

Dealing With Anger in Relationships

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Anger is a powerful, perfectly normal emotion that everyone feels at one time or another. Anger experts say that anger develops more often in the family—in marriage and with children—than in any other human relationship. A second common setting for anger episodes is at work, with colleagues and supervisors. As a consequence, more people are injured by the violent acts of someone they live or work with than by strangers.

Anger is probably the most poorly handled emotion in our society. It is the detonator of road rage on the freeway, flare-ups in the sports arena, violence at school and domestic abuse in homes. Anger is the source of many legal problems and many psychophysical diseases such as headaches, high blood pressure and chronic pain. Science has just recently begun to recognize the contribution anger makes to these and other diseases. When coupled with workplace and family stress, unresolved anger can cause emotional, physical and spiritual health to suffer. This can lead the angry one to lash out at the nearest person.

Managing anger successfully can make the difference between misery or happiness. This MontGuide has been written to help you under-

stand anger and how to manage it better. It also provides some ideas for dealing with others' anger.

What is Anger?

According to expert Charles Spielberger, anger is “an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild annoyance to intense fury and rage.” Many things can provoke angry feelings. People (such as a boss reminding you of a deadline for the fourth time this week) or daily events (such as getting dawdling kids off to school) might initiate anger. Worrying about personal problems or recalling events that were tragic or made you mad can also set off angry feelings.

Anger is expressed in three ways. It may be directed outward, toward other people or objects in the environment. You might feel like yelling, screaming, punching someone, smashing or destroying something, or throwing a chair or book across the room. These are destructive expressions of anger—destructive because instead of solving the problem, they usually escalate the situation and make the problem worse. A recent study showed that, contrary to popular belief, venting anger through physical aggression—such as by punching a bag or pillow—did not decrease anger but actually

increased aggressive behavior.

Anger may also be directed inward by suppressing angry feelings. This mode of expression can also be destructive—if anger is not allowed some form of constructive external expression, it can increase the risks of high blood pressure, depression, suicide, gastrointestinal problems or drug and alcohol use. Unexpressed anger can also lead to such problems as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on), a hostile and cynical way of dealing with others or increased use of put-downs and criticism. Obviously, such behavior doesn't promote harmonious relationships with others.

A third mode of anger expression is the control of anger. Pop psychology used to promote the philosophy of “let it all hang out.” During its heyday, this approach led some specialists to recommend that people communicate their anger just to get it off their chest. Far from solving problems, research has confirmed that unbridled expression of anger makes matters worse. Not only does it escalate anger and threaten relationships, but it places one's physical health

at risk, too. It is wise to control or manage the expression of anger in constructive ways.

Controlling anger doesn't ignore the emotion. Instead, it involves first calming oneself so that one's anger can be used to achieve constructive ends, such as solving problems and restoring emotional connections with others. Proper control of anger reduces the risk of violence toward others as well as physiological harm to oneself.

Dealing With Our Own Anger

As much as we like horses, few of us would be willing to ride one without a bridle. Around the world there are various categories of bridles. Within these categories there are literally hundreds of different kinds of bridles depending on what we want to do with the animal. But the major purpose is the same: To get the horse to do what we want it to do.

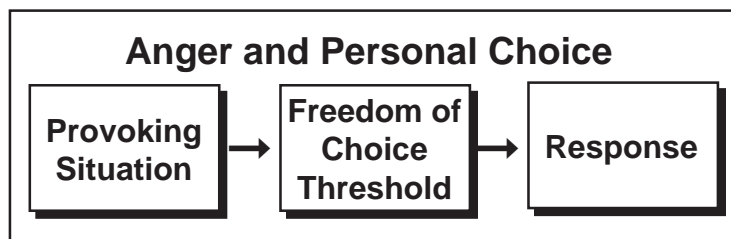
Using a bridle doesn't deny that the horse exists, nor does it mean that the horse is a bad animal. Quite the contrary. Bridles allow us to manage and guide the horse to accomplish our purposes.

Anger is like an unbridled horse. Unless we govern it, we are at its mercy. The consequences of unbridled anger aren't the ones we really want. Here are some suggestions for putting a bridle on anger.

Understand that anger is a choice. Since anger can be controlled, it follows that anger is a choice. Anger is a learned response to a trigger in our environment. While we may have a tendency to become angry, it's not wise or correct to give in and simply say "That's just the way I am, and there's nothing I can do about it." Ultimately we are in charge of which behaviors we choose in response to the emotions we feel. We often hear people say things like, "She/He made me angry."

That statement is inaccurate. No one is ever *made* to be angry. No one is forced against their will to lose their temper. Remember: Anger is a learned response to a provoking situation.

