

# IS ANGER DRIVING YOU APART?

Do you easily explode with anger or let it simmer away for months or even years? Understanding your anger style and your partner's can lead to a more constructive way of resolving issues, says Catherine Jones

*Photographs by Sam Barker*

**R**obert and I have become good at reading each other over time, so now we always know what makes the other angry,' says Charlotte, 43, who is celebrating her tenth wedding anniversary this year. In a way, she says, anger is just one of the checks that keeps their bond strong. 'Robert is most likely to get angry and shout when I don't listen. I tend to get sarcastic and moody when he forgets something important. Noticing each other's anger helps us see the impact of our behaviour so we can change tack.'

Clare and Simon have a very different relationship with anger in their 12-year marriage. 'Simon is very sensitive, which is what first attracted me to him,' says Clare, 'but it can make him paranoid and chippy. He

always thinks people are out to get him. It builds up until his anger appears like a hurricane out of nowhere, and is usually caused by something that seems quite small and insignificant to me, such as one of the children not eating their dinner. I hate him when he's like that, especially as it's always up to

**'His anger appears like a hurricane out of nowhere'**

me to restore peace.' Simon sees it slightly differently. 'Clare hates my temper, but it's the only way I can get her or the kids to pay attention to what I want. She's more articulate than me, and good at twisting arguments in her favour. I resent the fact that I'm driven to explode before she will allow me to have things my way.'

Nowhere are moods more under the spotlight than in our most intimate relationships, when our anger is the most difficult to control and is affected by our partner's anger >

levels, says clinical psychotherapist Dr Ronald Potter-Efron, co-author of *Letting Go Of Anger* (£11.99, New Harbinger). 'The people we most love, want and need are also the ones with whom we are most vulnerable, so it's easy to over-react. We feel the effects of their words and actions most keenly,' he says.

It's easy to snap at a long-term partner after a hard day, yet we wouldn't dream of being so short with friends. Equally, we might tolerate the most terrible outbursts from a partner when the same thing would be grounds for a tribunal if it happened to you at work.

#### What's your style?

Of all our basic emotions, anger is the one we are most likely to struggle with. Many of us are unsure how to express it, let alone deal with it. And this is our first mistake, says Potter-Efron.

'Anger is an emotional messenger that serves two main purposes: it tells you there's something significantly wrong and it gives you the energy to attempt to change things', which is particularly useful in relationships.

What you do when you get angry determines what Potter-Efron describes as your anger style. We may rely on many different styles depending on the situation but most of us have developed preferences for a few styles that we have continued to rely on since childhood. A child whose parents taught her never to fight with her siblings, for example, is likely to become an adult who will avoid anger at all costs rather than express her angry feelings healthily. Potter-Efron's study of anger has led him to identify 11 common outcomes, or styles, divided into three categories: chronic, masked and explosive.

Read on to find out which style you and your partner use, and, at the end, discover how they work together.

Anger is a messenger that tells you something is wrong



## Explosive anger styles

- Sudden
- Shame-based
- Deliberate
- Excitatory

Explosive styles manifest themselves in 'acting out' by yelling and screaming, explains Potter-Efron. 'This may be cathartic but can zap energy if it happens

too often. Two exploders will get into loud arguments. In the extreme, explosive anger can lead to violent aggression.'

Sudden types are impatient and frustrated. Because they fail to recognise the tell-tale signs of increasing anger, their anger appears to come on quickly, and leaves just as fast. If this is your partner's style, stay calm. Don't try to match their anger with yours. 'Once they calm down a little, inform them that you won't respond to them while they're acting that way,' advises Potter-Efron.

Many over-sensitive people have a shame-based style. Past events or low self-esteem may be behind it; a flippant remark about your partner's botched DIY job starts a blazing row. Not a practical type, he's always been sensitive about this subject and feels insulted that you've brought this up. He's ashamed. Rather than laugh it off, he gets angrier, dredging up poisonous remarks about your shortcomings.

#### A promise of honesty

If your anger is shame-based, the next time you feel angry, ask yourself, 'What am I ashamed of right now?'. 'You might not feel shame every time you get angry but it won't hurt to ask yourself the question,' says Potter-Efron.

Deliberate types like to fly off the handle as and when they feel like it – for power, image or emotional control. Their anger is exaggerated, often false. 'People who use deliberate anger know how powerful it is, and sometimes find themselves enjoying hurting someone else,' says Potter-Efron. Managing deliberate anger takes honesty. You have to make a promise to yourself to be honest in future. 'It's not enough to make a silent promise to yourself,' he says. Put it in writing.

Excitatory types like the 'thrill' of an argument and may seek out anger opportunities. If your partner is deliberate or excitatory, 'stay calm and insist upon addressing the issues rather than the excitement', says Potter-Efron.

## Chronic anger styles

- Habitual ●
- Paranoid ●
- Moral ●
- Resentment ●

A chronic anger style means people hang on to their anger for long periods, sometimes weeks, months or even years. 'Anger then becomes a chronic condition instead of a useful but temporary emotion,' says Potter-Efron. 'That means anger chokes out other feelings and becomes a solution for most problems, which is far from ideal. True anger may be hidden, denied or distorted.'

