

You Don't Have to Live that Way Anymore

It was a storybook wedding. The bride wore an elegant white dress. The groom donned a traditional black tuxedo. The bridesmaids strolled gracefully down the aisle. The flower girl and ring bearer were wide-eyed and earned coos and giggles from the crowd. The flowers were beautiful. The music played harmoniously. The candles added just the right hues to the backdrop of the ceremony.

The joy, elation and excitement of the day left Sabrina with an unmistakable glow. Within a few moments, she and Johnny had made the commitment to love, honor, cherish and respect each other in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death did them part.

But less than 36 months later, both Johnny and Sabrina were ready to break their covenant of marriage and file for divorce. How did something that began so perfectly grow into an unhealthy, hurtful relationship?

The transformation began shortly after the honeymoon. When the young couple walked into my office for counseling, I (Ted) remember sensing the pain, hurt and disappointment in their eyes as they began recounting their stories and

interactions. Sabrina remembered one evening shortly after they were married:

“I’m going out tonight, honey,” Johnny announced on his way out the door. “I’m hanging with the boys. I’ll be home around midnight.”

“What do you mean you are going out tonight?” Sabrina protested. “I had a special meal planned.”

“Don’t you remember last week, when I told you that Craig is hosting a Texas hold ’em tournament tonight?” Johnny answered.

“Yes, I remember you mentioning it, but I don’t remember us making any decisions about it.”

“What . . . are you my mother?” Johnny snapped.

“No, but I thought it would be cool if we hung out tonight, because we’re out every other night this week with work, church and my parents’ get-together.”

“Baby, I can’t let the guys down. They’re expecting me. I’ll try to get home a little earlier, if that will make you happy.”

“Fine, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Now you’re mad?” Johnny asked.

“Go!”

With that, Johnny left the house. Six months later, the marriage was deteriorating on multiple levels. Sabrina’s small annoying habits were growing too big for Johnny to overlook. Meanwhile, Johnny’s lack of attention to detail or care for hygiene were becoming more than Sabrina could handle. Instead of talking to her husband, Sabrina spent long hours on the phone each night criticizing him. She picked on the way Johnny ate and belittled him

for not doing more around the house.

One night, Sabrina was so fed up with Johnny that she went upstairs with a basket of freshly dried clothes that needed to be folded. She sat on the couch next to Johnny and picked up one article of clothing at a time. If it was her garment, she neatly folded and placed it on the floor next to the basket. If it was his, she threw it at him and said, "Fold it your @#%& self!"

The couples' communication was nearly nonexistent, and both spouses were suffering. What began as irritation quickly ballooned into annoyance, which resulted in feelings of being disrespected, devalued and controlled. Anger filled their home.

Whenever anger takes up residence in a marriage, sexual intimacy moves out. Anger is like a vacuum; it sucks the tenderness, gentleness and honor out of the relationship. As a result, Johnny and Sabrina quickly lost interest in each other sexually. Though they continued to sleep in the same bed, they never went to bed at the same time. This became the new norm for their relationship.

Nearly two years passed before Johnny came home with bad news: He had been fired from his job as a teacher in the local school district.

"They caught me looking at porn on the computer at school," Johnny confessed.

Sabrina was shocked. *What are we going to do for money?* she wondered. *What are people going to say?*

Then an even more devastating thought struck her: *How long has this been going on?*

Johnny's addiction to pornography had started in high school and progressed through college. Though he struggled with it while dating Sabrina and then during their engagement, he kept telling himself, *Once we get married, everything will be all right.*

Everything was all right for the first few weeks. But then the relationship soured, and Johnny returned to his old addiction.

He sat across the dining room table from Sabrina, waiting for his wife to unleash her fury. But instead, tears began welling up in her eyes.

"I have something I need to tell you," Sabrina stammered. "Remember Jack from high school?"

"Yeah," Johnny said, feeling a nervous tightness in his chest.

"Well, when I opened up my Facebook account online about a year ago, we reconnected. At first it was just a few emails back and forth, but then we met for coffee."

Johnny's mind raced with questions: *Did that meeting happen on one of my poker nights? Did I drive her to this guy?* But he managed to hold them inside.

Johnny asked the question he feared most: "Did you sleep with him?"

"No, but we kissed," Sabrina answered.

Then there was silence.

How could Sabrina and Johnny possibly hold their marriage together with such distrust? How could they move beyond the anger and disappointment they felt? How could they build a new foundation for their marriage?