Consider the following diagram. Between every provoking situation and outcome lies the freedom to select the actions we deem appropriate. Habit may make our responses seem almost involuntary, but they aren't. While certain provoking situations may creep up on us so that we respond with a knee-jerk reaction, once the connection between the provoking situation and our response is in our consciousness, we can begin to take more control over our actions.



Learn what provokes your anger. While no one can cause us to use anger destructively, the emotion of anger can be provoked in us. So it is wise to learn what your anger triggers are and write them down. Your anger might be provoked when someone ignores the good things you do, puts you down, or shows disrespect for your opinions. As a parent your anger might be aroused toward children when they are messy, don't cooperate or disobey your wishes.

Once you have made a list of your anger triggers, keep the list handy. Spend some time thinking about what you might do instead of reacting angrily the next time someone "pushes your button." For example, if you are angered when your teen won't clean his/her room, give him/her the option of cleaning it once a week and let him/her choose the day and time.

Recognize and admit your own anger. Notice what your body does when anger is provoked. Do

you feel hot or flushed? Is your heart pounding? Are you breathing more rapidly? Is there change in the tension of the muscles in your neck? Is your head or stomach aching? Also notice the thoughts you have and the actions you do or want to do when you feel anger. Perhaps you are thinking "It's not fair!" or "She's out to get me!" or "He makes me so angry so much of the time!" You may (or you may want to) yell or scream at someone, hit or slap, threaten, order around, or, as a parent, punish a child severely.

Notice also signs of hidden anger, such as sarcasm or feelings of frustration or wanting to get even. You may have been taught to deny

your angry feelings, or that they don't matter. But feelings do matter. Now is the time for great self-honesty. Realize that anger is normal emotion. There's no need for you to feel ashamed

or guilty about it. Whether at home or at work, give each other the right to feel angry. Feeling angry and acting destructively toward another are two very different things.

Relax and calm yourself first. Before the issue that provoked the feeling of anger can be resolved, you must reduce the intensity of the angry feeling by calming yourself. Discover what helps you calm down in anger situations and take action. Calming actions might include calling a friend or relative, listening to music, prayer or meditation, vigorous exercise, writing down feelings in a letter (for yourself), a good night's rest, a warm shower or bath, deep breathing, counting to ten, taking a walk or taking a mental vacation by imagining a peaceful, beautiful place.

Strive to understand the other person's point of view. There are many reasons someone may do something that provokes our anger, besides their intentionally wanting to

get us angry. Parents would do well to learn possible causes of anger in children at different ages and stages of development and use that knowledge in responding to an anger trigger. For example, Tommy, a three-year-old, was angry because his father wouldn't let him play with the CD player. He yelled "I hate you!" at his father. His dad remembered that children at this age may resent the fact that others have so much power over them and may become angry when they don't have the freedom to do as they please. Armed with this knowledge, he responded in an age-appropriate manner to his son, saying "Well, I love you. You're just angry because you can't play with the CD."

We can strive to put ourselves in another adult's shoes when they pull one of our anger triggers. Someone may be tired or over stressed. You may find that your anger was based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of someone's words or actions. Or perhaps the anger resulted from one person being pushed beyond their limits of tolerance.

Establish ground rules for expression of anger. This will help you manage anger. For example, when anger and conflict is escalating over an issue, agree that you will call "Time Out" and try talking about it again after you calm yourselves and can listen to one another better. Choose a specified time to talk, such as in 10 minutes or at a later time within 24 hours. Using this kind of ground rule can help you deal with difficulties with less bickering and strife.

Express your anger constructively. Express angry feelings calmly and with an attitude of respect, without attacking or blaming the other person. Explain to the other person why you are angry. Use I-statements with a Feeling-When-Because format. For example, "I FEEL angry WHEN the barbeque is left on BECAUSE it wastes gas."

Follow up the I-statement with a statement of the change that you believe would solve the problem now and defuse anger in the future. For example:

"I feel frustrated when you come home after curfew because that is against our agreement. I want you to follow through on what we agreed."

"I feel upset when I don't get the recognition I think I deserve, because I worked very hard on that project. I want some acknowledgment of my contribution."

"I feel angry when you track dirt on the kitchen floor because I just cleaned it. I want you to leave your muddy shoes at the doorway under the coat rack."

Even when expressing anger, you can communicate love and respect for the other person. A gentle touch on the shoulder and a calm voice, even when the words are expressing a feeling of anger, communicate to others that although you are angry, you still care about them and value the relationship. By expressing anger calmly, you are more likely to be able to explore with the other person the sources of your anger and how such a situation may be prevented in the future. When anger is recognized and approached calmly, respectfully, with the intention of strengthening the relationship and not hurting it, anger can actually encourage growth and intimacy.

Make an Anger Bridling Plan. As you read over the ideas above, have you noted any that might help

you bridle your anger? Pick one of your anger triggers and come up with a plan for dealing with it. Don't try to deal with all your triggers at once—start with one. Make a chart like the one shown below.

