

# Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**My wife has a terrible temper. When she's angry – which is quite a bit – she screams for hours at our kids and me. Last night, she yelled for fifteen minutes because our daughter didn't finish her chores. We've talked about it and, when she's not having one of her fits, she says she's sorry and agrees that screaming is not the best way to express her feelings. But no matter how many times she says she'll change, it's not happening. I love her and don't want to leave, but sometimes I just want to take the kids and move somewhere else.**

**-- Jerry R.**

Dear Jerry,

The fact that your wife understands that she is not expressing her anger in a healthy or acceptable way is a good sign. It means that, at least when she's not emotionally upset, she recognizes that she needs to change.

Anger is an ancient human emotion that was and is necessary to deal with threats to our survival. We experience anger in psychological, behavioral, and physical ways.

Think about what happens when you are angry: Your heart and respiration rates speed up, blood pressure soars, and your body surges with adrenaline and other hormones. With all that inner excitement going on, you're ready to fight or flee.

This "fight or flight" response has served us well when we had to aggressively fend off wild animals that had an eye toward devouring our offspring.

Responding with the same snarling response because our kids didn't finish their chores is not effective. Nor is it kind or loving and you're right that this behavior has to stop.

Whether she means to or not, your wife is teaching your children that the way to express anger is to throw a screaming tantrum. Not a very good idea. You know how kids are. They'll do what you do, not what you say.

The answer for your wife is not to hold in her anger. Suppressing anger leads to its own problems such as hypertension, depression, or that back-door expression of anger that comes out as passive-aggressive behavior.

Your wife needs to understand what is making her so angry and why she has needed to express her feelings in such verbally abusive ways.

Jerry, I'm taking you at your word that your wife "screams for hours" and not just occasionally raises her voice.

Often anger is a projection. For example, we're upset with our boss but feel like we can't say anything without endangering our job so we come home and – consciously or unconsciously – find a reason to yell at our kids.

This is not only unfair, it's also not effective because our boss never even knows how we're feeling and we haven't solved whatever work problem caused us to feel angry in the first place.

Psychologists have found evidence that some people who anger easily have a lower tolerance for frustration than others. Some research suggests that the causes may be genetic – infants clearly are born with different temperaments. But almost every study has shown that there are powerful socio-cultural reasons.

The chances are very good that your wife grew up in a family that expressed anger by yelling at each other. It's what she learned but now it's important to unlearn that reaction to her inner feelings.

Many families do not have great skills in emotional communication and it sounds like your wife may never have learned healthy ways to express her anger.

Your wife needs to find ways to express her feelings *assertively* which means being both honest and respectful to other members of your family.

Think of our emotional lives as being like an empty glass. If you can imagine that this glass is almost filled to the top with water, then you can see that it doesn't take too much more water to make the glass spill over.

We manage our emotional lives by limiting the amount of water being poured into the glass, and by making sure that we aren't going through our lives with an almost filled glass to begin with.

We can reduce a great deal of our stress through exercise, relaxation techniques, or yoga, and it's important to practice these on a regular basis. But that's just the beginning.

Your wife can start to change by honestly reflecting on the stresses in her life and asking some questions. What emotion is she carrying around with her that makes her so easily ignited? What makes her angry and why? What did she learn about expressing anger as she was growing up? What alternatives to screaming can she use to express her feelings?

Sometimes these questions lead us into very wounded areas and it may be advisable – perhaps even necessary – that she work with a counselor or therapist to sort through them.

In the meantime, offer your wife your support but calmly and directly let her know that you will not tolerate verbally abusive behavior toward you or your kids.

*Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com), call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949*

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