

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

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is your anger obstructing your relationship? Whether we've been wronged, denied, or offended, we have all been angered. However the way we deal with our anger can vary. We may get defensive if we feel attacked, or offended. Some may keep it inside until one little thing blows the top off, and they finally let it all out at once. People often don't realize the consequences of their anger outbursts until after the outburst has occurred.

The hardest part is after the episode when trying to eradicate the damage you may have done to your partner, and relationship. Like anything else, there is a right, and wrong way to control, and manage your anger.

How is anger affecting your relationship, and what can you do to manage it? Earning his Doctorate from the University of Illinois, Dr. K. Bryce is the Director of Cary Counseling Center and Allied Psychological Services in New Bern North Carolina.

Dr. Bryce, and his wife Helen own a nautical marriage retreat service named Love Odyssey Charters, which helps couples save their marriage on a weeklong sailing odyssey to different ports of call along the rivers, and sounds of North Carolina. Dr. Bryce has extensive experience in performing individual psychological therapy, marriage counseling, and substance abuse counseling.

Welcome to the show Bryce, I'm so glad you could join us today.

Dr. Bryce: Thank you Scott, it's a pleasure. I've always enjoyed talking on the show before, and I'm sure this time will be a pleasure as well.

Scott: Well we're really grateful to have you back, and without wasting any time, let's jump right into it. I'm excited to hear what you have to say today. And so what is it that exactly you're seeing when it comes to anger management, and a committed relationship?

Dr. Bryce: What I'm seeing Scott, is a lack of understanding about what anger is, and the lack of understanding that anger, mismanaged anger is really at the core of the communication breakdown that most couples see that progressed over the years in a relationship as people numb out, and stop talking to each other.

So that's what I'm seeing in terms of anger. People don't understand really that healthy anger in the form of boundaries, and in terms of healthy protection of self is really necessary for relationships, but not the rage form of anger that people fall into.

Scott: What problems do you see that couples are experiencing in a relationship when they can't control their anger?

Dr. Bryce: Well what happens is that the repeated destructive disapproval that comes with the attacks, and the rage states goes into each partners unconscious. This is what

people don't want to talk about, they don't want to acknowledge that there is an unconscious. But the unconscious is working all the time, in anticipating what your partner is going to do.

So what happens is that when people get bruised up enough from mismanaged anger, they become unconsciously afraid of what's going to come next. And their brain will naturally take them into only safe areas. So let's stay responsible, just do the responsible thing, let's talk about the kids, let's talk about what needs to happen to the house, what's happening on the job, and what happens is that the curiosity that really nourishes a relationship that gets suppressed, and when curiosity gets suppressed, communication goes down.

So it's all very complicated, but it starts with the bruising from mismanaged anger.

Scott:

So some of the basic points if I can try to sum it up for myself, I find this interesting. This bruising creates a level of expectation that when my spouse, or significant other goes to say something, because there's all these issues in my unconscious that you called it, that I haven't dealt with. I may hear something totally different.

Dr. Bryce:

It's actually more subtle than that. It's when, say I'm in a relationship with my spouse, and I've been bruised up over the years, even before I open my mouth, my brain is anticipating it's not safe to go where things are uncertain. So what will come out of my mouth is only a safe topic, and my own opening up my brain to be curious about my spouse, I've stopped being curious about my spouse. When you stop being curious about your partner, your partner is not going to feel loved. If your partner has a sense that you don't want to know what's in his, or her

mind, what she feels, what she wants, what she remembers, the meaning of her memories, the things she thinks about in the middle of the night when she gets up to go to the bathroom.

If your partner has the sense that you're not curious, your partner isn't going to feel loved, isn't going to feel wanted. And then the default comes, if I'm not important to my partner's mind, then I'll be important by at least being heard some way, and then comes the criticisms, and the harshness, and the sarcasm, and all these different manipulations to get to be noticed, and important in the relationship.

The biggest fear in a relationship is not abandonment, most people are afraid of being less important, and this is what really sparks the fighting. They're fighting about who's going to be more important, who's going to be less important. And it's very reassuring in the moment to go into a rage, and be critical of your partner, because momentarily your nose is above the water, you're no longer drowning you're momentarily important. And this is the rage that drives so much of the damage.

Scott:

And another point I kind of want to just have you elaborate on real quickly is I kind of feel like some of the terminology you're using, I would assume that you're somewhat of a spiritual man, and using that terminology, I think you're at least in the west when we, I guess maybe global when we think about being spiritual, it's often a big emphasis on pacifism, and not getting angry, and such. But I hear you kind of touching on the point that there is a controlled type of anger that's healthy. Like it's not just controlling the rage, and out lashing at people, but you're saying it's just as dangerous the other direction to not touch it, and hold it all in, and...

