

Anger in spats is more about marital climate than heat of the moment, study shows

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How good are married couples at recognizing each other's emotions during conflicts? In general, pretty good, according to a study by a Baylor University researcher. But if your partner is angry, that might tell more about the overall climate of your marriage than about what your partner is feeling at the moment of the dispute.

What's more, "if your partner is angry, you are likely to miss the fact that your partner might also be feeling sad," said Keith Sanford, Ph.D., an associate professor of [psychology](#) and neuroscience in Baylor University's College of Arts & Sciences. His study — "The Communication of Emotion During Conflict in [Married Couples](#)" — is published online in the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Family Psychology*.

"I found that people were most likely to express anger, not in the moments where they felt most angry, but rather in the situations where there was an overall [climate](#) of anger in their relationship – situations where both partners had been feeling angry over a period of time," he said. "This means that if a couple falls into a climate of anger, they tend to continue expressing anger regardless of how they actually feel . . . It becomes a kind of a trap they cannot escape."

Common spats that might fester deal with in-laws, chores, money, affection and time spent on the computer.

Sanford found that when people express anger, they often also feel sad.

But while a partner will easily and immediately recognize expressions of anger, the spouse often will fail to notice the sadness.

"When it comes to perceiving emotion in a [partner](#), anger trumps sadness," he said.

Previous research has found that genuine expressions of sadness during a conflict can sometimes draw partners closer together, and it potentially can enable couples to break out of a climate of anger.

"A take-home message is that there may be times where it is beneficial to express feelings of sadness during conflict, but sad feelings are most likely to be noticed if you are not simultaneously expressing anger," Sanford said.

The findings were based on self-reporting by 83 married couples as well as observation and rating of their behavior by research assistants, who were given permission by the couples to videotape them through a one-way mirror. Couples were asked to choose two areas of conflict and talk to each other about them — one chosen by the wife, the other by the husband. They also were asked to rate their emotions and those of their partners before and after each discussion.

Couples' "insider knowledge" of one another might be expected to make it easier for them to read each other, Sanford said. But the only time in which [couples](#) made significant use of insider knowledge to distinguish emotions was in interpreting soft emotions -- such as hurt or disappointment -- in [conflicts](#) about specific events, the study showed.

While women expressed soft emotions more, they were no better at perceiving hard emotions (such as [anger](#)) or soft ones, Sanford said.

Provided by Baylor University

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