

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality

Warning: Passivity Causes Drownings

Oceans are known for their power and unpredictability.

In a millisecond, a swimmer can be rendered powerless by a colossal wave and then dragged along the sea bottom by an unrelenting undertow. The same is true of problems in our relationships. Closed eyes, passivity or a head-in-the-sand approach virtually guarantees we're in for an unwelcome surprise.

For Darcie, 38, the "colossal waves" are her husband's sudden outbursts—explosions of anger that come out of nowhere and leave her swirling in their wake. And yet Darcie's tendency is to ignore Jeff's temper. She soft-pedals the problem, lying low until it seems safe again to raise her head out of virtual sand.

"Confronting him will only make it worse," she said.

The two have been in counseling with me for several months, and the anger issue has been one of our main focal points. I see progress. In their sessions, she's doing a better job of confronting him about his outbursts and he's seeing the seriousness of those outbursts—how they're impacting Darcie and their relationship.

When they go home, all's well for a few days, but according to Darcie: "He just falls back into his same old pattern."

Her endurance is growing thin. While describing his latest angry tirade, her despair was obvious. She's at a point where she must see solid change.

I asked: "You say that he falls back into his old pattern, what about you? Do you fall back into your old pattern?"

"Yes," she said sheepishly. "I still find it difficult to let him know how he's affecting me. Instead, I do my usual peacemaking thing, putting all my energy into smoothing things over."

Darcie hasn't always been aware of these self-defeating tendencies. In counseling, she has come to see that her reluctance to take a firm stand—to object vigorously—is perpetuating the problem. But being firm and raising her voice goes against her grain. She's averse to conflict, wanting no part of it. Peace at all costs is her mantra. Her passive pattern is something she's carried around since early childhood.

"In our home, the atmosphere was thick with constant friction and fear," she said. "I was always on edge."

Not surprisingly, the shadow that fell over her childhood was her father's terrible temper.

"Anything would set him off," she said. "I remember how his anger would just make me shrink inside!"

“That’s sad, Darcie,” I said. “Your constant state of anxiousness must have felt like walking through minefields every day.”

She nodded.

“Unfortunately, it’s become your pattern of relating. You mouse-down when there’s the slightest hint of irritation in Jeff’s voice.”

Darcie’s desire for greater peace on the home front is realistic and attainable. But that can never happen if she continues to avoid confronting him about things that matter—things having to do with her well-being and the well-being of their relationship.

In one session, she mustered the courage to tell him, “Your anger keeps pushing me away!”

She added that she wouldn’t divorce him because it runs counter to her beliefs.

“But in a way, you’ve already divorced him—emotionally speaking,” I said.

Jeff agreed. It’s a disturbing fact he’s painfully aware of, so he’s urged her to be forthright when he upsets her. Neither partner is satisfied with the status quo—both favor a closer relationship. Steps to correct the problem will require both of them to become mindful of their automatic reactions and diligently work to change them.

Jeff is being challenged to be consistent. Regulating his anger can’t be temporary or partial; he must throw himself wholeheartedly into it. This means choosing to be conscious of his knee-jerk responses and choosing alternate behavior that’s relationship-sustaining.

Darcie needs to realize that being straightforward in a counseling session isn’t enough. She has to make it a habit outside the office.

“Be sure to let him know—on the spot—when you’re distressed, despairing or frustrated,” I said. “The key is to express yourself calmly, deliberately and powerfully.”

And if his anger intensifies because of her openness, I suggested she immediately call him out on that. He’ll be prodded to check himself.

Their counseling sessions have helped shine a light on the negative dynamics of the relationship, dynamics that have kept them locked in an endless pattern of wave-meets-hapless-swimmer. Now it’s up to them to apply that knowledge.

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