

Understanding Your Anger: Are You Reacting or Choosing?

Taking your anger and understanding the motivation behind it will help you see both sides and can lead to a happier marriage down the road.

BY DR. NOELLE NELSON

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Your spouse forgot to fill up the tank on your van, after he/she borrowed it yesterday to deliver a special project to a client. So here you are, late to work, having to wait in line at the pump. You're pissed! You grouse, you mutter, you kick the tires. You carry that anger around with you and start seeing reasons to be upset everywhere. You end up having a fairly miserable day.

You come home that night, and you're barely through the door when your spouse exclaims, "Why can't you ever call when you're going to be late? You've ruined dinner!"

You snap back, "Why do you have to get on my case the minute I hit the door? Like I really need to come home to this!" and you're both off and running, the beginnings of an all-night harangue in the making.

What's happening here? You don't think of yourself as an angry or bitchy person, yet you certainly are behaving like one! You feel like things are out of control, and you don't like it.

Well, you're right. Things are out of control and the reason is you are reacting to the events in your life rather than responding to them. Reacting is an automatic behavior, there is no conscious thought between the event and what you do with that event. When you're simply reacting to what goes on in your life, you are out of control—you are not making conscious choices about how you want to behave, you're letting someone or something else push all your buttons, and whatever comes out is what comes out.

So your spouse fails to fill the tank, and you get angry. You don't stop to think about the fact that your beloved was operating out of his/her own needs and concerns of the moment. Perhaps your spouse was worried about being on time, or mulling over something the client said and didn't notice the gas gauge. You don't know. You just felt a knee jerk reaction of anger flare up, and nursed that frustration all day long.

Instead, learn to respond. Feel your anger, of course, but then make a conscious choice whether you want to let that anger stick with you and infect your day, or whether you would rather let it go for now and try to understand the motivation behind your spouse's behavior—perhaps by the simple expedient of asking him/her later on, in a non-accusatory way: "I noticed you didn't fill the tank on the van. Any particular reason why not?"

Similarly, if your spouse cries out "dinner is ruined" in despair at your lateness, they are in all likelihood unhappy because they were looking forward to offering you something nice—a good dinner. Coming back with a knee-jerk reaction will only create havoc. If instead, you respond to your initial feeling of frustration by taking a deep breath, then think for a moment, you may realize that your spouse is disappointed. You can acknowledge that disappointment and from there, work out a better understanding of dinner hours and phone calls and so forth.

Take charge of your life. You are not a mindless robot, fated to react automatically to events. You are an incredible creation, a being capable of conscious thought, of choice, of mindful response. Use that wondrous ability to make your marriage the joyous experience it truly deserves to be.

Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D., is a relationship expert, popular speaker in the U.S. and abroad, and author of nine best-selling books, including "[Your Man is Wonderful](#)" and "[Dangerous Relationships](#)." Dr. Nelson focuses on how we can all enjoy happy, fulfilling lives while accomplishing great things in love, at home and at work, as we appreciate ourselves, our world and all others. For more, visit www.noellenelson.com and follow her on Twitter [@DrNoelleNelson](#).

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