

## On Relationships



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It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon in August. We were relaxing on the deck in full sunshine. It was not too hot. The sky was a clear blue and a light breeze made being outside delightful. I was still on crutches after my knee injury in April while backpacking in northeast West Virginia when my left foot had gone forwards up to my right shoulder rupturing my ACL, PCL, and severely damaging the artery that goes to my leg and foot. I'd had several surgeries to repair the leg. My wife and I were sitting out on the deck, 20 feet in the air. The only way off the deck was through a door to the living room or the bedroom. My wife was called by a friend to go walk the dogs. She leaves. When you are on crutches you only get up when you really have to get up. About half hour later, I had to pee enough to drive me to get up. I went to the door to the bedroom and the door was locked! My wife, who grew up in Detroit, locks everything. She locks her car in a locked garage. She keeps all the doors and windows locked because if you don't, and you live in Detroit, when you come back your things will likely be gone.

This was the third time I'd been locked on the deck. First and second time shame on her, third time shame on me. Once I have been locked on the deck twice before I should realize it's likely to happen again and put lock cores in the door to the deck so as long as I had a key I couldn't be locked on the deck. I called the store the doors had come from the next day and installed door locks at no cost! This solved the long term problem but not my anger about being locked on the deck when I was on crutches!

The bitter pill in a relationship is this: "When I'm angry at you, it's about me." AA has a saying that when you point a finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at you. It certainly doesn't feel that way. But if you accept that when I'm angry at my partner it's about me, you'll solve the problem. If you don't accept this, you are going to be fighting for the rest of your life. The reason for this is very simple. When I'm angry at someone for something they've done 8 or 9 or 10 times, I should have done something different at number 3. First time, shame on them, second time, shame on them, third time, shame on me. I had

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opportunities to make a new plan but I didn't. I grew up in the suburbs and our front door was never locked when I came home from school. However, this third time I'm accepting shame on me.

I'm also really angry. I'm thinking, 'How could she lock me out, she knows I'm on crutches?' After considering other possibilities, still very angry, I decided to call her cellphone until I either filled her voice mail or she answers. On the 4th or 5th time she answers. I said, "You locked me out on the deck again". She responded, "Oh, I'm sorry, be right home." I was still simmering but I've also swallowed the "bitter pill." I'm accepting it must be about me even though I didn't feel that way at all. I'm feeling, 'How can this possibly be about you Jim? She locked you on the deck! You are on crutches. It's obviously about her! No, remember the rule. It is about you. Oh, help me with this anger.' So I didn't talk to her about it. I said thank you when she got home and I mostly avoided her for a couple of days. She clearly knew I was quite angry. I still hugged her and said, "Good bye" and "Hello".

I started reflecting on my anger. It was clearly disproportionate to the situation. First I realize anger is stimulated by fear. We get angry in response to some conscious or unconscious fear. What am I afraid of? My first thought was, "Maybe she doesn't love me!" But I know that is not true. I *know* she loves me but sometimes when I'm upset I don't *feel* she loves me. This was a part of the anger. Certainly I was angry that in my current condition on crutches my mobility was severely limited. Ordinarily I could have climbed off the porch down the side but not now. I recognized these limitations had a threatening effect on me. However my anger was so powerful that I knew there was more to it. Then it dawned on me. I could have easily died from my accident in April! Some people would have died from pulmonary embolisms. I was writing an essay about my injury that I had titled "Saving Jim's Leg". I realized the name actually should be "Saving Jim". The largest portion of my anger was about almost dying. That was very threatening and I had been avoiding feeling that anger. Now my anger about being locked on the porch activated everything else I felt angry about. Knowing this helped me calm down some.

I talked with some friends (with whom I was not angry) and I eventually came to an awareness of what may be happening. Whenever my wife would ask me if I wanted anything I'd say, "No." I thought, 'I don't want to bother her. If I really need something I can go get it myself even if I'm on crutches.' It occurred to me, 'Why would she be thinking about me when she leaves the house if every time she asks me if I need anything I say, "No?"' I'm repeatedly communicating to her that I don't need her! This could motivate somebody to at least unconsciously want to lock me on the deck. At this point I was ready to sit down and talk with her about being locked on the deck.

We sat down and I told her I realized every time she'd ask me if I need something, I'd say, "No." So why would I expect her to be thinking about me when she leaves the house? I was constantly communicating to her she doesn't need to be thinking about me and I don't need her! I told her from now on anytime she asks me if I need something I'm going to say, "Yes," and think of something that I did need or want. The best part is she started spontaneously making me food which had rarely happened before. She's a professional too and we usually do our own laundry. She's done my laundry and hung up my shirts I left in the dryer. She felt

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a little more positive toward me. What could have been a disaster and drive us apart, ‘You locked me out, what’s wrong with you, I was 20 feet in the air and I couldn’t climb down !’ instead helped us get closer. It helped our relationship.

The ‘bitter pill,’ when you are angry at your significant other, it’s truly about you, can lead to a better and closer relationship. This is about how we are maintaining our boundaries about our feelings. It’s not “You made me feel...,” but rather “My response to you was to feel...” . No one ‘makes’ us feel anything. It is our unconscious understanding or interpretation of what is happening that we are experiencing. The first or second time, maybe it’s a little bit about them. Rather than getting angry, we can say, “I’d really appreciate it if you would not throw your underwear on the floor in the bathroom every night.” By the third time, you can start throwing their underwear outside when you find them. When they don’t have any underwear left, likely you won’t see it on the bathroom floor again! You don’t have to have a big fight about it. Anger is a synonym of mad, and mad is a synonym of crazy. When we are angry we are crazy. Until we have our own anger under control we are unable to communicate effectively with the situation that brought on our anger. The value of swallowing the ‘bitter pill’ when we are angry is it reminds us to step back. This gives us an opportunity to understand and manage our own feelings before we try to resolve a problem. Anger never solves problems. Love solves problems.

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