

THE RECOVERY ROOM



Dealing with Anger After an Affair

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I want to talk about an issue that can be very problematic in the recovery process: anger. Specifically, let's consider how anger can be experienced and dealt with once infidelity has taken place. Anger is almost inevitable; it is a reaction common to nearly everyone who experiences betrayal.

Anger is an emotion that rises up in a natural way because it helps a person feel protected in vulnerable circumstances. It enables a person be in control of a situation that often feels very much out of their control. Following an affair, anger is expected from the one who has been betrayed. And as time goes on, we often see anger rising up in the one who has been unfaithful as well.

Because it is so empowering and such an easy emotion to grab hold of, anger is often the thing we rush to when we feel challenged, when we feel at risk, when we feel insecure. It can be a destructive force, but it doesn't have to be.

If anger has become a damaging force in your marriage, you can begin to bring it under control. But more than that, you can begin to use anger in a constructive way, using it to rebuild your relationship rather than tear it down. Let's consider how that can happen.

When an affair is discovered or revealed, the emotional reaction of the betrayed person will usually be out of control in the beginning. I would not expect a betrayed person to respond to the discovery of infidelity in a controlled emotional manner any more than I would expect a person injured in a bomb blasts to immediately process the situation in a rational way and start planning their recovery. No, in traumatic situations everyone is in a state of numbness, not sure of what's going on. The brain is focussed on one thing: *survival—how do I recover from this catastrophe?*

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Since betrayal is one of the deepest pains and biggest threats to relationship we can experience, it evokes the same kind of emotional response: the rush to security, the need for safety. It's a survival instinct. Even before we can process thought, that emotion is in play.

That is the benefit of anger. It is an emotional response to a perceived danger in our life. We are hard-wired to react that way when we feel at risk. Even before we can give thought to it or put words to it, the brain kicks in and evokes a reaction in us that is pretty much out of our control when we first experience it.

That reaction is beneficial when there is an *external* threat. If you're walking down a dark alley and someone jumps out at you, it's good to have that response of fight or flight. It's good for your safety, security, and survival.

However, when you're talking about a perceived *internal* threat, that same angry response can work against you rather than for you. If your preferred outcome in a relationship is connection and intimacy, then every time anger takes control it is going to work against that goal. Ultimately, it becomes an enemy of recovery, not a helper.

You cannot dismiss anger. You have to recognize it for what it is: a signal that something is wrong. You can think of anger being like a bobber, sitting on the surface of the water. Sometimes it shows a little bit of agitation and sometimes it's wildly splashing all over the place. That bobber indicates to the person fishing that something is going on under the water.

That's what anger does. It tells us that something else is happening deeper inside us.

Unfortunately, we are often so focused on the anger that we never get to what's underneath. If we just focus on the anger, we will probably respond with either fight or flight; we will either run and hide from the person or we will go on the attack.

But you do not have to act in the anger. You don't have to be controlled by it. You can recognize the anger and then choose a different response. Instead of moving away from the other person or moving against them, you can use anger as a trigger to help us move toward them in a way that creates a possibility of connection.

How do you do that? Start by turning our focus away from the splashing bobber and consider what's causing the agitation. If anger is the bobber, you've got to go fishing. You need to understand what is going on underneath the anger.

One day I came up with this acronym that has worked for me. It helps me when I'm angry or facing anger in someone else. I teach it to couples so they can use it as well.

Underneath the anger, one or more of four primary emotions is usually going on inside you. The first letter of each emotion can be used to spell "F-I-S-H." So let's consider what "fish" might be pulling on your bobber

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“F” stands for FEAR. When we are afraid, when we feel we are at risk, we will often give an angry response.

“I” stands for INHIBITION. I mean inhibition in the sense that something or someone is stopping us from getting what we want. We have a goal or objective in mind, and something is getting in the way. It make us feel powerless and the response is often anger.

“S” stands for SHAME. This includes the whole shame family: feelings of embarrassment, failure, guilt, inadequacy, unworthiness. (This is an especially big trigger for men for evoking anger.)

“H” stands for HURT, physical or emotional pain.

When we feel any of these things—fear, inhibition, shame, hurt—instead of attending to those more vulnerable emotions, we’d rather take charge with anger because it feels more empowering and strengthening.

After an affair, the person who’s been betrayed often doesn’t feel safe enough to have a vulnerable conversation about the level of their hurt or fearfulness because they don’t trust the one who hurt them. Instead, they are thinking, *“I need to be safe; I need to be secure, but you are a danger to me. Look at what you’ve done!”* Emotions come out in a flood of anger and rage.

But when you can bring anger under control and have a conversation about WHY you are angry (by talking about your fear, inhibition, shame, and hurt), you are entering a vulnerable conversation. And in a vulnerable conversation, there is an opportunity for the other person to offer comfort and relief. In that kind of conversation, you have the chance to move toward connection and intimacy that you will never achieve if the encounter stays above the waterline in the anger mode.

It’s not easy. It takes intention and effort. It takes a willingness to risk in a relationship where you’ve been hurt. It takes a kind of conversation that goes deeper than the waterline. When I watch a couple beginning to engage in that way, I see connection starting to happen again.

The betrayed spouse is not the only one that responds in anger. Unfaithful spouses want to move on; they don’t want to feel stuck in the process. If they start to feel they are being constantly reminded of their failure or repeatedly accused, it is likely they will become angry, too.

I know couples who have genuine love for each other, longing for their relationship to be restored, but one or both of them is stuck in their anger. That anger will never take them to the place of restoration. If your ultimate goal is to return to a restored relationship, then anger must be attended to.

Let me give you three helpful suggestions for bringing anger under control.

Suggestion 1: Begin with a soft start.

Dr. John Gottman, a leading marriage researcher, states that most destructive conflicts between couples could be avoided by simply beginning the conversation with a soft start instead of a hard line. A hard start is one that is confrontational and aggressive. It puts the other person on the defense right from the start. When someone starts that way, it is almost guaranteed to turn into argument. But if you can start what you want to say with control and softness, your chances of having a meaningful conversation increases dramatically.

Suggestion 2: Use timeouts.

This is the common-sense “count to ten” counsel. That means you need to take a timeout and back off from the encounter. Give yourself a little time and space to calm down to allow emotions to subside so you can still feel the anger, but have it under control.

When conversations get heated, don't stay in the battle. Don't keep doing damage. Couples should have an agreement that they will honor each other's request for a time out. Each request should include a commitment to return to the conversation and an estimate (10 minutes, 10 hours) of how long the timeout will be.

Suggestion 3: Move to curiosity.

Anger moves you to take control of a conversation, driving you to get your point across and convince the other person. When you are angry, you want to win and you are focused on getting your way.

Curiosity moves you to a place of listening, even if you don't agree with the other's point of view. It turns the fight into a dialogue between two people trying to understand each other rather than trying to win. You can remain very honest about what's happening in you while focusing on your understanding partner's point of view.

Make every effort to move to a curious position and stay there until you understand your partner's perspective, regardless of your opinions about it. You'll likely discover your partner more open to listening to you once you have listened to them.

So, when you feel out of control with anger, think about those three things. Remember that your goal is connection, not winning. Maybe you need to begin with a soft start. Maybe you need to take a time out. Maybe you can embrace curiosity instead of just trying to get your point across.

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Then, when you are in control, let anger be the bobber that directs you to what's underneath. Move your conversation down to the "FISH." Invite the other person into that vulnerable place and you'll have a chance for connection, intimacy, and healing.