Dr. Bryce:

That's exactly what I'm saying. I see more relationships lost, because people are so afraid of their anger that they hide, and they stop communicating. Now it's not easy. I'm not talking about coming out, and raging. What I'm talking about is having the ability to momentarily have boundaries, and defend yourself if you get disapproval, you need that.

Think of it this way, how easily could you get out? And say play in the sandbox if you have no immune system. You're not going to do it. And the unconscious is like that. If the unconscious thinks that it's not capable of defending against disapproval, it's not going to be allowing you to be very curious, and to be very open. It's going to keep things safe, and so when a person expresses healthy anger, as in the form of refusal, it gives the person a sense of safety, so that curiosity, and exploration system, the play system, can all come online. Otherwise all you get is the safety system where people hide.

Now interestingly enough, you bring up the east, and west, but Dalai Lama, I was listening to one of the Dalai Lama's talks, and he says don't be a fool if somebody is abusing you, don't take it. You need your defenses, stop the abuse.

Scott:

Sure.

Dr. Bryce:

All right? So, the same thing happens in relationships. There are three forms of conflict you need to engage in all of which involve anger. You need to negotiate which is a form of slow motion conflict of sorts, you're going to refuse your partners position sometimes, and that refusal requires healthy anger.

You're also going to need to confront broken agreements for correction. Your partner isn't going to like that, but you're going to do it anyway, because it needs to be done.

You're also going to confront minor boundary intrusions if you know what you're doing, if you don't suck it in, if your partner gives you commands, talks down to you, gives you should statements, tells you what you're thinking, and feeling. These things if you ignore them, and don't confront them will result in your eventually numbing out from this gradual fear that takes place down below.

Now I measure this, I actually developed a questionnaire, I gave a presentation on it in 2008, down in New Orleans in my talk to the Universal Theory Society, and this questionnaire measures how anxious does a person feel, imagining using the word refusal with their partner, or refusing the different ways such as "I refuse to let you do that with my things" "There's no way I'm going to agree to that" "I refuse to pretend that, that's okay with me." And I measure "how anxious does a person feel with that?" Because the person is going to be anticipating disapproval coming back on them. And the interesting thing Scott, is that the lowest score of anxiety, that is how comfortable a person is saying that they refuse, which is an actually angry state that correlates with health in a relationship.

The closest relationships are ones where people feel totally comfortable saying "I refuse" to their partner. Now that's healthy anger. It's not attack.

Scott:

Interesting, and you bring up the point, of the view point of the east with the Dalai Lama, and even here, and in western Christianity I know there's a scripture in the New Testament that says "To be angry, and sin not." It's a commandment, be angry, but don't let it turn into a sin,

and I think that's another way of expressing the, 'it's you've got to be in touch with the anger', it's healthy, but you just can't let it turn into something bad.

Dr. Bryce:

Well let me tell you how to turn it into something bad. When you use anger to defend pride, and to stave off shame then you're likely to go into what's known as hyper arousal. Now hyper arousal is when anger, and arousal reach such a level of activation that your brain stops working. People don't know this, but your brain will actually work within a window of tolerance of arousal. And there's a cycle of physiology to this known as the HPA axis, and adrenaline, cortisol. When these neuro-peptides activate the brain to such a high level you stop thinking. You only rely on your automatic responses, and people's automatic responses are very often attack. Or the other automatic response is suck it in, and hide. And there's a very common pattern where people will do both, will either suck in, suck in, suck in, blow! And what's happening is that a third system is not coming on line.

You actually have three systems affecting these emotions. I won't too geeky on you, but there's a shutdown system, that even the amphibians have that's a primitive defense system, that's your hide helplessness response.

You have an activation fight, flight system, but the third system which actually has a physiology that moderates anger is your social engagement system. So what happens with people who can't manage their anger is that their social engagement system in the what's known as the orbital pre-frontal cortex is not integrating to make their anger smart.

So the problem is really that people have dumb anger to defend pride. When anger is smart, they're not defending

pride, they're actually defending the relationship in the future. And it looks something like this, "I refuse to go along with you, because I'm going to protect the best balance of what our relationship needs to be in the future." That's going on in the back of the mind of someone who is using their anger to defend a relationship.

Scott:

If they're unable to let's say identify that they're hiding, or unable to control their outbursts, this anger's left unresolved no matter what form, what are some of the short, and long term negative effects that this behavior that this behavior you see typically has on a relationship?

Dr. Bryce:

Well I've already been through one of the long term effects. The bruising goes down into the unconscious of one or both of the partners, and the person develops more, and more inhibition, and at the tail end of it not only are they not talking, they actually lose a sense of who they are.