Sabrina's anger toward Johnny's addiction and Johnny's anger toward Sabrina's kissing an old friend are healthy re-

sponses. Any normal person would react with shock and anger. At the same time, now they both needed to make choices to resolve their anger in a healthy way. (I'm happy to tell you that they did work hard to rebuild their marriage relationship, and they did learn the life-giving principles of dealing with their destructive anger issues—the same principles that we will present in the rest of this book.)

Admittedly, Sabrina and Johnny's life had enough twists and turns to be an Everyman story. Their marriage relationship took more hits in a few short years than most marriages will experience in a lifetime. But even if your marriage is visited only with simple problems such as differences in views about housecleaning, the chances are that you will deal with enough irritations and occasional anger flare-ups with your spouse that you can benefit from the proven tactics we will share.

In fact, it's often the small, daily irritations experienced over a long period of time, and not dealt with in a healthy way, that have the power to strain a marriage and lead to estrangement. That is true probably because feelings of irritation can lead to resentment and anger in marriage that continue to build below the surface, regardless of the face you or your spouse present to each other every day. And that's a danger zone.

So, even if you would say that your marriage is good, is more than good, or it couldn't be better, you can benefit by learning the secrets to anger control and how you can create closeness in your communication with your mate. Even if there is no problem looming in your marriage right now,

you need this information, because you live in a fallen world with other fallen human beings who will rub you the wrong way, and vice versa.

We have stories to tell you from our own lives of how we learned to respond to some big trials and some smaller irritations, and we have proven strategies to give you that will greatly benefit your interactions with those you come in contact with, beginning with the person closest to you.

Anger: A God-given Emotion

If there's only one thing you take away from this book, we want you to understand that anger in and of itself is not a bad thing; anger is an emotion designed by and given to you by God; *but it's what you do with that anger that can negatively affect your spiritual, mental and emotional health.*

Anger is not a bad emotion. Think about it: If you cannot feel anger toward evil, then it stands to reason that you cannot love what is good. In other words, there are some things that it's okay to get angry about. God wants you to be angry about some things, such as social injustice. He feels the anger, too. But even when we get upset about the right, constructive, purposeful things, we still must make sure we handle anger in the appropriate way.

Unfortunately, anger is not just sparked by good, right and constructive things. Anger can be triggered by rejection, judgment, failure, control or lack of control, neglect, loneliness or inferiority. If someone is abandoned or left out, cheated or mistreated, overlooked or misunderstood, the result is often anger. No matter what the cause, when left

unresolved, anger will lead to sin. Anger will sprout jealousy, envy, strife and contention.

Scientists have even discovered that stress, which is often caused by unresolved anger, releases a chemical in your brain called *cortisol*, which can damage your brain and cause your nervous system to shut down. If left unchecked, anger can result not only in physical disease but also in emotional and spiritual disease. Anger may be taking a bigger toll on your relationships and life than you realize.

The path of anger looks something like this:

Event → **Emotion** → **Anger** → **Sin**

Anger is not a primary emotion; it is a secondary one. You feel a host of other emotions before anger, such as the feeling of being devalued, cheated, invalidated, unloved, neglected, controlled, disrespected, disconnected, belittled, judged, abandoned or a like a failure. Planted and watered over time, those emotions are like seeds that take root in your heart and grow into anger. Anger left unresolved produces poison that ultimately kills and destroys everything in its path.

Every day, you experience a host of encounters or events that produce an emotion in you. If you feel wronged or overlooked or unfairly treated, anger will often surface. When the anger is left unresolved, it festers inside of you like an infection, until it eventually leads to sin. That's why it's so important to deal with the resulting emotion and anger quickly, before it results in sin or further self-destructive behavior.

In chapter 2, we will begin to explore how you can bring anger to a healthy end. We believe there are three main outlets for anger: You can (1) *stuff it*, (2) *spew it* or (3) *study it*. The good news is that if you *study* anger, you can learn to resolve conflict, hurt and pain in a healthy way, no matter what event or action has seemingly come against you. This second chapter will provide some of the foundational tools you will need in order to experience peace and satisfaction in the midst of life's unexpected and unsettling fluctuations.

In chapter 3, we go inside the cycle of anger to examine not only what anger looks like but also how you can break out of it. Whether you realize it or not, you have internal buttons that, when pushed, release anger, frustration and even rage. You can learn to recognize and master these buttons. They do not have to get the best of you or your relationships. How do Gary and I know? Because we've personally wrestled with our buttons, and we're finding more freedom and grace in this area than we ever thought possible—and so can you!

