



## Anger Management

*This is episode #97 of Stay Happily Married, "Anger Management."*

*Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.*

*Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at [Rosen.com](http://Rosen.com).*

---

Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here in the studio with Dr. Julia Messer. Julia is a licensed psychologist currently practicing with Orenstein Solutions in Cary, North Carolina, where she helps guide individuals and couples through difficulties like anger issues. She also deals with substance abuse issues and relationship and family crises.

I'm really pleased that we're going to get to talk about anger. I think it's a big relationship issue. We get a lot of feedback from folks that are listening to the show about it.

Julia, welcome to the show.

Julia Messer: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Well, this is terrific that you're here. And I think anger is a big, big problem for a lot of couples. I'm curious from an expert, from a professional standpoint, where is the line between occasionally being upset and having a real problem? What's the distinction between people are just a little angry or people are really having an anger problem?

Julia Messer: Yes. Basically, everyone gets angry or upset occasionally. Anger itself is a normal human emotion. It's healthy and appropriate many times. The line between really problems with anger comes from how a person responds to those feelings. So having the

feelings themselves is not the problem, is not the issue; it is how a person deals with those feelings.

Lee Rosen: So we're allowed to get angry; we just can't do anything terrible with it, I guess.

Julia Messer: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. So what does it look like when someone is too angry? I mean, that is stepping over that line?

Julia Messer: It can look like an outburst. So when someone has almost a rage and they might throw things, they might become verbally aggressive or even abusive. However, anger can also have a lot of negative consequences and implications in a relationship when it's held inside and it can stew or simmer over a long period of time. And that can be really difficult to deal with in a relationship. So it might not look like an outburst, necessarily; it could be a subtle contempt, daily jabs.

Lee Rosen: Sometimes I've had people say to me that they don't even need -- they know what's coming and so they almost -- they don't want it to come. They're just trying to keep their spouse's anger wrapped up. And so it doesn't even have to come out. They get so used to tip-toeing around it. They can kind of feel it lingering under the surface but it never actually erupts.

Julia Messer: That can definitely be the case. And I hear people say that they feel like they're walking on eggshells around a person.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Julia Messer: And that isn't impacting the relationship; it is harming it because it has implications for trust, emotional connectedness, feeling distant. And just trying to keep the fire out makes a person feel scared in the relationship and invalidated.

Lee Rosen: Do you think that -- let's say you're out with a couple for the evening. It's you and your spouse and the other couple. And the other couple, let's say the husband is one of those people that really does just have a lot of stuff, a lot of angry stuff pent up. Would you typically know it's there? I mean, are you going to get a feeling that it's there? Or do people just hide it and you don't even realize it?

Julia Messer: I think it can depend. I think we all have seen couples that it seems that there's an underlying negative interaction or maybe even fear from one side of the couple. On the other hand, I think people can

do a very good job at hiding it and avoiding it or ignoring it, particularly in public.

Lee Rosen: Right. Sometimes you do hear people say that their spouse is really, really angry. But you felt like you just never noticed it; it wasn't something you saw. But I think you're right. I think some -- although, I've had other situations where I've been out and it's like, oh, yeah, big issues there. So I think you're right on track.

When you have somebody that's got these issues and the anger is there and it's just waiting to come out, are there certain kinds of things that you've seen that really serve as the trigger that it's like, this happens and then, boom, you're dealing with one of these angry episodes?

Julia Messer: Triggers can be specific to individuals but I do think that there are also common triggers for all of us to feel anger. One of those is stress. Stress can come from daily events, so job stress, getting the kids off to school, driving in traffic. Stress can come from a major incident such as job loss. And in those situations, having the stress there, very small, minor things can cause a person to really respond in an angry way and even have negative consequences associated with that.

So triggers, there are broad triggers for all of us, I think. But for an individual really it's about the goal that he or she has because we feel anger when we have a goal or a need that we want to have met and something's blocking that goal.

Lee Rosen: So whatever that goal is for you, if it gets blocked you're going to have that outburst if you're that kind of person.

Julia Messer: Yes. You're either going to have an outburst but probably a lot of us will feel anger on some level, or irritation, because there are different levels of intensity of anger. However, feeling angry, like I said earlier, is not the problem. So if a goal is blocked, all of us are going to feel something because that's frustrating. And so how we choose to go around the obstacle and get that goal met, that can be the difference between erupting into an outburst, solving the problem constructively.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is interesting how as a layperson I kind of drift into this mushing together anger with negative stuff that happens because of anger. And I guess that's pretty common that people do that. But what you're saying is anger's not so bad. Anger's fine.

