

Managing Anger



The events of 2020 have fueled stress and anger that had been simmering for some time before this year (Ray, 2019). Many are angry because of what they have lost or what has been taken away from. Some of the most common losses have been loved ones, jobs, prized traditions (graduations), routine, and security. Anger is a natural response to loss for all people. In fact, anger is visible even among infants whose goals are blocked (Lewis et al., 2006). Anger toward friends or family happens when we feel a threat to security of those close relationships.

Why am I angry?

All emotions provide information. They tell us something about our environment or ourselves. Anger may tell us that we have been hurt by injustice, insult, or betrayal (Gilam & Hendler, 2017). Anger may also tell us that an experience is threatening because it has made us feel exposed or vulnerable. Anger, therefore, can serve an important function. *Without anger, there would be little motivation to deal with unfair or hurtful situations.*

Whether intentional or not, common expressions of anger such as raised voices or harsh language often

create emotional or physical distance between us and the target of our anger. This happens even when our goal may actually be to restore closeness. For example, close friends or family who express different opinions may resort to angry criticism of one another. This criticism may be an ineffective way of stating “your opinion makes me think you don’t care about me, and because I want you to care about me, I am going to try to tell you why that opinion is wrong.” This is ineffective, because criticism provokes a defensive or avoidant reaction rather than the sensitive or caring response that each person is looking for.

How does anger affect my body?

Anger immediately changes how the body functions (Steptoe & Kivimäki, 2013). Anger commonly activates our body’s fight-or-flight response. Signs of a fight-or-flight response include faster heart rate, higher blood pressure, and changes in stress hormone levels. When these responses are activated, it also becomes much more difficult to use our logical thinking skills, which helps us solve problems effectively.

What do I do with my anger?

Anger is a sign that you have experienced pain or injustice, so it deserves to be addressed. Following these steps can help manage anger:

1. **Soothe yourself in the short-term.** Sitting or lying down, breathing, or finding a quiet place to briefly rest will reduce the physical effects of anger. In essence, you can take a break or give yourself a time out (try not to tell someone else *they* need to calm down). If you are around others when you are angry, ask for space by stating, “I need a moment. I will be back in [specific time].”
2. **Define the pain, injustice, or hurt feeling that fuels your anger.** Here are a couple tips to navigate this process:
 - a. You may have to ask yourself, “why?” or “so, what?” several times before arriving at the source of the anger (see example below).

Example: Getting to the Source

I am mad because you called me selfish.

Why?

I do things for you all the time.

So, what?

I do not want you to think I am selfish.

Why?

Because it hurts to think of someone I care about having such a low opinion of me.

- b. Watch out for powerful feelings such as **fear, shame, helplessness, or sadness**. Try to go beyond simple statements such as “this isn’t fair.” For example, “I’m angry at being laid off because I am afraid of falling behind on my bills and feel helpless to change my boss’ decision.”

3. Take a chance at **explaining the feelings to someone else**. When you express pain, fear, or sadness using the method in step #2, it is easier for other people to listen to you. You may also have to listen to understand somebody else’s anger if your anger was the result of an argument.
4. When the true feelings beneath anger have been expressed, it is easier to **brainstorm solutions** to the problem.

What do I do with someone else’s anger?

The key is to show that you want to listen before offering advice or arguing your own points. Repetitive conversations are the result of speakers feeling unheard or situations remaining unchanged. Therefore, if you find yourself hearing the same words from someone repeatedly, they do not think you understand. **Use the phrase “help me understand”** to ask for clarity on another person’s experience. Do not try to offer advice or make any of your own points until you have genuinely been able to show empathy. An empathic listener can help someone identify the true source of their anger (step #2 above).

You can also use these four points for dealing with your own anger as a waypoint for listening to somebody else’s anger. For example, if the person is enraged and not thinking clearly, it is okay to temporarily remove yourself from the situation to allow them (and possibly you) to physically calm down before returning to the conversation.

Anger is only a sign, not a solution

Mental health experts will decline to label any emotion as good or bad. Anger is no exception. Anger is a signal that a situation needs to change. Although the most visible expressions of anger tend to push others away, we should be fighting that impulse around people who are important to us. By giving ourselves time to get to the source of anger, we can make progress toward relevant solutions to our problems.

References

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