

Anger

by Susan Tobin, Ph.D.*

Anger can be a very scary emotion-- whether it is your own anger at someone else, or you feel that someone is angry with you. Many people grow up with poor examples of how to manage anger effectively and compassionately. In fact, many people do not even recognize healthy anger as anger when they see it. In some families anger was violent. As one student said, "in my family, it wasn't an argument unless the police came." In other families anger is very passive. No one would speak about their feelings of anger, but everyone knew a family member was angry by the silence or slamming doors. It may seem unusual to think of anger in a new way, but anger can be a very positive emotion if expressed in an appropriate manner. The purpose of this handout is to help you to learn how to manage anger in a positive way.

Isn't anger a bad emotion, shouldn't we avoid it?

Anger is a normal, healthy (and necessary) part of human experience. Anger is neither good nor bad. But anger can be expressed constructively or destructively. Expressing anger by lashing out at another in a verbal or physical way is an example of destructive anger. The *feeling* of anger is neither good nor bad, but *that manner* in which the feeling was expressed only injures the relationship or the other person. Holding anger in and letting it dribble out in snide remarks or lack of cooperation is also a destructive expression of anger. Some people confuse the expression of anger with the feeling of anger and avoid either expressing anger or admitting to feeling anger at all costs.

It is impossible not to express your anger. Bottled-up anger "leaks out" in the form of lack of cooperation, silence, cynicism, and lightly veiled sarcasm. Expressing anger in this way is destructive because others have difficulty dealing with it directly. It is harder to build intimacy with someone that you are distancing yourself from. Managing your anger requires that you channel it to communicate rather than to punish. Anger management does not require that you avoid anger or any strong expression of it. Strong expression of anger should be coupled with a desire to work through the issues that give rise to the anger.

Shouldn't we all just deal with our anger within ourselves?

Anyone who says that they don't get angry is lying to themselves. All people get angry. Some people choose to pretend that they don't feel angry. This is also a destructive *repression* of anger. In this case the person does not allow themselves to know they are angry. Often what happens is that the person may develop an illness (such as an eating disorder, high blood pressure or an ulcer) from all the rage inside. After bottling the anger up for a long time it becomes so scary to let it out it starts to seem impossible. A person who has bottled up rage may feel scared that if they let out a little anger, the rest will come pouring out.

*based on an earlier version by Dennis Kivlighan, Ph.D.

Recognizing and Dealing with Your Anger

Recognizing angry feelings. The first step is to recognize the early warning signs of anger. For people who tend to blow up, the trick is to learn to feel the anger when it is simply irritation or frustration. Learning to recognize that something is bothering you early will help you to deal with it sooner, before you get so upset that you cannot manage your response. For people who repress their anger the trick is to recognize the anger before you store it away. Usually people who repress anger actually feel anger, but they label it as stress or sadness. It will be important to start to recognize that the uncomfortable feelings of muscle tightness or anxiety are really angry feelings.

Owning anger. Acknowledging anger and claiming it as your own behavior is a helpful first step. It increases self-awareness and prevents unwarranted blaming of others. Turning blame into "I" statements locates the anger where it is actually inside of us. "I am mad." vs. "You make me mad."

Calibrating the response. Anger is not an all or nothing experience. It ranges from relatively mild reactions such as "I disagree.", "I don't like that.", and "I'm bothered." through medium responses such as "I'm annoyed.", "I'm pissed off.", and "I'm irritated.", to intense reactions such as "I'm furious.", "I'm enraged.", and "I feel like hitting you." Start listening to the wide range of words other people use to describe anger and develop your vocabulary.

Diagnosing the threat. Anger is usually a reaction to a threat or to a possible loss. You can analyze what you are afraid of or what you stand to lose. Diagnosing the threat frequently reveals that it is simply a difference in values, opinion, upbringing, or styles of behaving.

Sharing the perceived threat or loss. This is a way to make the internal anger a public or interpersonal event. It diffuses the intensity of feeling inside of you and clarifies your perceptions. It permits you to receive feedback and consensual validation. It also gives you a chance to change a relationship for the better.

Recognizing & Dealing with Another's Anger

Acknowledge that anger is happening. Sometimes we react instinctively to a situation. This instinctive response can be very defensive or unhealthy. Stop and realize-- this is anger-- it is time to use my anger management response. (After you practice for awhile the new management will become instinctive.) Just breaking that pattern at this point will be helpful. This is also the hardest point to stop. Your typical pattern of responding is often overpowering and it takes practice to overcome this urge.

Affirm the other's feelings. One of the things that tends to get lost in an argument is acknowledging how the other person feels. To say "I understand how you feel." is NOT the same thing as saying "I agree with what you feel." It is possible to understand another's feelings, how those feelings developed and completely disagree with their point. When we try to ignore another's anger it only heightens the intensity of the feeling. It is never a good idea to say "Just calm down, don't let this bother you." Or, "you should not be worked up over such a little thing." It is much better to say "Help me to understand what is making you so upset so that I can try to work this through with you. I want to do this because you are important to me."

Acknowledge your own defensiveness. Let the other person know what you are feeling. Acknowledge that your own tenseness may lead to miscommunication and distortion. Learn your body's reaction to anger directed AT you. Sometimes we freeze or stiffen up and can't talk, other times we jump back with "it's not my fault, YOU shouldn't have..." Allow yourself to have that first reaction, but don't use it to formulate your response. Wait until it passes. Take a few deep breaths. Tell yourself that anger is only a feeling and that working anger through can deepen your feelings of closeness to this other person.

Clarify and diagnose. Give and request feedback. Distinguish between wants and needs. Check expectations. When interpersonal needs and wants are out on the table it is easier to resolve anger. How did the conflict emerge? Was there a misunderstanding? It is not as important to find out whose fault it is but to notice what you feel right now and to identify how to move beyond this place and back to clear communication.