

Fighting Words

When your ex makes you "fighting mad," it can be hard to resist the impulse to engage in verbal battle. But a fight just leads to a revenge attack, and then another and another. Here's how to get out of this vicious circle and resolve your dispute.

By Karen Vagiste

We "gun" someone down each time we shoot our mouths off in anger; vicious verbal snipes, subtle sarcastic slurs, cynical jabs, and issuing blame are just some examples of our verbal artillery. There are people who should register their tongue as a dangerous weapon! Non-verbal messages can be equally powerful; a certain look, a gesture, or an intonation can strike a deadly blow at someone's pride, intelligence, judgment, and self-respect. Such negative encounters slow down the progress towards peace because they keep people in the heat of the battle. Even if you're on a low simmer, it's best to turn the heat off. A cool mind can click into neutral gear, which will make traveling over the "hot spots" easier.

The *Talmud* says, "with a weapon you can kill up close, with a word from across the world." Voice-mail, e-mail, and faxes can be used as tools of electronic weaponry. E-mail was created to encourage instantaneous communication and thus lead to increased productivity. Yet the angry words that often race across the screen act as blocks to communication.

Some people have developed very sophisticated ways of unleashing their anger; they smile while their velvet hammer slowly pounds out a message designed to strike a person down. Such classy people don't stoop to using those common little dirty words. In the end, it doesn't matter whether you're a highbrow or lowbrow fighter, the sad truth that emerges is that our human instinct to fight is stronger than our will to make peace. Yet we all dream of world peace, even though we may have some difficulty keeping the peace in our own kitchens.

We aren't born knowing how to negotiate peaceful solutions, so it's easy for the fighting instinct to prevail. Whether you're the one being gunned down or the one holding the smoking gun, there are no winners, and the dispute still remains to be solved. A fight just leads to a revenge attack, and then another and another. This circle of retaliation can spin relentlessly! Unresolved conflicts elevate the body's stress to levels that can be dangerous.

Is your gun pointed at your heart?

Topping the list of illnesses that stress-triggered bullets cause is heart disease, which has become the number one killer in western countries. Your own family doctor could tell you that the stress of being angry, or even thinking spiteful thoughts, will make you more vulnerable to heart disease in several ways.

Heart disease begins very slowly when stress thickens blood, increases blood pressure, releases cortisone which weakens the immune system, and increases cholesterol in the blood; if you overindulge in processed snack foods to calm your edgy nerves, then you'll have more fatty deposits in your arteries.

Oral gratification

Overeating is a classic "flight" response to a conflict that appears impossible to solve. Many people withdraw from a bad scene and take refuge in comfort foods, which tend to have a high fat content. Others may escape via alcohol or drugs. Self-destruction usually isn't a conscious choice, but it is a possible outcome if there is no self-control.

The second classic response to conflict is to stay and fight. People in this group wage a verbal battle that could become physical. These people are the angry, "in-your-face" types.

Other people resort to sly, covert fighting tactics. Their behavior sends out mixed messages, so they are hard to figure out and thus can cause us a great deal of mental angst. The vast majority of people will either stay to fight, or take flight.

Both of these reactions to conflict lead to heightened levels of stress, which will cause some physiological damage. The medical facts clearly indicate that a human body cannot be constantly trying to adapt to heightened levels of stress without showing some damage.

Dr. Hans Selye, a professor of medicine and surgery at the University of Montreal, conducted many studies on the impact of stress. He proved that there is a breakdown of the body's adaptation to stress over time, and the result can be sheer exhaustion, a cold, a nervous breakdown, a collapse in the form of a heart attack, or perhaps a major illness such as cancer.

Medical research just keeps pumping out volumes of evidence that prove angry people have a higher incidence of premature deaths. Dr. Redford Williams states in his book, *Anger Kills*, that "hostile people, those with high levels of anger, cynicism and aggression, are at a higher risk of developing life-threatening illnesses."

It's no wonder that the Center for Disease Control has declared anger to be a disease.

Anger's profile

No matter what the dispute, certain common denominators emerge. Whether we're embroiled in a corporate battle, a custody fight, an insurance claim dispute, or a lovers' quarrel, here's an overview of the sequence of events. First the frustration builds, then the anger flares, and by the time "smoke" is coming out of our ears, we know something in our system has broken down. We lose control and, "snap," out pops the gun and we spray our opponent with a shower of our angry, embittered diatribe. Those nasty words keep us in the war zone.

