

**The Relationship Institute**  
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**IT'S NOT ABOUT ME**

Anger is the most frequently misunderstood emotion. Because of this, it is the emotion that has the most destructive effect on relationships. Since so many of us never learn how to experience and express our anger in constructive ways, it often comes out hurtfully, is taken too personally and creates alienation between us and our partners.

When I feel angry I need to own it. It's not about my partner; it's about who I am and how I am reacting to my perceived reality. That means that I need to take responsibility for my anger. That is, I have the responsibility to be aware of it as an emotion I am feeling and the responsibility to figure out what I need to do about it in order to take care of my self. This is true whether I choose to express it to my partner in a constructive manner or choose to dismiss it as an unhealthy or inappropriate reaction.

When my partner is feeling angry about something that I have done, I also have a responsibility: the responsibility to remember that **it's not about me**. That means that I will listen respectfully to how my partner feels even though it pertains to me and I don't like what I am hearing. I will listen knowing that my partner is sharing with me who he or she is, knowing that this is an act of intimacy. Specifically, this is an act of conflict intimacy, the kind of intimacy that we are all less comfortable with. So I may have to push myself to really listen, to remain calm and not think about my response. I will remember that I do not have to defend myself, for what I am hearing is about him or her, **it's not about me**. Instead of getting defensive, I will listen like a friend, curious to understand what he or she is telling me about him or herself. And I will put myself in his or her shoes and try to find empathy for his or her experience.

To help deepen this process of conflict intimacy, I will ask a few questions. None that has anything to do with any defensive agenda of mine, but only questions to help me and maybe help him or her understand and learn about him or herself. A caring listener does not bring the focus back to him or herself, and does not try to problem solve. This listener helps the intimacy being offered by hearing it, understanding it and helping the speaker to learn more about him or herself.

When we know that **it's not about me**, we can listen, can remain caring, and can resist the tendency to become defensive. When this happens, the conversation, our self-knowledge, the level of respect and intimacy in the relationship, and the relationship itself can evolve.