

# Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**My wife and I fight all the time, about everything. We've been married for three years, and things just keep getting worse. The slightest thing will set one of us off, and then we spend the next hour screaming at each other. She knows all of my triggers, and uses them at will. She makes me so mad that I can't think straight, and I immediately jump from being a little angry to completely enraged. I love her, but what can I do to make her stop pushing my buttons?**

**-- Donald**

Dear Donald,

When you ask how you can make your wife change her behavior, you're looking in the wrong direction. First, accept that you can't do anything to make her change. Instead, you have to create a new bearing for yourself by recognizing that you can only change yourself.

Though it often feels as if others can create feelings in us, the truth is that no one has any real power to make us feel anything at all. Our reactions to another's annoying or inflammatory actions are in our own control, and are our own responsibility. The notable psychiatrist and author of the powerful book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, wrote, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom."

Donald, you must use that space, the space in which you can choose different responses to what you see as your wife's provocation. It's not always easy to change. After all, it sounds as though you have a three-year history of reacting in the same old angry ways to your wife's behavior. Truth be told, I'm willing to bet that your quick and livid reactions to challenging words or actions predate your marriage. Is this true? Have you always had a hot temper and a short fuse?

You will have to learn new responses by becoming increasingly mindful of your angry knee-jerk reactions, and replacing them with calmer, more conscious responses. This is the "space" that Dr. Frankl wrote about. This is the moment when you decide to stop reacting with childish anger, and instead, use the conflicts in your marriage to authentically communicate and grow together as a couple.

Like any new behavior, expressing anger in healthy, productive ways becomes easier with practice. You are more likely to be successful with this in your marriage when you manage stress and anger in other areas of your life too. If you are not "trigger happy" already, chances are that your responses to your wife's challenges will become more reasonable, and truly focused only on what she is saying or doing. If you are like most people, when you become angry it's not just about the moment at hand. Instead, your anger is fueled by an impossible boss, mounting bills, traffic jams on the way home, overwork, stress, tension, and all kinds of other stuff that have nothing to do with anything your wife has said or done. Unfortunately, most people live their lives like hand grenades, fully loaded and just waiting for someone to pull the pin.

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

8/31/05

1

Take a good look at your life. Are you effectively managing stress? Do you have outlets for relaxation? If not, you better get those in place. You'll live a longer, happier life when you do.

The next time your wife pushes one of your buttons, take a deep breath. Remember just how sick and tired you are of this damaging dynamic in your marriage. Get in touch with feelings of appreciation, and the love that you feel for your spouse. Be aware of what your tone of voice and body language are communicating. Instead of yelling, calmly say, "I would like to find a new way of resolving this conflict. Would you like to talk about this issue in a way that shows that we really do love each other?" Then listen. Do your part to engage in an adult discussion of the issues at hand. Be honest about your own feelings, but express them respectfully.

This is not a magic bullet cure for your problem. It will take practice and hard work and it's harder to do in practice than in theory. As an old Spanish proverb teaches, "It is easier to speak of bulls than to be in the bullring." But, if you are committed to changing the way you express anger in your marriage – and, especially, if your wife is also willing to try to change – then I predict a positive outcome and a more peaceful, loving future. But regardless of whether or not your wife is willing to change, your decision to react differently in the space between stimulus and response is your true path to personal power, growth, and freedom.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).