Let's move in for a look at the action on the battlefield. John and Mary have erected a massive communication barrier. He calls her a liar and a cheat, and she tells him he's a lush who can't be trusted. Their rage buries the underlying issues. They aren't ready to drop their guns, so the real reason why she felt she had to lie can't surface. For some couples, this is the only sport they play together that gets their heart thumping! They become very clever at ducking and dodging each other's bullets. Those painful punches, whether verbal or physical, just keep coming. But one little mistake and the next punch could be deadly.

Eventually, they'll both end up feeling emotionally exhausted and beaten with no resolution in sight. Two people can only withstand so much crossfire before their ability to communicate totally falls apart.

Fighting styles

Have you ever wondered why some people seem to thrive by yelling and pushing other people around, while others who may be equally angry hide their emotions? Our style of expressing emotions and resolving conflicts is established when we are very young.

Here's an example. At the age of seven, when Sandi got angry over some dispute with her brother, her parents immediately punished her by sending her to her room. She was told that it was not acceptable for her, the older sister, to get angry. At this early age she was forced to control her emotions and put her brother's needs first. She received the clear message that showing anger was bad and other people's needs came first. In essence, she was receiving lifetime training on how to deny her emotions.

Twenty years later, Sandi still dreads revealing any slight form of anger. She's afraid of being rejected if she doesn't agree with other people. Sandi doesn't even acknowledge her anger to herself. As a result, a high degree of tension has built up in her body from repressed anger. This tension seeks an outlet, and finds it in the form of severe headaches.

Over the years, Sandi's inability to express her overwhelming anger and negotiate for her own needs has led to an immense sense of powerlessness and despair. She eventually had to be medicated for depression.

Her "gun" had gone off and sprayed an internal toxic spill. Her raging anger manifested itself in a silent scream.

Do you identify with someone who leads a life of quiet desperation or with the more aggressive fighter? Most of us will fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Our responses to conflict slide up and down this scale depending on who else is involved in the disagreement.

Explore your thoughts and feelings about conflict by playing "The Conflict Word Game." Stop to consider how you react to the word "conflict." Does this word stir up negative feelings or thoughts? Describe whatever your first reaction is to this word. Think back to your childhood and recall how conflicts were solved in your home. How are they solved now? Jot down some descriptive phrases on a piece of paper. This exercise may lead you to a new perspective on your behavior.

What we believe about conflicts comes from the messages we have received from our parents, teachers, significant others, and the media. Parents and teachers traditionally punished children when they were embroiled in a conflict. Most of us were told what we must think, say, and do. It's not surprising that many people don't trust their ability to solve conflicts and thus they seek advice from others.

Own the solution

The basic premise of problem-solving is that if you own the problem, then you also own the solution to it. Your solution is within your own grasp, and it's my job as your coach to guide you to it. (The questions in the "Action Plan" in my book, *Settle It!*, provide an easy-to-follow strategy for arriving at your solution.) Yet human nature tends to set up obstacles. Some people prefer clinging to the edge of a cliff; they'd rather be uncomfortable and struggle, day after day.

On the other hand, there are people who find procrastination is far easier -- and certainly much safer -- than dealing with the problem. Once upon a time, they had tried to do something about the dispute, but it didn't work out, so they've given up. Now they've begun to derive some pleasure from feeling sorry for themselves, as they blame the world out there for their woe. Some of them have quit having a life; they connect with the outside world through the safety of their remote control.

Is the person with whom you're having the conflict a "cliffhanger" or a "couch potato"? Both types of people will feel a little bit better if you allow them to vent some emotions. Watch out for their tendency to get carried away. Some of them will even look to you for help: people love being rescued. A part of us regresses to a dependent stage that's reminiscent of childhood, when others took care of our problems. We also tend to get impatient and yearn for immediate solutions.

If you provide a person with a quick-fix answer, then you'll be guilty of sabotaging the problem-solving process. Your gun will have sprayed a dirty bullet and knocked someone off the path ahead. The short-cut solution has a high degree of appeal, especially if someone close to you has been feeling helpless and distressed for a long time. The conflict has begun to wear you down, so you're seeking some relief for yourself as well.

Resist the temptation of becoming a power player by jumping in to rescue someone else! Your quick-fix solution may even appear to work, at least for the short term. The other person, who was desperate for help, may have such faith in your instant cure that she will bury her anger. But over time, suppressed emotions can build extra megawatts of energy that seek release in one form or another; the silent internal scream and the fight being two possibilities.

I'll restate the basic premise: anyone who owns a dispute also owns the solution to it. The questions that appear in the problem-solving process guide a person's thinking to the solution that lies within him or her. Recognizing ownership of a problem is important to overcoming it. The goal is to tackle the problem in collaboration with the other person who is involved. By maintaining an atmosphere of respect and patience, the opposing parties stand a good chance of resolving their dispute. Unfortunately, our dominant culture drives us to think otherwise.