Some of us may have become so accustomed to destructive expressions of anger that we find it difficult to apply the ideas listed above. Reactions to certain anger triggers may have become so ingrained that it seems impossible to change them alone. If this is so, get help from a trusted and trained professional or minister who can help you deal with your anger.

Handling Other's Anger

Dealing with our own anger is one thing. But how do we deal with others' anger? When anger is directed toward us, what steps can we take to defuse a tense situation? Colorado Extension Specialist Robert Fetsch provides helpful hints in his publication, "Dealing With Others' Anger."

When confronted with the anger of others, therapists and educators recommend a combination of communication and problem-solving strategies. First take steps to protect yourself from any potential violence (leave, go to a safe house, wait until your partner is sober, etc.). Often a "time-out period" reduces the hostility level. To help reduce chances of aggression, experiment with the following five steps.

Ask, "What is it you are angry at me about?" and listen for the unmet expectation, need or de-

My Anger Bridling Plan (Example)

My anger triggers	Physical reactions and thoughts	My typical actions	What I will do instead
1. Jason refuses to do his chores	1. My face gets flushed and my heart starts pounding. I think, "What do I have to do to get you to move!"	1. Yelling, ordering, threatening.	1. Go to my room, do deep breathing, repeat the word "relax" in my mind until I feel calm. 2. Go back to Jason and restate his job, and then say: When you refuse to do your job, I feel angry because we depend on everyone to carry their weight in the family. I expect you to complete your job before you go to your friend's house.

mand. Check out their meaning. For example, a parent may ask a teen, "So, you want me to drive you both ways to your new job five days a week, right?" If the unmet expectation is not clear to you, you can always ask, "What is it you want now?"

Be sure to be as empathic and understanding as possible. Suspend all judgment. Genuinely strive to look at the situation through the other's eyes. Sometimes the urge to defend yourself is overwhelming, but don't! Instead, ask, "What did that mean to you?" If appropriate, paraphrase the other person's viewpoint. A parent might say, "So, after you told me I'd have to drive you to and from work because this is your first job and you really worked hard to get it and I said, 'Let's talk about it later,' you felt like I was putting you off. Do you think that means I don't care about you?" Listen and paraphrase until the speaker indicates you've got their viewpoint.

Third, whether your critic is wrong or right, find some way to agree. Having a "we-can-solve-this-problem attitude" helps a lot. For example, "I have to agree that I was in a rush when you announced your new job. You're right—it would have been better if I'd explained that I had to go to the office in five minutes for an important meeting, but that I really do care about you and your new job and would love to hear about it later."

Fourth, ask "What do you want (of me) now?" During the time you take to listen

for the unmet expectation, empathize with the other person's viewpoint and tell them where you agree, much of the intense anger disappears. A clue that the time is ripe is when you hear an audible sigh as the angry person takes a deep breath and the energy shifts. Once the anger has subsided in both you and your critic, ask the question. Your critic might say something like: "You're the parent and I want you to show you care about my life, too, by driving me to and from work."

Fifth, negotiate a win-win agreement. Explain your viewpoint tactfully and assertively negotiate differences. For instance, "I'll tell you what, since your job is not that far from school and 3:30 is a busy time for me, why don't you walk to work from school and I'll pick you up at 6:30 every day? Can we try this for a couple of weeks and see if it works?"

Of course, not everyone wants to work out a win-win solution to a problem. If you use some of these steps and find yourself feeling more angry for what the person is saying or doing, stop and ask yourself, "What's going on? Do I feel like I'm losing and the other person is winning?" If so, check this out with the other person by saying something like "I started this conversation with a win-win attitude. Now I feel like we're in a you-win I-lose situation. Is that what you want? Are you willing to go back

with me to a win-win attitude?" If they're willing, proceed. If not, it may be time to seek the help of an impartial third party.

Three additional strategies may help handle others' anger:

- **Use the person's name.** This will help you get the angry person's attention.
- **Slow down and lower your voice.** When someone is very angry, his or her speech will usually be very rapid. Slowing down your rate of speech and lowering your voice may lead the angry person to a more reasonable tone.
- **Sit down.** Sitting makes you less intimidating. It also slows an angry person's rapid thoughts and words. Ask the angry person to take a seat beside you as you discuss the problem. Sitting next to a person (versus across from them) is a more supportive position.

Spend some time learning about anger, what provokes anger in you and what calms you down. Then choose to express anger constructively so that its expression builds rather than damages relationships. Deal with others' anger toward you in ways that can actually help defuse their anger.

Suggested additional reading

American Psychological Association (1997). *Controlling anger—before it controls you* [online].

Available: <http://helping.apa.org/daily/anger.html>

Find other Extension Publications on the web at <http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/pubs.html>

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