

hot stuff:

I. The argument

The issue, once it arose, became incendiary. Anne, a magazine editor, was sitting in a restaurant enjoying an after-dinner espresso with her lawyer husband, Mark, when the conversation turned to what she considered to be the odious behavior of a female friend of theirs. This woman, who was in her early thirties (as were Anne and Mark), had been married for close to a decade to a man who had fallen desperately ill several years earlier. Very recently, even though her husband was suffering from an extended but clearly terminal cancer, their friend had gone out and become involved in an extramarital affair.

To engage in such behavior was, in Anne's view, immoral and disgusting. But to her consternation, Mark didn't seem to agree with her, at least not completely. "It is terrible, but I suppose I can understand why the stress—the impending death of someone you love—might be so enormous that a person might want some reassurance and relief. Even relief of that kind," he said in an even, reasonable tone of voice.

"Of course, if she got into an affair with someone and really fell in love with him, that would be outrageous," he added at once. "But otherwise, it might be that the simple physical

contact with another person—and that could be anyone, even a close friend—might be justified. Because of her own neediness and the stress and because of the horrible impending loss."

Anne's cup landed on her saucer with a clatter. "But this is a deathbed betrayal." She stared at him in dismay. "And to me it's like—desecrating the relationship! Can you imagine having been married to someone for almost 10 years, and not being able to keep your pants up

through the person's last illness?" she demanded angrily.

But before he could respond, she continued, "To me, there is something so unprincipled about this that it's just crazy, and I don't see how you can defend that position for a minute!"

Her voice had risen, and the older couple at the next table were obviously listening. Mark, embarrassed, didn't answer. His entire body had stiffened and he was staring down at his plate.

"Yes, it might be nice to 'relieve' yourself, as you put it, given the stress," Anne went on, speaking more softly but in a sarcastic tone, "but that doesn't change the fact that that dying person is your *partner*." She was gazing at her own partner indignantly. "How could anyone ever *do* that?" she asked, looking not only angry but slightly frightened as well.

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anger, and how to handle it

BY MAGGIE SCARF

He stared back at her with a particular expression on his face—one that Anne found annoyingly familiar. It was as if he were looking at a child, whose simplistic notions were to be tolerated but who was naively ignorant of the real complexities of life. She detested that look. He went on to explain, with patience and forbearance, that in the case of a long and debilitating illness the person doing the caring was likely to become drained, and might need some caretaking herself. Things might be easier for everyone if there were someone else on the scene who was comforting her and she were “more relaxed on the sexual front,” as he put it.

“I think that is so *perverse*,” Anne retorted. Her blood was up, and her anger was escalating by the moment. “I think that is such a vile, dishonorable way to deal with a relationship with somebody you care about—I consider that totally abusive!” She had half risen from her seat.

“Sit down. Please,” Mark hissed at her, and she did so almost automatically. But then, furious about having obeyed his command, she leapt to her feet, stalked out of the restaurant and returned to their apartment alone. Mark, when he got home a half hour later, was obviously incensed by the public scene she had

made; the argument resumed and escalated as they traded insults, blame and memories of past injuries and grievances. But eventually the quarrel did die down, as many quarrels do, without either person’s having resolved—or even comprehended—the crucial concerns they had actually been fighting about.

Such unprocessed issues, like unprocessed waste material, tend to trap sour odors and contamination within an intimate relationship.

How, one might ask, could things have happened differently? How might this entire incident have been handled differently?

The argument resumed and escalated as they traded insults, blame, grievances.

II. Attack and counterattack

There is nothing wrong with feeling angry per se. Anger is a normal human reaction to a stress-pro-

ducing event—very often a situation in which a person believes that she or her self-esteem is threatened. The difficulty is that when someone starts feeling anger, she (or he) tends to communicate that feeling with a lot of force and emotionality. And then, as therapist Stuart R. Johnson points out, things start getting out of hand at once.

“Frequently, the angry person will violate the boundary between the *effect* of the other person’s action—say, feeling upset by something he has said—and the *intent* of his action,

HOT STUFF

which might not have been hurtful or attacking at all." When the angry person counterattacks, as Anne did, the other person feels assaulted and misunderstood. He experiences her as not attacking the comment he has made, but attacking him as a person. In turn, she feels hurt, and sees him as having *meant* to hurt her. The boundary between the act and its motivation has been crossed.

Soon, the couple are arguing about two very different things. The first person is still reacting angrily to her partner's comments; the partner is defending himself against what he feels is an assault on his personhood. "It becomes a 'My apples are better than your oranges; No, my oranges are better than your apples' kind of fight," observes Johnson, a clinician in private practice in New Haven, Connecticut. "They aren't even talking about the same thing, but they aren't aware of that at all."

Anne and Mark had, of course, been fighting about an abstraction—what each of them would do in such a situation—but an abstraction that had deep meaning for her.

When Mark said that he could empathize with their friend's predicament, and even understand her behavior, he wasn't really saying that the behavior was morally correct or that he would behave in that way himself. But this is what his partner had heard.

In the heat of the argument that followed, each of them had lost sight of the other person and what he or she might be thinking and feeling. For, as Johnson notes, a quarrel about one event often

becomes a quarrel about many events: "The fight is like a powerful magnet that attracts and picks up all of the unresolved fights of the past. At that point, the couple is in an escalating vicious circle. She's kicked him, so he kicks her; she kicks him back, so he kicks her back; she kicks harder and then he kicks harder—they're in an argument that involves everything that's ever happened in their lives, one that spins off into antiquity."

