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ANGER

Divorce-related anger can literally make you crazy -- causing you to say and do things you'd never dream of if you were thinking clearly. Even though it's a normal part of the healing process, anger can become a destructive force in your life. Here's how to cope.

By Jane Nahirny

Rose was so mad she could hardly see straight. She and her husband, Jim, were six months into their "trial separation" when she discovered that he had been dating someone else. Reeling from the impact of the painful news, she sped over to his new apartment, intent on learning every last detail about the new woman in his life. Her heart pounded and terrifying questions flashed through her mind as she drove: "How could he have lied to me? Who was this other woman? Was she attractive?" And, perhaps worst of all, "What was I thinking when I suggested that we should separate?"

At Jim's apartment, a deep and uncontrollable rage rose up inside Rose's chest as she pounded her fist again and again on the dining-room table. "How could you do this to me?" she cried, as Jim sat and watched, white-faced and speechless as the breakfast dishes flew off the table and smashed into pieces on the floor. He had no idea how to react -- or how to begin to defuse the scene that was unfolding in front of him...

Anger is a very familiar emotion for all of us. And in healthy relationships, it can be an overwhelmingly positive force in our lives. "Anger is a very healthy emotion," says Chet Mirman, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist and director of The Center for Divorce Recovery. "Healthy anger can tell us if there's something wrong -- something painful and threatening that we need to take care of. It helps us protect ourselves, and to know when people are crossing our boundaries."

But for couples who are going through separation or divorce, anger is often anything but healthy. In her informative book *The Good Divorce* (Harper Perennial, 1995), Dr. Constance Ahrons defines divorce-related anger as "an extreme rage, vindictiveness, and over-powering bitterness that is felt when a love relationship is ending. It is a special kind of anger that usually hasn't been experienced before."

When anger is coupled with divorce, it's often used as a misguided means of hanging on to a failed marriage. After all, for many people, a bad relationship is better than no relationship at all. Divorce anger allows people to punish their ex as often as possible, all while maintaining an ongoing (bitter) relationship with him/her. It's a situation that leaves both partners in divorce limbo -- a perilous situation that obstructs growth and self-awareness.

Some people hold onto their anger so tightly -- stoking the fires on a daily basis -- that their rage takes over their whole lives, coloring and informing all their thoughts and actions. They weigh every action to see how much emotional or physical harm it will inflict on their ex-spouse -- even simply being a nuisance will do in a pinch -- without seeing the injuries they may be inflicting on innocent victims.

When Peter announced he was getting married, his ex-wife Jeannie hit the roof. "He has this great new life - - a nice house, good job, pretty wife -- and I'm stuck with nothing," she complains. "So whenever I have the opportunity to spoil something for him, I take it. Sometimes, I'm a little ashamed later, but it feels great at the time." At the last minute, Jeannie refused to let their two children participate in Peter's wedding ceremony. Instead, she dropped them off just as he and his new wife Sara were leaving for their honeymoon. The kids were so upset about missing the wedding and being dropped off without warning that Peter felt he had to cancel the trip -- which in turn upset Sara.

"I was furious with Jeannie -- more for involving the kids in her own personal war against me than for making us miss our honeymoon. I made the trip up to Sara later, but it's much harder to undo the damage to my kids. Jeannie just doesn't seem to get how much her vindictiveness is adversely affecting our children." Using children as human shields in the divorce battle is a common way to fan the flames of divorce anger.

Many scenarios are possible, all of which are damaging and punitive to the children: the custodial parent withholds visitation from the non-custodial parent; the non-custodial parent refuses to pay child support; the custodial parent "forgets" to pick the children up; or the non-custodial parent is hours late in bringing them back. "We forget what's best for the children because we are so intent on getting that other person," writes Ahrons. But "getting back through the kids is hitting below the belt."

Divorce anger is also often expressed through the legal process itself. Here, it's very important to remember that your lawyer is your advocate, not your therapist or best friend. Expressing anger to your ex-spouse through the legal process invariably leads to prolonged, emotional proceedings that will ultimately leave you -- and the family resources -- drained dry.

Using the court as a venue to vent your anger is a bad idea for a couple of key reasons: it's the wrong venue, and it's very expensive (financially and emotionally). Unfortunately, the legal divorce process itself tends to add fuel to the fires of anger. Dividing property (some of which has great sentimental value) and trying to prove your case for custody and/or support can be very emotionally charged because these issues underline what is being lost or changed because of your divorce. Some degree of upset is inevitable, but driving yourself alongside your ex into bankruptcy is truly cutting off your nose to spite your face.

So how can you cope with this new and intense anger? The key lies in understanding its roots, and in finding constructive ways to express the hurt, disappointment, and loss that both you and your former spouse are feeling now as you proceed through separation and divorce. "Anger can really be a very healthy and positive tool, but if we use it destructively, all we do is scare people and alienate them," stresses Dr. Andrea Brandt, Ph.D. M.F.C.C., and a specialist in anger management with the California-based LifeWorks Company. "People have to learn to have anger work for them, not against them."

Here's some advice about coping with your own and your ex-spouse's divorce-related anger.

