

THE JOY OF VEX

Did you ever wonder why so many couples squabble incessantly? We all know them; they bicker about anything and everything — when they're alone or with company. Couples like Frank and Marie Barone, the parents on "Everybody Loves Raymond," are one of these dueling duos. They entertain us with their insult humor and sarcastic digs.

Research has shown that "good" fair fights are important to emotional and physical health. It's the chronic persistent jabs and harangues that damage our well-being and our relationships. Partners who participate in hurtful anger by name-calling, using personal information to wound the other, use their children as pawns, or

inflict physical or emotional harm are playing with fire.

So why does hurtful anger persist? For many, it becomes a substitute for passionate intimacy. It can feel curiously safe in its familiarity and unexpectedly invigorating. The rush of adrenaline released during anger arousal is strangely similar to the rush you feel during sexual arousal and is mediated by the same hormones. It's also interesting that both anger and sex are next door neighbors, living in the limbic system of our

mid-brain. No surprise that some people become "addicted" to the feelings of exhilaration when they battle. After a fight you might even feel weak in the knees and "spent" — not unlike an orgasmic release.

This erotic form of hurtful anger can become habitual and lead to a disturbing kind of

enjoyment — a passionate suffering or risky pleasure that "hurts so good." Left unchecked, however, it easily spreads to other parts of the relationship creating a contagion that is contemptuous, demeaning, and destructive. Hurtful anger contaminates trust, mutual respect, and intimacy. Bickering and battling can become a way of life. The metaphor I use for these couples who are hurtful fighters is that they're "connected through barbed wire." When they connect, it's through pain.

Couples who participate in hurtful interchanges often come to therapy because of a variety of sexual problems (desire, arousal, or response), but a central problem is their failure in empathy — being unable or unwilling to see things through their partner's eyes. Murder is the ultimate lack of empathy. What people don't realize is how toxic anger can "kill" what they love the most.

George and Martha "Bickerman," a couple in their mid-50s, came to see me because of infrequent sex. George, a successful financial manager, made the call. He was losing his patience with his wife's lack of passion and their hum-drum existence.

Martha, postmenopausal, was told by her gynecologist that she was fine medically. She had no difficulty becoming aroused or responding sexually when she wanted to be close. The problem was that she rarely felt like being close. The reason: the Bickermans were angry with each other most of the time. Martha told me that she felt ignored, unappreciated, and envious of George's more glamorous lifestyle. "He gets to travel, and we never go anywhere. I feel just like one of his possessions."

And how does Martha communicate her dissatisfaction? She yells, complains, threatens, and withholds affection. She berates George for playing too much golf, calling it his "mistress" and feeling in competition with his love for the game.

And how does George feel? Furious. He complains about feeling unappreciated for the money he brings into the household and for what

he does around the house. "That's how I show her I love her," he says, "but apparently it's not enough for her." George also criticizes Martha for not working, while spending all that he earns.

The fights between George and Martha have been getting more and more volatile. They escalate until George storms out of the house to take a long drive, leaving Martha steaming and alone. The final chapter is what they call "pay back." She retreats into silent withdrawal and mute rage which could continue for weeks. He stays out late. When they finally do have sex, she passively unenthusiastically complies as George struggles with his erection. When it's over he might comment that "It was like making love to a corpse." She agrees — only he was the corpse!

I see embattled couples like this every day who argue about all kinds of issues, large and small. It's typical for them to present a litany of complaints to me as if they were attorneys making their final summation before the court. Each one hopes for a "verdict" in his or her favor. Is it right that he preferred eating Haagen-Dazs or catching the last inning of the Red Sox game to coming to bed and spending time with her? Is it right that he leaves his underwear carelessly tossed in a heap? Is it right that one of them always initiates sex?

Whether they acknowledge it or not, couples like the Bickermans actually prefer war to love because it enlivens them. They like the rockets and the roar — the drama — and the passion. It unconsciously brings excitement to an otherwise boring relationship. Hurtful anger in couples is similar to when children rough house in their play as a less vulnerable form of bonding. They push up against each other, poke and prod, but really want to be buddies.

What these couples have forgotten, or perhaps have never learned, is how to resolve their differences amicably and build intimacy. Somehow fighting became easier than making love. The opposite of love isn't disdain, it's indifference. We only become angry about situations or with individuals that matter to us

when our expectations are unmet. The challenge is to not let your disappointment overwhelm your understanding about what really matters. To help couples focus, I sometimes ask, "Is this the hill you both want to die on?"

After an episode of momentary madness, you may "regain your senses" and apologize, but the damage has been done. Words have power. Couples need to practice empathy. As stated in the prayer of Saint Francis, "...Grant that I may seek to understand, (rather) than to be understood..." And a bit more general wisdom (from my mother), "If you chop at the tree long enough, it will fall." Hurtful comments squander your emotional capital — more valuable and irreplaceable than financial capital but less carefully invested.

All relationships have struggles. There are good fights and bad fights. What distinguishes a good fight from one that is not is how it is fought. If what you're doing isn't working, you need to see how each of you is stoking the fire. You might even be enjoying it!

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