Beware of verbal cruelty

"Sarcasmitis" is a disease characterized by the careless use of sarcasm. It rips off a layer from a person's dignity, leaving an invisible wound. Sarcasm is a form of anger that is used to keep people at a distance. It can slowly creep into healthy relationships and cause hurt and alienation. Television producers could put up a sign warning people that their show's heavy dose of sarcasmitis may erode your sense of decency, and that of your children. This invisible culprit can do more harm than a dozen dead bodies piled up on the screen. We all know "thou shall not kill," but who has ever said sarcasm is bad? Common sense dictates that the messages, which repeatedly go in through the ears, will eventually come out through the mouth, unless you are a rare individual with a built-in "crap detector" that deletes the garbage.

Multitudes of media messages sink into our subconscious and surface when we least expect them. I hasten to point out that the media alone cannot be blamed for all society's ills; there are many contributing factors. Yet one truth rings out loud and clear; the media does feed us a well-rounded diet of cruel and violent actions. Have we become so conditioned to the media's vulgar messages that the pain, which we experience in our personal lives, has slipped into our comfort zone? Has our top layer of sensitivity become numb? If so, then it will take increasingly bigger jolts before we recognize that we've just been dealt a hurtful blow.

We have all been recipients of nasty, vindictive, unjust words and actions. Some words seem to crawl right into our system and "kick against our brain." Our natural reaction is to take flight or stay to fight. It's certainly not easy to drop our gun. It's quite remarkable how easily a finger seems to slide into the gun's trigger position. It's so effortless that it seems like an unconscious act! Basic instinct is at work.

The urge to shoot the other guy's argument to pieces has to be reckoned with sooner or later if we want to have a peaceful night of sleep. And if that other guy happens to be your co-parent, your need for a peaceful resolution is rather urgent!

Marriage counselors can make relatively accurate predictions about a couple's future happiness based on how well they are able to resolve conflicts. Some of them would even go so far as to say that 50% of all divorces could have been prevented if people had been more careful about what words came out of their mouths during a dispute. Once the wrath of anger has been unleashed, the slide downhill will be swift. Words have the power to hurt as well as heal.

Doctors claim that if people were more careful about what went into their mouths, 50% of all deaths could be delayed significantly. If we control what we put into our mouth and what words come out of it, we will enjoy a healthier physical, as well as mental state.

Consider the impact of anger on our mental faculties. Each time you yell, throw something, punch or slam the door, push or hit someone, or hide your feelings by saying and doing nothing, your own self-esteem takes a beating. Deep inside, you know you blew it. You wish you could have handled the conflict differently. It still remains to be solved, which makes you feel miserable. And if a sense of hopelessness settles in, over time, depression could result. This is why I say the gun we carry is unintentionally pointed at ourselves.

How do you drop your gun?

If you haven't yet reached the stage where you're sick and tired of fighting or hiding, believe me, you will eventually. There's no point in waiting for that kind of bitter end. So why put yourself through it? If your anger, whether overt or covert, highbrow or lowbrow, has already caused some wear and tear on your system, then let the healing process begin with APEX.

- A:** **I ACKNOWLEDGE** that my conflict need not be permanent.
- P:** **My POSITIVE** attitude prevents my anger from aggravating the conflict that I want to solve.
- E:** **ENTHUSIASM** for a final solution keeps me receptive to the thoughts and feelings of the other person.
- X:** **I eX-PEL** my need to fight or take flight by being a peacemaker.

The APEX self-talk statements will build up your internal reserves of goodwill, thus making it easier to drop your gun. The tradition of self-talk has spread far and wide because it really works. Simply copy the APEX statements onto a piece of paper and keep them in your wallet. Read them over as often as you can, especially when you're in a traffic tie-up or store line-up.

The word APEX signifies the highest level attainable in any human task. Lengthy, on-going disputes could cost you a great deal: a satisfactory custody or divorce agreement, for instance. So strive for your APEX -- your personal best. Put the power and the glory back into your words.

This article has been edited and excerpted from Settle It! by Karin Vagiste. A distinguished mediator and speaker, Vagiste offers an "Action Plan" to enable you to resolve the disputes that block you from achieving your goals. (There's also a "Simplified Action Plan" for children under 12, enabling you and your kids to work out problems and make decisions in a collaborative fashion.) Her methods allow you to keep your dignity and self-respect intact while working towards a satisfactory resolution -- good news for those hoping to reduce or eliminate the bitterness and battles of divorce. Lam Quach's entertaining cartoons illustrate key points throughout the book.