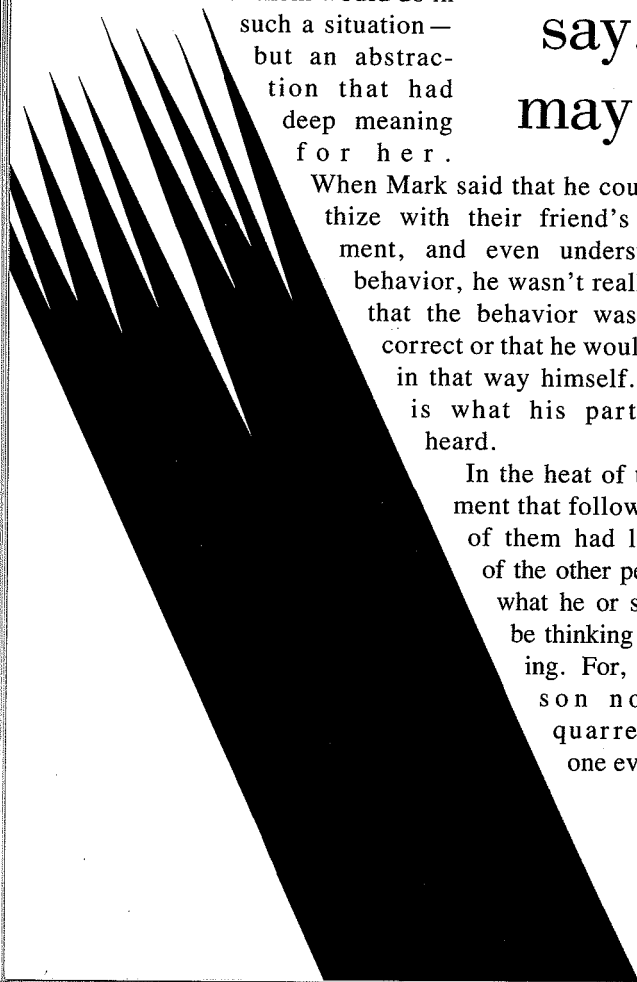
III. The task

The first order of business is to block the quarrel's escalation, and to keep it focused on the issue that has arisen at the moment—leaving aside all of the problems and indignities of the past. A second, but equally important piece of business is *not to try to negotiate a resolution* while one or both partners are still feeling furious. If Anne and Mark had been in couples treatment—or even been aware of a simple-sounding yet powerfully effective therapeutic "homework task" currently in widespread clinical use—they might have proved far more capable of keeping their fight functional, healthy and on track.

The easy instructions for this therapeutic task are as follows: As soon as a fight begins to develop, the person who is getting angry should be given 10 to 15 minutes in order to tell the partner 1) why she is angry; 2) what she thinks the basic issues are; and 3) what the feelings (such as hurt or fear) are that lie just beneath the surface of the anger that she is communicating.

Had the couple been following these guidelines, they could have declared a cease-fire in place as soon as their quarrel began developing. Anne would then have been given the opportunity to vent her feelings for the next 10 or 15 minutes. Then, before getting into the vicious circle of attack and counterattack, she could have explained to her partner, in the

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clearest way possible, the impact that his remarks had been having on her.

IV. The resolution

If the pair of them had agreed to stop their intensifying argument and given Anne time and space in which to explain herself without fear of verbal counterattacks or interruptions, Anne would, I believe, have responded in the following fashion:

1. "Why am I angry? I'm angry because you seem heartless. I look at you and have the feeling that you're being very logical and reasonable, but that you're showing the empathy of a frog or a lizard. As far as I'm concerned, you're acting more like a computer than a human being. You have 'logical' responses to make, but no deep commitment as I understand it.

2. "What are the issues? What you said makes me feel that you'll abandon me, and to tell the truth—given that I didn't have a very good relationship with my father—it wouldn't surprise me if you *did* walk out on me when I needed you the most. So there's something that's terribly scary to me about the cool, logical position that you've taken.

3. "What are the feelings underneath the anger? I really feel frightened. I feel as if your commitment is only a partial commitment, and as though you won't be *there* for me. The very fact that you could say those things makes me question whether you actually love me—or whether you *would* disconnect if that seemed 'reasonable' under certain circumstances. So I hope you can understand where I'm coming from, and how hurt and scared I was by your remarks."

Often, by the time a person has gotten to the feelings underneath the anger, much of the anger has in fact dissipated. And the other person, having heard the angry individual out, can more readily understand the impact of his behavior upon her. Mark, for example, would

have come to realize the effect that his superreasonable and rational stance was having on his wife. He would have been more capable of understanding and empathizing with the feelings that had been evoked in her—something that could not have happened in the heat of an ongoing battle.

According to the rules of the task, once the angry person has had her say, the partner is *not* supposed to respond. The anger task is nevertheless set up as a quid pro quo. For in exchange for the opportunity to

ventilate her feelings without interference, the angry person must promise not to bring up the issue at any moment *outside* the designated task time. This gives both people a sense that the situation is under control.

She can be heard out without being counterattacked. He

can feel that she will not be free to bring up the issue and mount a new blaming attack at any time that she feels the impulse to do so. And at this juncture—after her angry passion has died down and he has begun to comprehend its sources—the pair can start negotiating the difficulty and trying to reach a mutually acceptable resolution. Once the anger has been expressed, they can roll up their sleeves and get to work on a win/win, mutually acceptable solution.

"The episode then becomes part of their shared relationship, part of their memory bank, as they'd say on *Star Trek*," Stuart Johnson points out. It is now a part of the couple's history, an incident that has been resolved and will not come up again. □

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