

*My brother-in-law has a real problem handling his anger. He becomes verbally abusive and even violent at times. My sister and their children often feel like they are walking on eggshells around him. What can be done regarding his anger-management?*

You firstly need to distinguish between

1. Anger-management and
2. Abuse-management.

They are very different things. Anger-management is a legitimate personal development issue. Everyone, to a greater or lesser degree, struggles with the management of anger. We express it, repress it, avoid it, project it, disown it, divert it, etc. Managing anger is an issue for every couple in marriage counselling. However, when it comes to abusive behaviour it is important that one does not miss-diagnose it as an anger problem.

When ‘anger-management’ is the term used to describe the problem faced by a man (or woman) who is being verbally abusive, intimidating, and physically violent it neutralises and downgrades the problem. When a problem of abuse is downgraded to a problem of anger then the core attitudes and beliefs that allow a perpetrator to inflict abuse get lost. Someone who verbally assaults and emotionally frightens and terrorises another, over a period of time, has a problem that is far more serious than an anger problem. I have found in my work over the years that most abusive personalities will prefer to see their problem as an anger problem (just as a child sex abuser prefers to see his violent abuse of children as a sexual orientation problem).

Defining abuse and violence as an anger-control problem is to fail to understand the psychological and emotional dimensions to abuse and violence. For example:

- Abusive personalities are typically no angrier than others in difficult relationships.
- Abusive behaviour (such as name-calling, frightening someone, putting someone down, intimidation, threats etc) is not triggered by anger but by attitude.
- Violence that persists in a relationship is not triggered by anger but by fear of loss of power and control.

We all experience anger and passing impulses to ‘let-fly’. For most people lashing out verbally at one’s partners is not part of a pattern of abuse, does not hold them in fear, and is out-of-character. This is not the case however with abusive personalities. The abusive personality persistently engages in this kind of behaviour. Though he will most-often be a Jeckyl & Hyde type, the partner is still walking-on-egg-shells all the time.

Most abusive personalities want you to believe that their behaviour is out-of-character and is provoked by others. The truth, however, is that their own pathological need for control, their fear of powerlessness, and their disrespectful attitudes are what allow them to be abusive.

Changing these kinds of behaviours and attitudes is extremely difficult. It requires developing respect and equality and realising that no-one can make us be abusive or violent without our complete co-operation. The abusive man can become as addicted to his abusive control as any addict. I frequently remind men at the conclusion of a session that they have the power and ability to end their abusive behaviour at any point. I remind them that no one provokes them into behaving so awfully, that it is not an anger problem but a problem of needing to control and intimidate others. The opposite of abusive control is to emancipate and set others free to be whomever they wish and choose to be. You might remind your sister of these facts and encourage her to talk with someone who can support and assist her in understanding what is happening.