If you're angry:

- **Write it out.** Work through your anger by keeping a journal or by writing letters you don't mail, suggests Dr. Brandt.
- **Shout it out.** "If you can roll up the windows in your car or put your head in a pillow and scream, it can drain some of that negative energy out of your body," she adds.
- **Talk it out.** It's important when you're angry to develop your own personal support system. Instead of directing your anger at your ex-spouse, talk to a good friend (or two), or find a therapist who specializes in anger management.
- **Get some professional help.** "Remember -- anger acts as a shield. Your anger suppresses other vulnerable feelings that may be too hard to deal with. It's easier to feel angry than to feel lost, confused, and worried," says Dr. Mirman. "Talking to a professional can help you begin to feel those emotions you've been suppressing and move past the anger." You could also benefit from a support or anger-management group where you can share your story. "Support groups help people develop much greater self awareness around their anger," explains therapist Deborah Rodrigues. "They remove the sense of isolation and help people move to a position of growth and development."
- **Re-examine your "core beliefs."** When we point a finger at another person in anger, we're really pointing three fingers back at ourselves, says Sharon I. Roach, S.S.W., a certified Core Belief Engineering practitioner. "Often, anger is based on something that we observe in early childhood and form a belief about. The problem is that as we grow older, our beliefs and decisions can become outdated."
- **Take responsibility for your part of the marriage break-up.** "It's a rare couple in which both partners were exactly equal in the breaking of the marriage, but it's an even rarer couple in which one partner was solely at fault," writes Constance Ahrons in *The Good Divorce*. "Do some personal growth work. "Anger is a great motivator towards action and can propel you to take steps in your life to change situations," says Cynthia Callsen, a New York-based counselor and psychotherapist. "Your anger can help you identify old patterns, and then you can take the steps to stop repeating them."
- **Learn what "pushes your buttons."** Try to understand your anger -- and what triggers it -- before you express it. Don't be afraid to say that you need some time to think about your response.
- **Protect your children.** Never make them part of your conflict with your former partner by withholding visitation or support or poisoning their minds against your ex. "For the sake of the children, if for no other reason, learn constructive methods of expressing anger," Ahrons says.

- **Keep conflicts at a moderate level**, Rodrigues advises. "The other person will often match your level of intensity." And be sure to choose your battles carefully. "Expressing every little irritation and disagreement provokes resentment. Think about the most important issues -- and let go of the small stuff."
- **Use "I-messages" when expressing anger.** Say: "I feel disappointed when you don't call," not: "You stupid idiot, you're always late!"
- **Give yourself time to recover from the loss of your marriage.** On average, experts say that the healing process takes about two years. "It's important to realize how sad you are," says Ahrons. "This won't necessarily make you more vulnerable to your ex-spouse; your successful handling of your emotions puts you in a more powerful position."
- **Forgive, let go, move on.** Anger can become a comfort, a constant in our lives, but as long as you continue to nurse your anger against your ex, you will never have a happy, fulfilled, post-divorce life. Own your responsibility for the break-up, and realize that you have the power to make the choice to forgive and move on, or stay angry and remain stuck. It doesn't matter what your ex does, you can still choose forgiveness. (For more on this topic, see "The Power of Forgiveness".)

If your ex is angry:

- **Listen to and validate your ex-spouse's comments.** "Your ex may be feeling like he or she isn't being heard," says Callsen. "By really listening to his or her concerns, you may realize where the anger is coming from and identify what you can do to help." It also really helps to defuse the situation, by saying something like, "I understand why you're angry with me."
- **Don't be afraid to take a "time-out."** Walk away from an anger attack if you can't handle it. "You can always say, 'I'm not going to talk to you until you calm down,'" suggests Callsen. "You might be feeling angry yourself that you were just attacked. So walk away, or end the call. Put limits on what you'll take and how you'll be treated."
- **Get some assertiveness training to boost your self-esteem.** "Anger is like a fire that must be burned up into the ashes of forgiveness," writes Ahrons. "If we are passive, it is like throwing more logs onto the fire..."
- **Use your response to defuse the situation.** "When someone is angry, they're likely to pull in a million different issues," says Rodrigues. Insist on dealing with each issue separately, and one at a time. You can also try agreeing with your ex, she says. "When you say 'Yeah, you're right,' it tends to quiet people down pretty quickly. There's nowhere to go with it, so eventually the anger shuts down."
- **Try not to take your ex-spouse's comments too personally.** "Remember that anger is a projection of one's own inner feelings and one's own world," says Roach. Rodrigues agrees: "Accept the fact that this person is angry because they're going through turmoil. It's not your anger, it's theirs, so don't own it."
- **Stay calm.** It can really help de-escalate the anger, says Rodrigues. "Tell yourself 'I can handle this' during an angry phone call from your ex. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, can also be effective when you're listening to someone who's really angry." A mantra can be helpful, too, adds Brandt. "If I'm speaking with someone who's really angry at me, I'll always say silently to myself, 'This is good for our relationship.'"
- **Learn to recognize your own hot buttons.** When someone pushes one of your buttons, your response is going to be way out of proportion to the offense. "Other people's feelings and words are simply information," stresses Roach. "If you're affected by them, there may be something that trails behind them from your history that is bothering you."
- **Try to feel a little compassion** -- no matter how hard that may be. "Now that the relationship's over, the other person is probably feeling fearful and threatened that they'll never love again or they'll never see their kids," says Rodrigues. "Try to hear what's underneath the anger. Quite often, it's fear, pain, or shame." Showing empathy or compassion for your ex can go a long way to defusing his or her anger.
- **Be honest with yourself.** Recognize that when someone is angry with you, there may be something in what they're saying. "Very often, you might hear something that's really valuable," says Brandt. If your ex is yelling at you, you can choose to think he/she's a jerk and start yelling back, or you can "dig for the gold" in what he/she's saying. Keep the gold; discard the dirt and rocks.
- **Value your safety above all else.** If your former partner's divorce anger seems to be headed in a dangerous direction, put some boundaries in place and communicate through a third party. "Threats should always be taken seriously," advises Rodrigues. "Remove yourself from the situation and refuse face-to-face contact if you sense any danger at all... put the answering machine on and screen your calls."