How many people have you heard say "I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what I want. I feel like I'm suffocating. I feel like I'm drowning?" Now those people are not using active defenses. They're using passive defenses, they're hiding, they're sucking in, they're minimizing things, they're being very nice, and very sweet, but their brain is taking only the safe route, and they're not risking any communication that's uncertain.

So no curiosity, and they're not expressing what they want, because that's too risky. After a while, if you don't know what you want, you don't know who you are. So that is very, very common pattern. This is where affairs occur, I rarely see affairs occurring with people who are using active defenses. It's not the dominant person in the relationship who tends to have affairs. It tends to be the

person who is hiding, and not expressing themselves, and they're not using healthy anger in the form of boundaries.

Scott:

Yeah, I think you bring up a great point there, I want to explore just for a second. For the person, you're saying that the person who's more so the victim, the one who's hiding in a sense, how about the fact that if they don't feel like they can challenge, because they're not in the position, because the other person is the income earner, the homeowner, the dominant one, the extrovert, who exercises that power over them, I think that would be difficult for them to set boundaries, and express their anger.

Dr. Bryce:

It is absolutely difficult, and this is why it's very useful to have both people present, because it's really both people who need to do the work. I've had couples who've been living apart, and where one person has felt nauseous, and repulsed to the other actually start practicing in a cooperative manner on correcting minor insults.

I know it's a weird kind of exercise where they actually practice throwing minor insults at each other, minor intrusions, and practice correcting them. And would you know it, I've had them get the attraction back, and move back in with each other, by practicing conflict. It's...

Scott:

I believe it.

Dr. Bryce:

It's weird, but it's true. When they get the sense that they can actually speak up, and defend their boundaries which by the way are internal, not external, they're really internal. When they have a sense that they can actually have boundaries there's a tremendous outpouring of

appreciation, and affection from the relief, and couples will very often come back together.

Scott: Well at what point do you see though, that couples actually become aware that the lack of anger management is hurting the relationship, they come seeking you out?

Dr. Bryce: Very often they're aware when it crosses the line into violence, and the spouse calls 911, and there are some legal ramifications, and then they really have to deal with it.

Scott: Okay.

Dr. Bryce: Okay? Or a spouse is threatening to leave the relationship, and then they're find they're going to have to come out of denial, and deal with it.

Scott: Do you observe any trends among couples that have issues with anger management in a relationship, like related to maybe their age, or how long they've been married, their family history?

Dr. Bryce: Yes, some very definite trends. Remember I said what makes anger smart, and useful to a relationship is the ability of that third system, the social engagement system that's in the frontal cortex to regulate the arousal of your anger. And so, anything that hits that frontal cortex is going to take down the ability to manage anger. For instance, people who smoke pot, they might bliss out momentarily, or for that day, but the long term loss of metabolism in the frontal lobe is phenomenal, and that's

going to lead to more what's known as emotional dis-regulation.

Summarily someone who has PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, coming back from Iraq, those people have phenomenal problems, because of the damage to the parasympathetic nervous system.

People who have been brutalized growing up, who have been afraid of a tyrant father, who say "I'm never going to be like him," those people have disassociated anger. If they have attachment problems growing up, they're going to have problems with their frontal lobe regulating their arousal, regulating their anger.

Conversely, people who do mindfulness meditation, this gets to what you can do about it. People who do mindfulness meditation regularly 15 minutes a day, are going to be improving their ability to override their impulses. This actually increases some of the structures that are involved in regulation of anger. It has to do with function of the brain.

Also alcoholism, alcoholism is another big factor, not just how drunk you are in the moment, but also how much you've taken down your frontal cortex with alcohol over the years. It's going to matter.

Scott:

So with this mindful meditation though, you can do repair that maybe you've done with psychological damage, alcohol damage, marijuana damage.

Dr. Bryce:

It helps a lot. I have a lot of my couples doing mindfulness meditation, and it takes about two, or three months, and they come back, and they are able to report that they were going to go into a conflict that they knew was going to blow up, and they able to back away.

What it does, it gives you what's known as meta-cognition. Meta-cognition is the ability to see your emotions, and your thinking from another angle. From a higher level of consciousness. So after two, or three months of mindful meditation, you have more ability to use those 10 seconds to do something else other than rage at your partner.

Now people who have border line personalities, these are people who have some of the most severe rage problems, they are helped by DBT, dialect behavior therapy. DBT is built around mindfulness training. The Tibetan Monks who Monks who were brought over from Tibet, and we scanned them over here on our functional MRI's, they all have thickened pre-frontal cortices from the mindfulness meditation.

