

# **THE ANATOMY OF AN ARGUMENT THAT SPINS “OUT OF CONTROL:” Learning To Identify And Take Responsibility For The Choices You Make When You Are Angry**

Angry people are continually making choices, even though they may feel and look completely “out of control” to themselves and those who happen to be around them at the time. The escalation to more intense anger and to explosive and punishing behavior can be increased by simply reacting to the situation and the other person’s behavior, or it can be allowed to decrease by actively making more positive choices to avoid thoughts, verbal statements, or actions that continue to inflame the situation.

The intensity of your anger is determined by controlling and entitled attitudes and the rationalization and justifications that are used to continue to engage with the other person. The more “rounds” two people go with one another, the more reasons they will find for continuing and escalating their altercation even further.

Truly understanding your punishing and explosive anger requires the willingness and ability to analyze an argument and see its natural steps of development or escalation. To help you recognize these steps, we will analyze a conflict that involves two people in which “provocation” leads to “provocation,” ending ultimately in destructive and hurtful behavior that dramatically affects how both people feel about themselves and the other person.

The sequence of events illustrated below is reconstructed from many of the stories that clients have shared with me over the years about the choices they have made (and not made) in the midst of arguments they have had. Don’t forget that **CLEAR** (though not necessarily conscious) choices are continually being made as situations escalate and your anger becomes more punishing and destructive. Poor choices angry people make become part of the reason they end up feeling so little respect, trust, and safety in their relationships with one another.

## **SOME SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF STEPS AND CHOICES THAT CAN OCCUR IN A COUPLES’ ARGUMENT:**

**STEP 1:** I come home after a long day at the office at 7 PM. I’m feeling incredibly tense and stressed these days because of a big project at work that I’m part of. I’m later than usual in getting home and I forgot to call my wife to let her know that I’d be running behind. As soon as I walk in the door, my wife “jumps” on me and starts to “rag” on me about what “brats” the kids (12- and 9-year-old boys) have been since they got home from school. She told me that the boys “got into it” with each other and our older son made the younger one cry by punching him in the arm. She is also angry that they had to wait on having dinner because I was running late. I actually think about asking her to give me some a few minutes to change my clothes and take a little time for myself before we talk about the kids but instead I get immediately defensive and react by starting to raise my voice with her.

### **CHOICE POINT 1:**

He makes the choice to immediately engage with his wife rather than taking some time for himself to calm down after his long and difficult workday. He thought about and could have made the positive choice to leave temporarily to change his clothes but he doesn’t do this which only allows the discussion to begin to escalate further. His wife could also have put off this discussion until both of them had had a chance to “cool down.”

**STEP 2:** My wife just has to start talking about how much I work and then she starts to “nag” me about how I’m “never home” and how I’m “not the kind of husband and father” I should be.” I am so damn sick of her “bitching” about my work hours and how I’m never “good enough” for her and my kids. After all, I figure I’m doing all of this for her and the kids but she never seems to give me any credit for how much I put in for her and our family. I try to “reason” with her at first, but she won’t listen to what I want her to hear so I start to make fun of what she is saying to me, mocking her words in a “sing-song” voice. I know it “drives her crazy” to have me talk to her that way. My thoughts about her are really getting negative the whole time that I’m doing this.

**CHOICE POINT 2:**

He makes the choice initially to try to “reason” with his wife to get her to “back off” and stop talking to him but that doesn’t work to get her to cease her complaining about him and the current situation. So he decides to “make fun” of his wife, knowing that this will hurt her and potentially escalate the situation even more (although he may also believe that this will work to stop her and the argument at that point). Another choice he could have made could have been to go into another room, sit down, and actually listen and try to empathize with how hard her day has been and how frustrated she is feeling with their kids right now. He makes the choice to mock her as a way to punish her for “questioning” him and his self-worth despite knowing how much this actually hurts her.

**STEP 3:** My wife gets even angrier and calls me a “jerk” and an “asshole.” I really don’t like it when she starts to call me names so, since she has started the name-calling, I yell at her about what a “lazy stupid bitch” she is. She really hates it when I call her the “b” word. That really “gets her going” and, by this point, we are both screaming as loudly as we can at each other, not even thinking about the kids, who are in their bedrooms.

**CHOICE POINT 3:**

His wife starts the “mud-slinging” related to name-calling, which is never helpful when an escalation is moving upward. He makes the choice to immediately respond “in kind,” fueled in part by the negative thoughts he has already been having, believing that, at this point, she is really “asking for it” and that he has an additional and “valid” reason to “punish” her even further (which, again, he may hope, will “shut her down” in the moment and end their argument).

**STEP 4:** My wife is completely exasperated at this point and turns around and starts leaving the living room to go back into the kitchen. But I am really pissed off now and I am blaming her for “ruining the whole evening” so I follow her into the kitchen to “finish this discussion” and get her to admit that she was “wrong” to treat me the way she did when I walked in the door.

**CHOICE POINT 4:**

His wife may actually be trying to de-escalate the situation by going to another room even if she is not taking what could be called a “respectful” time-out. But he chooses to allow his hostile and cynical thinking to “take over” and he makes the decision to follow her into the other room to continue their “discussion.” Following someone who is attempting to leave an escalating situation is never helpful or productive, even if the way they have left the discussion is not as respectful as it could be.

