

# Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry

## What Can Go Wrong When Working with Angry Couples

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National Institute for the Clinical  
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Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry:

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## What Can Go Wrong When Working with Angry Couples

**Dr. Buczynski:** According to Dr. Ellyn Bader, what we say the first time we meet an angry couple could be lighting their fuse.

**“The way you start that session matters a lot.”**

**Dr. Bader:** Let’s say you’ve talked to a couple on the telephone, and you know they’re very angry at each other.

Then, you’re coming into the first session.

Right away, the way you start that session matters a lot. You don’t want to ask, “What brings you in? Why are you here?” – typical questions that therapists are taught to ask.

Because what you’re going to get is one person unloading on the other. They’re going to tell you all the things the other person has done where they’ve been wronged.

A better thing to say is, “Usually when couples come in and they’re hurt and angry like I know the two of you are from some things I heard on the telephone, a therapist will ask the question, ‘What brings you in?’ I’m not going to ask you that question. I’m going to go about this a different way. Joe, what I’d like to know is, can you tell me what Mary’s main complaints about you are? And Mary, can you tell me what Joe’s main complaints about you are? We’ll go one at a time, but I’d like to see if we can get a picture of what each other’s main complaints are.”

Instead of one of them telling me how bad the other one is, Joe is telling me what Mary thinks he doesn’t do well. I’ll say, “Tell me your top two, three, or, at the most, four, complaints that you think she is. When you’re done, I’m going to ask Mary how accurate you were.”

So, he tells me a few complaints. Then I’ll say to Mary, “How accurate was he?”

Usually, he’s pretty accurate.

Then, I’ll turn to her and I’ll say, “Did you know he was listening to you that well? Did you know that he really knew what your complaints were?”

Often, somebody will say, actually, I didn’t know she heard me – or, I didn’t know she was listening.

In the first 30 minutes that you're with a couple, instead of allowing them to trash the other person, you're actually showing them that they have been listening to each other. They think that haven't been. So, that starts things off in a different way.

**"Instead of allowing them to trash the other person, you're actually showing them that they have been listening to each other."**

**Dr. Buczynski:** It's interesting, but that one shift in your greeting can really set the stage for more agency and empathy from your couples.

Now, some couples just can't communicate without their anger. So, Ellyn will often engage them with what she calls her most effective skill.

**Dr. Bader:** I'm going to tell you the most powerful technique that I use. Usually it takes about five hours to teach this. I'm going to collapse it and go a couple minutes.

My husband and I have developed a process called the initiator inquirer, which is a process that looks like it's a communication process, because so many couples – and angry couples in particular – will say, "We can't communicate well. All we do is fight."

This is a process where each partner is taught a different role.

To summarize quickly – the initiating partner is the partner who brings up one issue and says what they think and feel about it, and does so without any name-calling, blaming, or negativity.

The goal for you, when you initiate something with your partner, is to know more about yourself when you're done than you knew when you started. That's putting emphasis on them going deeper into a deeper understanding of themselves.

The inquiring partner's job is to listen and to do so without interrupting. You can work on them with things like deep breathing and other things that help them get centered and focused. They are to ask questions, and those questions are questions located completely in the initiator's experience. They're not questions like, well, do you think that bothers me too? Things that pull it back to themselves are off-limits.

The goal is for them to empathize and to stay with empathy until they create a soothing moment. That's that moment of connection, where the initiating person says, "You really got it. You really understand."

It looks like a process of communication, but what's really going on in that process is you are building in and helping each partner have new developmental capacities that they didn't have previously. Those are

developmental capacities that keep them in the fighting because they don't have them.

“Over time, they develop a much greater capacity to see the world from their partner's eyes rather than only from their own eyes.”

For example, the easiest one to understand quickly is that a narcissist does not have the capacity for empathy. When you put a narcissistic partner into that inquiring role enough times, they begin to have to stretch, and they begin to have to stretch into understanding the other person's world and the other person's experience, not being so caught up in themselves.

Over time, they develop a much greater capacity to see the world from their partner's eyes rather than only from their own eyes.

An initiating partner may have the ability to anticipate their own desires and wants, and to bring them up in a constructive way. So, they wait until their desires are violated and then they clobber the other person, which is what starts the fight.

For people who don't initiate and bring up the things that matter, they're going to stay angry. They're going to be angry a lot.

So, that role is pushing their own development when they have to come into the session and initiate in a way that's not normal or comfortable for them.

**Dr. Buczynski:** This kind of work can really push a person's development.

It builds this important capacity to take on future issues with more empathy and less reactivity—But obviously, not every session with an angry couple is going to go according to plan. And sometimes, when couples fight, the practitioner can experience a sudden urge to take sides.

So how do we avoid this?

Here, Dr. Stan Tatkin tells us how projective identification almost threatened his work with a hostile couple.

**Dr. Tatkin:** This couple had been married for several years and they had three kids.

The gentleman was quite angry with his wife in a very persistent way.

As a therapist, I began to feel a lot of urges to go after him and protect her. One of the things that will happen in couple therapy is the matter of projective identification.

It's one of the most important things to experience and to utilize once you understand what it is and where it might be coming from – it helps you to know where to throw your intervention – whether to one partner or to the other partner or down the middle.

By not talking about or dealing with *her* own anger and rage, it actually amplified *his*."

In this case, I became aware that she, in her quietness, was employing me in some manner to do battle with him – it was she who'd experienced a great deal of rage, a great deal of anger, and by not expressing it, by not stopping him, and by not talking about or dealing with her own anger, it actually amplified his.

This distorted a reality here, where he looked like the person who was always angry – the bully in the room – but actually, it was her passivity and avoidance that was contributing to his anger.

"Getting her activated and involved helped to calm this man down."

So, I'd say to her, "How can you just sit there? I wonder if you want to yell at him."

Or I'd say to him, "She's looking over there and I'm going to scan her face for any signs of anger. It looks like she's very angry with you as well."

Getting her activated and involved helped to calm this man down.

This will happen in couples: one person begins to be pushed into a position of expressing a certain affect, a certain attitude, or a certain position because the other partner is passively doing the same thing and that amplifies the situation.

Once that is understood, the seemingly continuous angry, hostile person is no longer that way.

It's important for the therapist to "find the baby" in people. It's very difficult dealing with strong affects and personality presentations that are off-putting, but "finding the baby" – finding the person inside that's driving the whole behavior is essential to do if we are going to help, understand and modify the situation.

**Dr. Buczynski:** This points back to what Sue Johnson said earlier, about the rage that can build up when an attachment figure refuses to engage. And as Stan revealed, you might need to keep an eye out for projective identification in these situations.

Now, In the next module, we're going to explore one of the most unsettling parts of working with angry clients: when their anger is aimed directly at you, the practitioner. I'll see you over there.