So we know that mindfulness work correlates with emotional regulation. It's like doing physical therapy on the structures. You can't see the structures, because they're embedded in deeper parts of your brain, but you can strengthen them like muscles, and then you get to observe what you're about to do, and do something less stupid.

Scott:

Yeah, interesting. What other suggestions would you have for couples to manage their anger?

Dr. Bryce:

I'd say that if you have, well there are different levels to manage it. In terms of simple interventions there are a couple of rules to establish that are very important.

One is that each person has a right to retreat to privacy, and the ability to pace anger is important. In my book I have a rule called "The when and where rule" which means that anybody has a right to back out of an angry situation without being followed, they have a right to retreat to privacy. And if you're going to do that, if you're going to retreat you have an obligation to negotiate when, and where very specifically you're willing to come back to your partner to complete the negotiation.

Well if you establish that, that you can actually, each person can pace the conflict, then when you come back to the conflict your brain has had all this time to prepare, you'll have half the heat. Where people really blow up, is when they're told they have to deal with something right then, and there, and they don't have a choice about it.

So there's a lot of violence that occurs when somebody tries to get away, the other person is like a side winder, heat seeking missile, and they coars through the house until they're in the backroom, and that person's cornered, this is where you get the violence. So pacing, pacing conflict is very important.

The other thing to do is to establish objective criteria. If you can establish something outside of your respective will for what's going to determine what is truth, and what's not then your negotiations are going to be less heated. Sometimes it's agreeing to see an accountant, or a counselor, sometimes it's an agreement let's use the checkbook to see what's really true, but this way if you

establish a framework then people are going to be less threatened in conflict.

This is a basic principal in negotiation. Most countries will negotiate a framework before they negotiate an agreement. And this comes out of the Harvard Negotiation Project on the basic principles of how to negotiate. You always separate the person from the problem, and you insist on objective criteria which makes it less personal.

Scott:

I like both of those. I really could have used that first one over the years I'm sure, the when, and where negotiations.

When couples are able to manage their anger, and start implementing some of these ideas, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality of their relationship?

Dr. Bryce:

Communication opens up, because the fear goes down. The unconscious anticipation that they cannot defend themselves can go down. There's one person who I remember I confronted him, because he wasn't using rage, he was using lying as a defense, that's the passive defense, and I confronted him about he could practice confronting his partner in a methodical way, and he could express his truth, and I told him what to do auto hypnotically, that is how he could talk to himself about how he is strengthening his future love of truth. And he went home, and he practiced that, his finance' wrote back to me after five months, and said that he had dramatically changed, that his ex-wife could no longer hurt him, that he was speaking the truth, that he had boundaries.

So people who practice healthy anger, wind up getting their internal boundaries which gives them sense of safety, which allows them to open up, and be more truthful, and more authentic, and that's it.

Scott: Wow. Well Bryce, is there anything else that you think our listeners should know?

Dr. Bryce: Sure, that a lot of my ideas are in a free book. Believe it or not I'm a very poor business person, I put my book out for free, all my chapters are on my websites. They can go to Odyssey Marriage Retreats dot com, and get into my chapters there. They can go to Cary Counseling dot com, go into the chapters there, go into the get help now section. There's a lot of instruction on what people could be doing to change their brains, to get their fear levels down. So that's what I would suggest.

Scott: Okay, instructions on the, any of the mindfulness meditation in there as well?

Dr. Bryce: That is not there. What you could do is buy the book "Mindfulness in Plain English," that's one of the best books. It's really very simple, I recommend people buy that book, tear it in half, and use the first half, don't read anymore, just do it.

If you do it, the hard part is getting people to do it. It's like push-ups. How many books do you want to read about push-ups? Do the darn push-ups.

Scott: And getting them to do it for three months.

Dr. Bryce: And getting them for doing, well you might actually wind up wanting to do it as a regular part of your hygiene just like exercising. It has phenomenal gain to it. Mindfulness meditation along with some of the meditations has a profound effect on mental health.

A study in England showed that people who practice gratitude meditation, a little bit different than mindfulness meditation, they had just as much effect on their mental health as psychotherapy.

Scott: I'm sure.

Dr. Bryce: Go figure.

Scott: Well this has all been very interesting. Really appreciate the information, I personally look forward to getting that book and reading it, as well as I'm sure a lot of our listeners will. So thank you so much for talking with us today, and being on the show.

Dr. Bryce: It's been a pleasure Scott. Thank you very much for having me on.

Scott: To find out more about Dr. Bryce, and his practice Love Odyssey, you can visit their website at www.LoveOdysseyMarriageRetreats.com, or call 919-460-2516 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information

about this show, and previous episodes visit us at Stay Happily Married dot com.

I'm Scott Blair, until next time, stay happily married.

Narrator:

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