

Anger Do's and Don'ts

Do speak up when an issue is important to you. Obviously, we do not have to address personally every injustice and irritation that comes along. To simply let something go can be an act of maturity. But it is a mistake to stay silent if the cost is to feel bitter, resentful, or unhappy. We de-self ourselves when we fail to take a stand on issues that matter to us.

Don't strike while the iron is hot. A good fight will clear the air in some relationships, but if your goal is to change an entrenched pattern, the worst time to speak up may be when you are feeling angry or intense. If your fires start rising in the middle of a conversation, you can always say, "I need a little time to sort my thoughts out. Let's set up another time to talk about it more." Seeking temporary distance is not the same as cold withdrawal or an emotional cutoff.

Do take time out to think about the problem and to clarify your position. Before you speak out, ask yourself the following questions: "What is it about the situation that makes me angry?" "What is the real issue?" "Where do I stand?" "What, specifically, do I want to change?" "What are the things I will and will not do?"

Don't use "below-the-belt" tactics. These include: blaming, interpreting, diagnosing, labeling, analyzing, preaching, moralizing, ordering, warning, interrogating, ridiculing, and lecturing.

Do speak in "I" language. Learn to say, "I think..." "I feel..." "I fear..." "I want..." A true "I" statement says something about the self without criticizing or blaming the other person and without holding the other person responsible for our feelings or reactions. Watch out for disguised "you" statements or pseudo "I" statements. ("I think you are...")

Don't make vague requests. Let the person know specifically what you want. Don't expect people to anticipate your needs or do things that you have not requested. Even those who love you can't read your mind.

Do try to appreciate the fact that people are different. We move away from fused relationships when we recognize that there are as many ways of seeing the world as there are people in it. If you're fighting about who has the "truth," you may be missing the point. Different perspectives and ways of reacting do not necessarily mean that one person is "right" and the other "wrong."

Don't tell another person what she or he thinks or feels or "should" think or feel. If another person gets angry in reaction to a change you make, don't criticize their feelings or tell them they have no right to be angry. Better to say, "I understand that you're angry, and if I were in your shoes, perhaps I'd be angry too. But I've thought it over and this is my decision." Remember that one person's right to be angry does not mean that the other person is at fault.

Do recognize that each person is responsible for his or her own behavior. Don't blame your dad's new wife because she "won't let him...". If you are angry about a problem between you and your dad, it is your responsibility to find a way to approach the situation. Your dad's behavior is his responsibility, not anyone else's.

Don't participate in intellectual arguments that go nowhere. Don't spin your wheels trying to convince others of the "rightness" of your position. If the other person is not hearing you, simply say, "Well, it may sound crazy to you, but this is how I feel." Or, "I understand that you disagree, but I guess we see the problem differently."

Do try to avoid speaking through a third party. If you are angry with your brother's behavior, don't say, "I think my daughter felt terrible when you didn't find the time to come to her school play." Instead try, "I was upset when you didn't come. You're important to me and I really wanted you to be there."

Don't expect change to come about from hit-and-run confrontations. Change occurs slowly in close relationships. If you make even a small change, you will be tested many times to see if you "really mean it." Don't get discouraged if you fall on your face several times as you try to put theory into practice. You may find that you start out fine but then blow it when things heat up. Getting derailed is just part of the process, so be patient with yourself. You will have many opportunities to get back on track and try again.