

The 7 Best Tips for Handling Anger and Resentment in Relationships

Too much fighting in your relationship? Empathy is the antidote to anger!

“Love is not a contract between two narcissists. It’s more than that. It’s a construction that compels the participants to go beyond narcissism. In order that love lasts one has to reinvent oneself.” – French Philosopher Alain Badiou

Resentment and anger in relationships often stem from utter dismay at how your spouse could have possibly done what they did. You just can’t understand it — you never would have done such a thing.

Affection Is Key to Keeping Love Alive

Here are a few scenarios as examples:

- For months on end, he was supposed to close a business bank account that was charging enormous fees and that he wasn’t even using anymore. There was always some excuse, and meanwhile, hundreds of dollars were going to waste.
- You’ve asked her countless times to please only play radio stations with upbeat music in the morning. But morning after morning, she keeps putting on the classical music station, which you’ve told her makes you feel like you should go back to sleep. How can she always seemingly forget your request?
- You both thought the other one had agreed to do dishes on Tuesday evenings. It’s almost midnight and neither one of you did them, and you are both silently resenting the other one. You don’t want to go to bed angry, but this is just the camel’s back from all of the other times your spouse didn’t do the dishes when they said they would.

The above situations are representative of the mundane resentments in life that lead to overriding marital problems when not handled with effective communication. Left unchecked over time, resentment will lead to anger in relationships, which takes enormous emotional resources to undo. Better to deal with resentment than let it spiral out of control.

So what is the solution to dealing with resentment against your spouse and its possible escalation to anger? The solution is to channel the shock at your spouse’s behavior into empathy, to try and understand them, and to come at the situation trying to see their perspective. It’s trite to say, but that’s because it is advice which is perennial. If it were easy, no one would need to talk about it much.

How can we feel empathy, and how can we act empathic, to the partners we resent? Here are 7 top tips:

1. Use “I statement” feeling terms, but don’t use “you.” Here is one example about how to phrase dissatisfaction over another spouse’s actions: “I feel resentful that the business account is still open. I want to understand if I can help you in any way to close the account, because I will feel really relieved and relaxed when it’s closed.”

2. Count to ten before speaking. This will help you choose your words more carefully and not say something you will regret.

3. Implement the I-Thou. “Catch” the other’s feelings, trying to feel them yourself. Surprisingly, this makes the experience of those feelings actually diminish. This is powerful because it is really the only way a person can impact another’s experience with feelings of anger in relationships.

4. Practice active listening. Repeat back what you heard in order to confirm you understood, and affirm your partner’s feelings.

5. Connect physically. For one, hug, and do have sex. For many women, this may involve a bit of fake it ’til you make it, if the situation is in the process of being resolved but isn’t there yet. For most men, sex actually serves to alleviate resentment because it’s a form of connection in its own right.

Even though you both might not be in the same emotional place during the resolution process, connecting physically can help. In fact, some marriage counselors suggest that if the marriage is on a downswing, have sex at least once a day. The scheduled connection might put things in a different light and aid in resolving resentment.

6. Meet on a bridge. This can be metaphorical and also realistic. In order to channel resentment into empathy, the “understanding bridge” will need to be gapped. Integrate the idea that “we both have to be on this bridge together.” We really can’t see what our partner is feeling until we get out on the bridge. The more steps you take, the more you can see the middle “hump” of this bridge, where you both come together in understanding the other. In order to actualize this place of mutual understanding, one idea is to literally go to a bridge nearby.

Pack a blanket and a light picnic snack, go to the bridge, and talk things out. The relaxing setting and fresh air can lend itself to openness, as well as taking things less seriously. The bridge has the advantage of serving as a successful means to reconnect.

7. Engage in daily empathy actions. Empathy is not necessarily the default feeling and needs some retraining to become par for the course. Routine empathy can be actualized by checking in with our partners about how they are feeling, looking them in the eye, and regularly giving the benefit of the doubt. Once empathy becomes intrinsic behavior, resentment often becomes a thing of the past.

Are There Limits to Unconditional Love?

Empathy, it turns out, is the antidote to anger in relationships. As such, feelings of empathy also fuel natural anxiety reduction. Not only will you hopefully come to an understanding with your life partner, you will both feel calmer.

Making empathy a regular part of your relationship will have an impact not only on getting along better, but ultimately feeling more connected and less stressed, because it facilitates you getting out of your own head, and into your partner’s. Empathy, as such, fosters unity, transforming narcissistic into conjoined, and dismay into understanding. Empathy forges the reinvention of self that, as Alain Badiou points out, is necessary for long-lasting love.

Last reviewed: By John M. Grohol, Psy.D. on 17 Nov 2014

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APA Reference Psych Central. (2014). The 7 Best Tips for Handling Anger and Resentment in Relationships. *Psych Central*.

Retrieved on November 23, 2014, from <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/11/23/the-7-best-tips-for-handling-anger-and-resentment-in-relationships/>