#### A negative outlook

The habitually hostile look for the worst in things and are as chronically pessimistic as they are angry, interpreting actions and events as negatively as possible. They sometimes develop rigid expectations. 'She needs to call me every hour if she's out tonight' – leading to disappointment. 'She's not called, she doesn't care.' Be sure to

manage your partner's expectations and help curb this habit.

Paranoid anger is both chronic and masked because this type project their anger onto others, thinking that others are angry with them. Sexual jealousy is a particular kind of paranoia that can affect relationships. Very jealous people often hide their own sexual impulses from themselves, says Potter-Efron. 'They don't want to admit they've got their own eyes and minds on someone else's mate. So they think everybody else is boiling over with lust for others.'

To overcome this anger type, you've got to see yourself as you are, Potter-Efron says, 'a sometimes >

### The habitually hostile look for the worst in things



<1 greedy, envious, jealous, and even lusting human being'.

If you are worried about your partner being paranoid, you can remind them that they are loved and safe. Building trust can be a catalyst for change for this anger style.

Moral anger is expressed by an air of superiority and a tendency to use your values as a weapon. It feels good to feel superior. You can criticise others without guilt because you know you are right. But developing a keener sense of empathy will help curb any morally angry urges. 'Empathetic people are curious,' says Potter-Efron. 'They listen without condemning. They appreciate the range of ideas and values that people have.'

### A moral matter

To handle moral anger within a relationship, Potter-Efron advises trying to pull the discussion out of the moral sphere and focus on the conflict as a practical matter. 'Tonight's diary clash means neither of us can pick the kids up from school, so we need to think of who we could ask to collect them.' Your moral partner may not see your point of view, but will at least acknowledge there's a problem.

'Think of resentment as the beginning and hate as the ending of a process in which people feel injured and offended by another person's words or deeds,' says Potter-Efron. It can also take over your relationship, trapping you in a pattern of constantly revisiting any past crimes or perceived crimes done to you. If you're a resenter, 'put the offence that caused the resentment into perspective', says Potter-Efron. Did their shouting really hurt you, or was it just irritating? Then commit to treating your partner more respectfully. 'This will help you break the cycle where each person feels injured by the other and then either withdraws or counter-attacks.'

## Masked anger styles

- Avoidance
- Anger turned inwards
- Sneaky

'People who have a masked anger style don't realise they're angry and/or they don't want to let other people know they are angry,' says Potter-Efron. 'Instead, the anger is suppressed for all sorts of reasons. Those with masked anger styles may have been brought up thinking anger is wrong or shameful, or they fear the consequences of revealing their true feelings.'

At a moderate level, anger turned inwards is a common style. But for some, it's always easier to get angry with themselves – that way no one answers back – making the style dangerously habitual and self-destructive. By definition, this anger style may be hard to recognise in a partner but is often a symptom of depression or anxiety, for which Potter-Efron recommends counselling.



Sneaky types dislike taking advice or guidance, hate being ordered around and show their anger indirectly by the things they don't do. 'They don't say no to people, they don't say yes either,' says Potter-Efron. 'They don't say anything at all, except maybe.' Potter-Efron has observed many sneaky types in relationships with a dominating partner. Their 'maybe' attitude is the only way they can feel they have some control in the relationship. But in the long term, sneaks are isolated from their partners, who lose respect for them after years of being fobbed off. Sneaky types can break the cycle by practising to say, clearly, yes or no. Have a 'yes/no' fight with your partner, Potter-Efron recommends. 'You start with yes and your partner with no. Say yes as many times as you can. Then swap. Absolutely no content allowed, just say yes and no so you can get those words firmly planted in your brain.'

### Fear of anger

Avoidance is the most common masked style, says Potter-Efron, because our society is scared of anger and chooses to view it as a disruptive force that threatens law and order. Nowhere is this more of a threat than in our relationships. While it can sometimes be the healthy response, adopting an anything-for-a-quiet-life policy can be harmful. In a relationship of two avoiders, 'things left unsaid are like ghosts', says Potter-Efron. 'They'll haunt the household until they are dealt with honestly and openly.'

Avoiders can change if they learn to accept that anger is a normal feeling. Becoming angry doesn't make you a bad person but it's important to be direct with your partner, to request what you want and stand up for yourself.



## How the styles work together

- **Masked + Masked**

Nothing is done about anger because neither side will confront the issue, letting it eat away at the relationship. Both sides must give the other permission to be angry, asking directly about the other's wants and frustrations.

- **Masked + Chronic**

Like explosives, chronics may have their anger style indulged rather than challenged. Their anger can hide behind or be confused with other emotions so, like two masked types, issues may not be resolved unless both sides can be direct.

- **Explosive + Chronic**

Explosives deal with their anger in the here and now, but chronics hold on to it. Try to debrief after a row. This will help chronics avoid absorbing more anger while exploders can use the time to self-reflect.

- **Explosive + Explosive**

Lots of heated arguments can become habitual, addictive even. Avoid remaining 'stuck' in anger by exploring the reasons behind it. Devote your energies to finding a practical solution.

- **Chronic + Chronic**

A chronic couple can aggravate each other's anger levels while the causes behind it remain untouched. Break the habit by developing optimistic thinking habits, learning to trust, focusing on each other's good points and listening non-judgementally.

- **Masked + Explosive**

Explosives have the upper hand since their anger style can become habitual without resistance. The masked partner must be firm, refusing to react until the exploder is able to discuss the issue calmly.