

# Anger

Anger, the emotion that reflects our hurt, frustration, or fear, is a signal that something is not right. It produces feelings that are more difficult to control than many others. Anger may be triggered by a physical threat, an unkind or untrue word, criticism of someone we care about, unfair treatment, or simply an imagined offense. Most anger springs not from major threats to physical well-being but from everyday feelings of frustration or perceptions of hardship. Such feelings can be created by a sense that others have received or taken from us something that is rightly ours - material goods, a job, status in the community, or love and security within the family.

Anger is an appropriate response to many such life experiences, but the impulse to react with physical violence is seldom appropriate in today's society. The person we perceive as the source of our troubles may be our boss (not a "safe" target to our anger), a parent on whom we are dependent (like it or not), or a rival in the workplace (someone we have to work with unless we change jobs). In frustration, we may lash out at loved ones, not because they are the ones who have wronged us, but because they are "safe" targets and they happen to be there when our anger spills over.

Anger has been described as a two-edged sword. It can protect us against something that hurts or threatens us, and it can energize us to strive for a goal. But it can also hurt those we care most about, and it can threaten our own health. If we learn to deal with anger effectively, it can be our ally. If we allow anger to toss us around on waves of emotion, it can be a troublesome companion, indeed.

## Dealing with angry feelings

Your spouse, your boss, your sister, or your friend criticizes something you've done (or not done). Your face flushes, your heart beats faster and you clench your fists. Your body is preparing you to strike back as though you were facing physical danger rather than a verbal blow to your self-esteem. What to do?

Many of us have been taught since early childhood that anger is "not nice," so we "stuff" our feelings. We may even refuse to acknowledge that we feel angry. Sometimes we may deny our anger because the person who triggers our feelings of hurt or outrage is someone we love very much. Occasionally, it maybe someone we fear. No matter how hard we try or how well we think we succeed, anger never stays buried. Suppressing angry feelings can create emotional distance between family members or friends. It can create strained relationships in the workplace. Whether we admit it or not, it can become an excuse for some of our actions or inactions.

Anger may also simmer below the surface long enough to contribute to physical illness. And, on occasion, it may bubble to the surface and explode in a sudden display of rage. In contrast to stuffing anger, some of us have been taught that unexpressed anger will poison us, that we must "get it out of our system." This way of dealing with angry feelings tends to backfire, however. It often creates more anger in those on the receiving end, and it does nothing to resolve the matter that initiated the conflict.

Nowadays, most therapists suggest that neither "stuffing" anger nor "ventilating" is healthy. We do need to deal with it, however, in ways that promote both physical and mental health. We also need to deal with anger in ways that are not destructive of our families, especially our children. Research shows that the way we deal with anger is learned. This means that children who are witness or are targets of abuse, verbal or physical, are likely to repeat such behaviors as adults. It also means they are at risk for physical abuse that results in brain damage, which, in turn, can contribute to aggressive, delinquent behavior in later years.

## Using anger effectively

Anger is a powerful feeling, neither good nor bad in itself. It's what we do with it that counts. Here are some guidelines to help you avoid situations you later regret:

- If having a serious argument, don't overreact or challenge your opponent. Take time out. Literally, walk away. You can always explain that you need time to collect your thoughts.
- Never act on feelings of anger. You may release some tension by hitting someone or shouting insults, but this is likely to add fuel to the fire.
- Interrupt your hostile thoughts quickly. You may find it difficult at first, but it is possible to control the thoughts you allow into your mind.
- Find a pleasurable distraction. Take in a movie, go to a concert or visit a friend. But take care to avoid excess food, alcohol, or shopping.
- Exercise, or practice relaxation techniques.

When you have had time to cool down, the next step is to analyze your feelings. What was it that really got to you? Worry about your job security? Financial troubles? Frustration with a spouse? Resentment of a friend's good fortune? Hurt that you did not get a promotion you felt you had earned? Once you figure out why you feel angry, you can do something about it. The following are strategies to help you use anger effectively:

- Give up the idea that you can change or control another person's behavior. The only behavior you can control is your own, and you can learn how to change your behavior in ways that encourage others to respond as you would like them to.
- Avoid blaming others for the things that are "not right" in your life. When things go wrong, it is easier to find fault with others than to recognize our part in the predicament. We must, however, accept responsibility for our own behavior and work our own way out of situations we dislike.
- When you know what "pushes your buttons," you can think ahead about how to manage such situations in the future. You can, for example, work on ways to express anger without provoking a hostile reaction from others.
- Learn to accept the idea that it's OK to feel angry. In fact, anger can be your friend. It can give you energy. It can alert you to threatening conditions. You can then use energy to work harder and accomplish more than you would if you were always calm and collected.
- Let your anger motivate you to set a good example for your children. Show them by the way you handle disappointments and unfairness that these feelings need not lead them to become bitter and alienated. Along with love, give them a model of behavior that will help them succeed in life.
- Let go of the past. Promote your peace of mind by releasing your hurts. Translate your anger into understanding of what triggers your feelings. Work on developing your self-knowledge rather than holding on to old wounds.
- Remember that the way you handle anger is learned and can be changed. Even if your family set a poor example, even if people close to you handled their own anger in violent or verbally abusive ways, you can learn to do better.

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