More than anything, we believe that it's essential for you to take responsibility and ownership of the anger in your life—no matter how small or big the outbursts. That's why in chapter 4 we give you specific tactics to deal with anger and rage when these emotions rear their ugly heads. You can get a grip on your responses and make sure that anger doesn't get a grip on you. Even if you don't think of yourself as a person with "anger issues," you might be surprised to discover what's lurking in your heart.

In chapter 5, we will examine some principles that may go against what you were taught in the church. The messages of

“don't let your heart be your guide” and “you can't trust your emotions” have been interpreted as “don't take care of your heart.” We want to teach you how to nurture your emotions and guard your heart, because it is your guide. Proverbs 4:23 calls it “the wellspring of life.” All of life flows from your heart.

In chapter 6, we look at what it means not just to forgive but also to embrace a spirit of forgiveness. Did you know that forgiveness can become a lifestyle? When you forgive, you not only set the other person free but you also become a little bit freer yourself. In order to walk in the freedom God intends for you, it's important to recognize the three essentials of forgiveness as well as five keys to nurturing a forgiving spirit.

Then, in chapter 7, we will challenge you to put the act of forgiving and being forgiven into practice in “Restoration: Crafting the Perfect Apology.” Do you ever struggle with what to say when you offer an apology to someone? If so, you're not alone. While almost everyone knows how to say, “I'm sorry,” very few people know how to deliver a sincere, heartfelt apology that works as a balm to the oldest and deepest of wounds. In this chapter, we give you five tools for crafting the best apologies—the kind that will revolutionize your relationships.

Once you know how to craft the perfect apology, we give you a chance to put that apology into practice in chapter 8. In “Unrelenting: Roadblocks to Forgiveness,” we look at the nine roadblocks to forgiveness and give you tactics to remove them once and for all from your life. You'll also be asked to look at the final 15 minutes of your life and develop

a forgiveness list that will change your life and your relationships forever.

You may be reading along and thinking that all of this is good advice for someone else, but your situation is too difficult. Maybe you're thinking that your marriage is beyond repair. If so, you won't want to miss chapter 9! We tackle dealing with a difficult spouse and look at four life-changing keys to forgiving him or her to make your marriage work no matter where your spouse is spiritually.

In chapter 10, we look at the six requirements for breaking sexual addiction and how you and your spouse can heal after an affair. Then in chapter 11, we explore the dangers of unresolved anger in your marriage. You will learn three valuable ways to foster forgiveness, as well as six ways you can maintain forgiveness in your marriage.

Finally, in chapter 12, we'll answer some of the "biggie" questions you have about anger and forgiveness in your marriage and relationships.

The good news is that you don't have to let anger or unforgiveness rob you of the life you are meant to live. By learning how to nurture a spirit of forgiveness, you can become all God means for you to be in your marriage, with your family and other relationships, and in your reactions to life.

In the upcoming pages, we will show you the kind of transformation that anyone can experience when he or she truly understands the power of forgiveness.

So get ready to dive in. First, we will examine and expose the roots of anger and identify healthy responses to what we feel. This is a foundational chapter you won't want to miss.

From GarySmalley.com

Each week we receive emails to our website, GarySmalley.com, from people with questions about their struggling marriages. We do our best to answer these questions with biblical truth and practical insight. Be sure to read through the various scenarios at the end of each chapter and our suggested guidelines for resolution.

Q: I live in constant anger toward my wife. I need help with understanding and channeling my anger well. Where do I start?

A: Begin by recognizing that anger is an indicator of something else at work. Anger is an emotion. Like all of our emotions, there's nothing wrong with it in and of itself. Anger is our human response to something that occurs or, at least, to our perception of that occurrence. In fact, some anger is good; we get angry when we see an injustice or when someone is trying to violate our personal boundary lines. In such cases, our anger is what motivates us to take appropriate action. But after anger motivates us to do something good, we can't afford to let it linger inside us. We have to get it out. Anger is a good emotion when it gets us moving; but if we let anger take root, we set ourselves up for a great deal of potential harm.

No matter how many times you try to resolve those issues or enter into deeper intimacy, the anger below the surface can keep you in turmoil. Living with angry people is like living in a minefield. If you say or do the wrong thing,

kaboom! They explode all over everyone. And you're left thinking, *I had no idea that one thing I did would cause such a reaction.*

Actually, anger is a secondary emotion, not a primary feeling. It arises out of *fear, frustration, hurt* or some combination of these. For example, if someone says something harsh to us, we first feel hurt and then anger.

When we strip the word "anger" down to its deepest level, we see the thread of unfulfilled expectations. Frustration comes when we don't receive what we had expected from other people or from circumstances. When you get frustrated or feel hurt, immediately go to God and tell Him about it. Replace your feelings of anger with more of Him.