**STEP 5:** As soon as she turns around, I am “in her face” again, yelling and screaming at how much I do for her and how little she appreciates all the efforts I make every day. I start to swear and cuss at her, saying things like “*I don’t need your bullshit,*” “*God damn it,*” and “*fuck you.*” I do this despite the fact

that I know she really doesn't like it when I swear. She actually tells me in this situation that she hates it when I swear at her but I choose to think to myself that she's just saying that to try to "provoke" me even more in this situation by once again criticizing my behavior.

#### **CHOICE POINT 5:**

He not only follows her but then also "moves into her space," another way to try to punish and intimidate her. The escalating situation gets worse as he starts to swear, knowing this will bother and hurt her even more. But he no longer cares about that at this point. He wants to "drive his message home" no matter what the cost to his wife's well-being and their relationship with one another.

**STEP 6:** We continue to scream at each other and I continue to swear at her and put her down. I am completely "pumped up" at this point. She makes another effort to leave but I block the door by standing in front of her and yell at her that she's "*not going anywhere until we get this taken care of.*" This seems to be the "last straw" for her and she throws a dish towel that she is holding at my feet.

#### **CHOICE POINT 6:**

The escalation continues and his wife tries once again to leave the situation but he makes the choice to block her exit, ensuring that the conflict will continue unabated. His wife, feeling more and more frustrated and trapped, "ups the ante" and throws the dish towel to the floor at his feet to show her displeasure with what he is doing.

**STEP 7:** I think to myself, "*OK, if you want to start throwing things, I can really show you how to do that*" and I reach for a pan of vegetables she has been cooking on the stove. I throw them into the sink. It makes a loud noise and splatters all over the countertop and the wall behind the sink. I actually thought briefly about throwing them against the wall but I knew that would have created too big a mess. My wife seems "shocked" that I have done this and finally stops yelling at me.

#### **CHOICE POINT 7:**

At this point, he gives himself permission to respond again "in kind" to what his wife has done by throwing the dish towel at him. He may be saying to himself, "*She crossed the line so now I can do it too.*" Thus, he decides to pick up and throw a pan of vegetables. He is also very aware that throwing the vegetables against the wall will probably cause more damage than he wants to create (even in the midst of his punishing and rageful anger) so he throws it into the sink, which he may still believe "makes the point" he wants to make. The continual process of escalation has gotten to a point where it appears that he has "gotten the last word" and "won" the argument when she stops "talking back" to him.

**STEP 8:** This seems to be the "last straw" for my wife, who finally "gives up" and then collapses and slides down to the floor and starts to sob uncontrollably. I begin to think she might be trying to manipulate me by starting to cry but then it actually dawns on me how badly I have been behaving and I feel really lousy. At that point, I finally decide to end this "fiasco" and I leave the kitchen and go to sit in the bedroom and turn on the TV to try to calm down.

#### **CHOICE POINT 8:**

In fact, it is at this point that it does appear that his wife has "given up" and the conflict has ended (and, in his mind, that it perhaps has actually been "resolved" for now and that she's finally gotten the message he was trying to send that she shouldn't treat him so badly). He has been able to escalate his behaviors in this exchange to the point where she has chosen not to continue (perhaps because she is fearful that it could go even farther to something physical

that is actually directed at her). He could have continued to yell, berate, and swear at her even now but he finally makes the “positive” decision at this point to disengage, partly in response to his concern about what he has been saying and doing but also partly because of a more conscious awareness of how he has been acting toward his wife, a woman that he believes and says he loves.

This example is offered as a way to capture the essence of the often highly choreographed “dance” that often occurs between two individuals when anger becomes distorted and destructive. Both individuals bring their brain chemistry, their childhood and life experiences, and the history of their interactions and their relationship with one another “to the table,” culminating in each person reacting to “dance steps” the other takes, often with little conscious awareness of what is really happening between them. This sets up an escalating power struggle that all too often ends in emotional and, sometimes, even physical pain.

Use the above scenario as a means to try to think about how escalations have occurred and do occur in your own life and about the choices that you and others make that either “fan the flames” between the two of you or help to de-escalate a potentially difficult situation. There are also more positive choices that this man could have used at a variety of points (e.g. calling when he knew he was going to be late, listening to his wife’s complaints about the boys and working to empathize with her frustration, having more positive self-talk about what was happening with her, taking a respectful time-out at various times in the escalation process). All of these could have potentially kept this from escalating to the destructive point that it did.

Positive choices are more difficult to make the longer you are involved in the escalation as the “fight or flight” stress response is “kicking in” and your thinking is becoming more “spun up,” confused and negative. But you have the ability to “put on the brakes” at any point because angry people are continually making those clear (though not always “conscious”) choices in their escalation process. Even in the midst of what often feels like “uncontrollable” rage, decisions are clearly being made. This man does, in fact, make a more “positive” decision to stop after his wife begins to cry and he chooses not to physically assault her directly.

**The ultimate goal in handling your anger more effectively is to slow down and tune into yourself so that you become more aware of your personal escalation process and your “choice points” and to make better and more positive decisions as a result, even in the midst of a painful and difficult incident similar to the one discussed above.**