Julia Messer: Right.

Lee Rosen: It's this other behavior that for some people becomes a problem.

Julia Messer: Right. And the feeling of anger, what is happening in our bodies is a mobilization of resources. It can actually help us to achieve a goal or to avoid danger. So what it's doing inside of us is meant to be protective.

Lee Rosen: It's ultimately a good thing. But would you -- you're the expert. I mean, I'm just curious. Aren't there some people, just the way that we're built chemically or whatever -- however the heck we're built -- that the anger gets out of hand, just like we have the wrong -- too much of something happens to some people than to others? Am I on the right track with that?

Julia Messer: Yes. We can get flooded -- this is the term -- with a lot of arousal physiologically.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Julia Messer: So blood pressure increases, heart rate, breathing. And I don't know if the difference is so much genetic or internal because research has shown that how we express anger is learned. And modeling of who we see getting angry and how they're dealing with it, that it's actually more of a habit than differences internally of how you control that flooding. And so the good news of that is that it really can be unlearned or new ways can be learned.

Lee Rosen: Right. Of how you're going to behave.

Julia Messer: Right.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. But I guess how you feel about it, that maybe -- is that -- and I know we're kind of getting into sort of the deep water here, but can you be less -- let's say you're the greatest person in the world at controlling your anger and you're never going to have an outburst, but can you make yourself get less angry?

Julia Messer: Yes, you can.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Julia Messer: One way to do that is to learn how to relax when you feel yourself elevating.

Lee Rosen: Heading in that direction.

Julia Messer: Yes. So catching it early. Noticing when the beginning signs are occurring and taking steps to relax yourself, breathing -- slowing down your breathing. And a large part of expression of anger is it comes from what we're telling ourselves and our self-talk. So the way that you're talking to yourself about whatever the incident is, is going to either elevate the feeling or it can de-escalate it.

Lee Rosen: Right. If only I'd had you with me at the product return line at Best Buy this weekend. Oh, it would have been fine.

Okay. So you've mentioned some of the things that -- the expressions of anger, I mean, these outbursts. We've all seen them, whether it's at Best Buy or at home, unfortunately. What I'm wondering is, for people that have these outbursts that behave in these angry ways, obviously it impacts their relationships. Does it impact their lives in other ways?

Julia Messer: Absolutely. It can impact your physical health, which is really important. There are studies that show links between blood pressure problems, cardiovascular issues, increased risk of stroke, heart attack, with a lot of hostility. And so there's a physical health component.

There's a mental health component because anger, especially when it's withheld or, as I was talking about earlier, the inward dealing with anger by avoiding it or turning it inside can lead to depression, anxiety. And there are obvious negative consequences that can come when a person has anger problems at work, which is very significant right now. There are estimates that 45 percent of the time in a workplace is involving dealing with conflict in the workplace.

And of course in relationships there can be negative consequences, loss of relationships, and even in friendships people who have anger problems tend to not have supportive, healthy relationships in general. That, in turn, can impact a person's mental health and physical health.

Lee Rosen: Sure. Yeah. So it sounds like -- I mean, really just having an anger problem can impact you in all aspects of your life, ultimately, it sounds like.

Julia Messer: Yes.

Lee Rosen: Do people that are suffering from this difficulty, that are having trouble with anger, do they see it? Do they know it? Or do they just think, well, this is normal; this is the way everyone feels?

Julia Messer: It varies. I think some people do -- maybe they don't recognize that the problem is how they're responding to the anger, but they know there's a problem because they know they don't feel good or they know that their relationships aren't working. Because most of the time when anger is outwardly expressed to try to get that goal met that we talked about earlier, 95 percent of the time it doesn't work. So this person knows that obstacles are getting in their way and they're not getting their goals and their needs met. They may not know why.

Other people blame the triggers. They blame the person that made them mad -- the driver -- or the other person in the relationship, the Best Buy salesperson, and really don't --

Lee Rosen: She was the devil, by the way.

Julia Messer: They really don't think about the fact that perhaps how they're responding to those feelings is a large part of what's not working.

Lee Rosen: Right. So people are -- some people are seeing it in themselves and they're trying their own approaches to not feeling so angry all -- I mean, it sounds like they're working toward not doing it. But does that work? Are they on the right track with what they're doing?

