

When Anger Goes Too Far

Two ex-spouses sit as we seek to develop a parenting plan that will help each as well as their four children. They regularly explode, accusing each other of many things, most of which date back to their marriage and divorce and are irrelevant to the parenting plan. Another ex-couple comes in quietly and respectfully, sitting opposite each other as they begin to address problems related to finances. It doesn't take long to notice that they are not talking with one another but about one another as if the other person was not in the room. They were talking "through" me to the other. When I asked them about this and explained how they needed to speak with one another these two quiet and "polite" people came at me saying, "I refuse to talk with them. They've ruined my life and I will not address them. I refuse." While these two couples have different styles, or "dances," they have one thing in common. All are angry with their ex-spouse.

These scenarios might be expected or understandable if they occurred in the early stages of the divorce. The difference is that both sets had been divorced for several years. In my nearly 20 years of working with families experiencing divorce, I find many divorced or even remarried men and women remain angry at their ex-spouse for several years after the final decree. Sadly, many never resolve their anger.

The work of Dr. Judith Wallerstein, possibly the foremost divorce researcher in the world, backs up my experience. Wallerstein has done 25-year longitudinal studies with the same population of divorced people, interviewing and assessing them at five-year increments. Her results are alarming. She found that 33% of men

and 50% of women studied were as angry, or angrier, after 10 years than they were at the time of the divorce. Time does not heal all wounds.

ADULT CHILDREN TELL TALES

Why is anger so misunderstood and feared? Don't people divorce to be "rid" of their spouse? I've talked with many children of divorce in their twenties and thirties whose parents divorced when they were kids. These adult children of divorce tell tales of their parents still at war years later, to the point of ruining a wedding or the birth of a baby. How can one rid oneself of divorce anger so that it doesn't stick around for years?

One definition I use for anger is it "is a normal, healthy, God-given emotional response to wrongdoing and injustice." I liken anger as a red light on the dashboard of a car telling you that something under the hood needs attention. We should feel angry about some things, but many people spend their lives trying to ignore or fight against ever feeling angry. They try to ignore the red light. People are taught that anger is something to be avoided. These people usually have the emotion of anger mixed up with something else — hostility.

Hostility is the ugly flipside of anger. While anger is simply the normal

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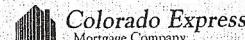
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response to wrongdoing, hostility is the way in which anger may manifest itself. It is actually possible to be angry without being hostile.

HOSTILITY TYPES

Hostility has three basic forms. The first is explosive or rageful anger. This is what most people think of when they think of anger. Someone is angry about something, and so they yell and scream, possibly throwing, slamming, or kicking something. They may call names, make threats or become physically violent. In a few minutes the one who has raged feels "better" while everyone around them is deeply hurt, seriously afraid or withdrawing to get away from the hostile person. The hostile person may or may not apologize but often is confused by peoples' response to them. Sadly, some divorced men and women rage during and for a long time following their decree.

The second form of hostility is a more quiet and subtle style that may not be seen as hostile. These are people who seldom if ever rage or scream but who quietly and thoroughly plot and execute their vengeance. They may be polite face to face, but inwardly they hate, seeking paybacks about which they fantasize.

Both of these types of hostility tend to be associated with new or recent anger, painful events that have occurred in the recent past. The third kind of hostility is associated more with an old anger. It is usually referred to as bitterness.

NEGATIVE, SARCASTIC

Bitter people do life differently than the rager or the quietly hostile. The bitter person has allowed their hostility to broaden, moving from targeting one person to now being overall unhappy with life and the world. They aren't simply angry with one person like their ex-spouse. They seem negative, critical, sarcastic, and pessimistic about many things or people. They have allowed their anger to fester.

Bitter people are easily noticed by listening to what they say. They are people who have little good to say about anyone or anything, including themselves. Bitter people aren't

taking the ex back to court or making threatening phone calls. They don't have the energy for that because their lingering hostility has taken away their strength and stamina. Bitterness and depression are common bedfellows.

Why would people go through life this way? Here, it's important to note that there are three kinds of people. The first is the uninformed person. These are the people who believe that their anger will simply disappear over time. But anger does not just go away. It is either resolved, or it sinks deeply into one's soul. The second person is one who wants to be rid of it, who knows it won't simply go away but they don't know how to process their anger or hostility so that it doesn't stick around.

The last type is the person who enjoys being hostile. They may not

say they enjoy this way of living but they do nothing to address it. These are the persons who justify, defend and explain their hostile way of living, blaming others and living as a victim for all of their life. They say, "You'd be angry, too, if this happened to you." Sadly, too many divorced men and women live life in this fashion, passing this misery addiction onto their children, remaining alone for the rest of their lives or bringing their hostility into a remarriage. For these people, bitterness has become the new norm.

THE OTHER SIDE

What is sad is there is a way out. I have seen many who have had terrible breaks in life, people who have been violated in horrible ways, live life fully. They have an attitude and perspective



that is attractive. They draw people to themselves rather than repelling them. Having bad things happen doesn't require that one become hostile or bitter.

How does one get through these situations, not allowing a divorce to drag them down for the rest of their life? There are three key traits that seem to follow those who enjoy life.

NOT COVERING UP

The first trait is that these people do their grief work. They let themselves be sad for a season, grieving their losses. They don't ignore their sadness and hurt or try to cover it up with some form of addiction. Instead they accept it, grieve it, shedding the necessary tears to help them let go of their pain. Second, these people make changes in their attitudes and in their expectations of life and people. They don't expect perfection from themselves or others. They begin to form reasonable expectations of themselves, their spouse and others. They don't make little things into big things. They see where they have some control in life and also accept where they are powerless. They have come to peace with life and themselves.

Finally, people who get through divorce and other violations forgive their offenders. They simply refuse to hold onto their grudges any longer. While they might not trust or like their offender or betrayer, they are no longer holding onto their resentment. They choose to forgive. Let me add that all of this takes work and time. Getting well and recovering from divorce anger does not automatically happen. It takes work but it is a work that ends in freedom rather than being in bondage to hostility.

When people let themselves grieve, make attitude adjustments and finally, when they forgive, hostility does not have to be their life-long companion. People have long agreed that anger is a normal part of a divorce. There is a difference though in being angry for a while and becoming hostile or bitter.

People who have gone through divorce can live whole, fulfilling lives, enjoying all that life has for them. Or, they can sit in a counselor's office 20 years post-decree a depressed,

lonely, and bitter man or woman who has been through several more broken relationships or divorces. They can develop what I call a "working business relationship" with the ex or they can continue at war, locked in a battle with the ex-spouse as they drag into it their friends, new spouses and children.

It's up to each one of us. Which way will you go?

The author, a former pastor now

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