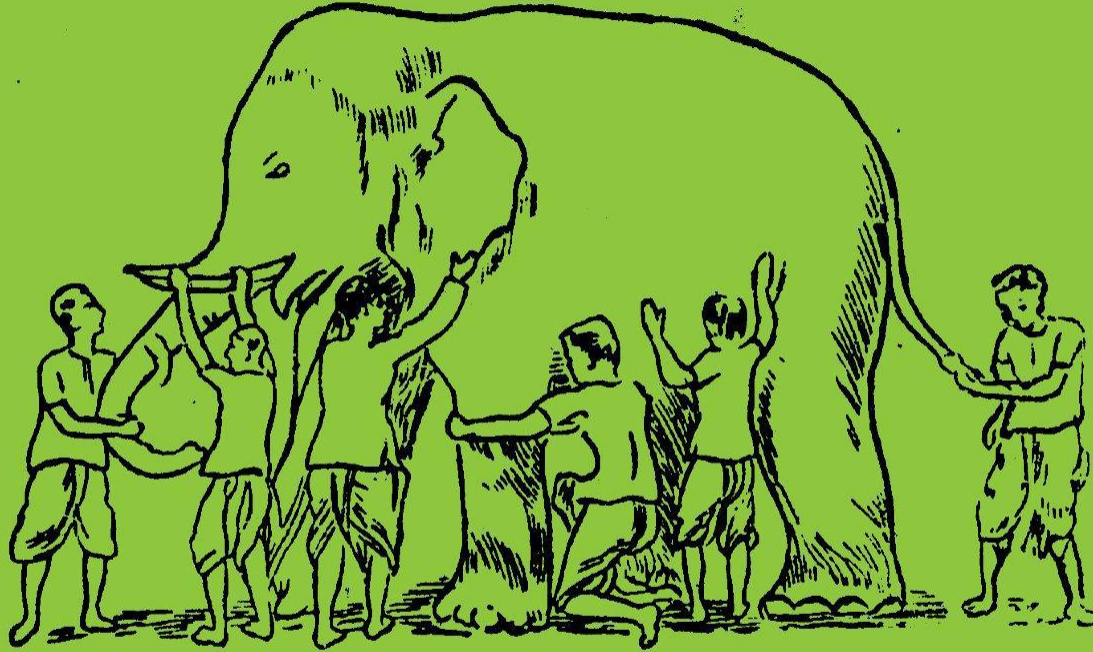
Typical needs both partners often have that are not being satisfied

- The need to have a **securely functioning relationship**. Dr Stan Tatkin calls it “the couple bubble”. Having each other’s back, without trying to change each other.
- Not letting “thirds” (**outside influences**) break into that intimacy bubble. Prioritizing the relationship. Interfering thirds might include children, finances, careers, in laws.
- Not having a secure enough relationship with your partner such that you both can honestly express personal and balanced them with relationship/family demands and needs. Unresolved needs builds resentment if partners blame each other for their frustration or disappointments in life. Resentment often turns to blame, then to rage.

Strategy 5

**TEACH YOUR CLIENTS TO REMEMBER
THE ELEPHANT AND THE BLIND MEN**

Strategy 5



REMEMBER: Perception *is* reality but not necessarily the *only truth*

The minister and his wife story

- Simple task of placing potted plant in center of patio wall turned into a major fight
- Both had their own reality and both were right, depending on perspective
- Teach **tolerance** of the idea of partner's seeing things differently

Strategy 5

To help prevent future rage episodes:

Teach your client the concept of Rage technically being *emotional dysregulation*

Strategy 5

Teach them that the defensive anger person may have accidentally dysregulated their partner without meaning to and without even knowing that they did it. This occurs in the limbic portions of both brains. The dysregulation occurs because it activates emotional reactions.

Strategy 5

For instance, Jim and Nancy were married for 14 years. One Sunday afternoon, Jim wanted to please Nancy (*so she would give him sex*) so he invited over a house siding salesman to re-do their house.

Nancy was so turned off by the 3 hour presentation that she left and went go to bed. Jim ignored this behavior and every 30 minutes went in the bedroom to update her on the deal.

In his brain, he was being helpful and was sure she would be grateful for all his efforts.



Strategy 5

Finally, she went into a **rage**.

He had no idea that he had dysregulated her so badly (*until she blew up*). Her brain was telling her how insensitive he was... just like her father... and she wanted to be with a man who saw **HER** and her needs...

She raged because she was overwhelmed with the realization of having to continue to be married to this man.



Strategy 5

Help your client “read” and look at their partner for clues as to what the partner is feeling or experiencing. Be sensitive to how the partner is **REACTING** to them instead of going on and on. A book called “Five Languages of Love” is often very helpful here. Teach them to adjust what they are doing which is making partner feel insecure, irritated or turned off.

Teach them that what they did or did not do *may be perfectly normal* but may still have dysregulated their partner because of that partner’s unique history. Understanding this helps you to deal differently with your partner which often decreases rage.

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