Julia Messer: I think it depends. I think some people can be on the right track to - - when they try to -- if they know that they get angry in the car, they can try to avoid traffic and go around it. So I do think people have some awareness of what they need to do to avoid situations that make them angry. Or go shopping at a time when there aren't many crowds.

But there can also be people who try to deal with anger in a less productive way by going to the bar or going home and drinking, using drugs to calm their bodies down.

Lee Rosen: It does seem that anger issues and alcohol abuse, drug abuse, that sort of thing, do seem to sort of go hand-in-hand. You hear about that a lot.

Julia Messer: Yes. And you can hear it in the context of that's how someone responds to anger or angry situations; that's the solution. Or it can precede a person's problems. So alcohol is disinhibiting, and so what would not normally cause a person to express anger, might if they've been drinking.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Let me ask you this. So if someone recognizes they have a problem and they're not doing very well at getting it under control and they call you, what do you guys do for them? What is an expert psychologist going to do for someone? How do you help straighten this out?

Julia Messer: There are different routes that can be taken and a large part of it depends on what's comfortable for that person. Individual therapy can focus on developing and practicing and using anger management skills and that includes improved communication skills, working on forgiveness in some cases, working on stress management, and it can be done individually.

For some people, maybe it is more of a couple's issue and the couple would need to come in together and work on in a therapeutic setting.

We also offer anger management groups. These are not therapy. This is not group therapy in the sense of the purpose being to bond or share personal past incidents, but more a psychoeducational group.

Lee Rosen: I kind of have to laugh that you guys are deliberately bringing a group of angry people together in your office.

Julia Messer: But this is -- I think people who have anger problems typically are not in any way dangerous or different from anyone else. We all feel angry and we all have times when we don't handle anger well. So it varies. There are people who get into legal trouble because of their anger, but there are other people who just kind of quietly suffer or they're not happy with themselves but in no way would be any different from getting any other group of people together.

Lee Rosen: Right. And so when you look at -- you mentioned seeing a therapist individually. You mentioned couples counseling as an option for working on the anger. And this group process. Of those three is one method better than the other or does it depend on the person or how do you decide which approach to follow?

Julia Messer: It does depend on the person and it depends on the comfort level. Some people prefer privacy and want an individual interaction. Other people prefer a psychoeducational approach and they want to learn the skills, take them home, practice them on their own and treat it from that angle. So it depends on the individual's preferences first and foremost because they're all effective -- they can all be effective -- because the skills are essentially the same.



Lee Rosen: Yeah. In the grand scheme of fixing people's problems -- because fundamentally we come to you guys, we want to be fixed. I'm sure you don't like that terminology but that's what we want. Problem: solve it. Is anger like a really hard thing to fix or is it a fairly easy thing to fix? Does it take a long time? Can you do it in two visits? Seriously, how challenging a problem is this?

Julia Messer: I think for any issue for any person the solution is not something that can be fixed by someone else entirely, that it is going to be difficult to change patterns of behavior and to change what we're used to doing. Even if it's not working for us, change is difficult. And a psychologist, a psychiatrist, is not going to be -- is going to be the person to guide and teach and provide information and a way for an individual to start doing things differently.

Lee Rosen: You would think after doing 97 episodes of *Stay Happily Married* I would realize that this is a little bit different than dropping your car off and having it fixed. You can't drop your head off with a psychologist and pick it up three hours later and it's had a tune-up. But that just is so appealing; it's hard for me to shake that idea.

Well, I am thrilled that you were able to join us today and talk about anger management. Thank you so much.

Julia Messer: Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: Special thank you to Dr. Julia Messer for being with us today. You can find out a lot about her practice and some upcoming anger management workshops, as well as all the other services that are offered by Orenstein Solutions, by visiting the website at [OrensteinSolutions.com](http://OrensteinSolutions.com). I want to spell that for you and I'll also put a link to it in the show notes. It's O-r-e-n-s-t-e-i-n Solutions dot com. You can also give them a call at (919) 428-2766.

Thank you so much for listening today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, your comments and feedback are so greatly appreciated. You've given us such good ideas for additional shows. You've helped us to improve this show tremendously. We love to hear from you.

Couple of ways you can be in touch. One is to call our comment line at (919) 256-3083, or you can shoot us an e-mail at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com). I get all of those e-mails. I read and respond to all of those e-mails and I can't wait to hear from you.

Until next time, stay happily married.



*Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the Web at [stayhappilymarried.com](http://stayhappilymarried.com). We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at [comments@stayhappilymarried.com](mailto:comments@stayhappilymarried.com) or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.*