

Dad, Calm Down

From very early on, boys have a more difficult time than girls when recovering from strong feelings of anger or sadness. Boys also typically have more aggressive ways of expressing their feelings than girls do. The result is that boys tend to be disciplined by parents and adults more often, and thus receive the message that emotional expression is bad.

This eventually becomes a major difference between men and women--men grow up having a more difficult time recovering from emotional upset, and they are encouraged to suppress and avoid feelings in many ways.

Women tend to recover much more easily and are encouraged to express their feelings and to talk about them. I am continually amazed when I see my wife or daughter change from being very upset to talking about the “beautiful flowers in the backyard” in a matter of seconds.

In the book, “Why Marriages Succeed or Fail,” (1994) John Gottman reports that studies of couples having emotional discussions show that men produce higher heart rates and blood pressures, for longer periods of time, than women do.

How this really impacts fathers is in your ability to stay engaged with your family rather than being overwhelmed by your emotions and shutting down.

When fathers become overwhelmed by their emotions, it’s very easy for them to begin feeling righteous indignation and contempt...and sound something like this:

- “I’ve had enough of this crap!”
- “All of the things I do around here and I’m treated like this!”
- “I’m not going to react, I’ll just give the silent treatment.”

- “I’ll get even!”
- “I’ve just got to get out of here!”

Any of you ever been there? It’s an easy place to go when you’re overwhelmed. It also can be very destructive to your family relationships. What is clear from the research is that physical responses are a very clear barometer of our ability to communicate at any given moment.

When your heart rates are elevated and you are stressed out, it is nearly impossible to have a productive conversation!

So whether it’s a conversation with your wife or with your teen-age son, it is essential to have a plan in place to calm down when the emotional intensity of the talk becomes too great.

Here are some “calming” ideas to consider:

- Know when you’re likely to be at your worst when discussing particular issues, and make rules about avoiding those times (no talks with your son about curfew violations after 11 p.m.)
- Use a relaxation exercise when beginning to feel stress during discussions with loved ones; deep breathing or other relaxation exercises can be of great benefit.
- Have a plan for time-outs. Just as athletic coaches might do, take a time out and give yourself twenty minutes or so to cool down. Most people don’t give themselves long enough, and can get right back into conflict if the time-out is too short.
- Examine your thoughts during these times of “overwhelm” and see if you can replace some of them with thoughts that are more constructive. Examples include: “Don’t take this so personally”...“settle down and do some breathing”...“this isn’t really about me.”

- Take responsibility for your own anger—you are the only one in the world that can cause you to become angry. Taking responsibility for this will help you to stop blaming others and begin to find strategies to deal with your anger.

The truth is that many fathers suffer from being “flooded” emotionally when they interact with their families. Their responses can take many forms, whether frequent yelling and conflict, or avoidance of conversations that could produce emotional responses.

The result of this can be any form of disengagement: watching lots of TV, working a great deal, avoiding time at home, etc.

It’s important to remember that feeling overwhelmed at times when you’re with your family isn’t a character flaw and it isn’t terminal. But it can compromise your ability to feel connected to your family and it is something that can be improved upon.

Taking responsibility for improving your ability to respond to “overwhelm” will help you to stay closer to your family and prevent conflicts that occur when you’re at your worst.

It is a process that ensures a happier and healthier emotional connection with your family.

Are you ready to try? All it takes is commitment and practice.

Is your anger a problem in your family? Try the popular ecourse, “What are You Waiting For? Ten Steps to Anger Management for Men” at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com/angermanagement.htm>

Sign up for the **free** “Dads Don’t Fix Your Kids” Newsletter at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com> for great articles, tips, and action plans for fathers—and receive the popular article, “150 Things Dads Can Do For Their Kids” for **free**!