

ANGER'S DEBIT SHEET

Todd Bertuzzi's recent trip to Colorado to play the Avalanche brought to an end a 20 month ordeal resulting from a rash moment where he clocked Steve Moore from behind. I say rash, not because the attack wasn't premeditated - it clearly was- but because the severity of the attack was intensified by anger and humiliation. Anger because his friend Marcus Naslund had been head-hunted and injured by Moore and humiliation because the Canucks were being completely outplayed in the game. What struck me about the immediate shocked reaction of the fans and the subsequent public criticism of Bertuzzi, was that it so much exemplified the less famous anger-related dramas that occur in men's lives every day.

Bertuzzi was initially carrying the torch of revenge and anger felt by the Canucks and their fans into that game and up to the point Moore hit the ice there was massive support for retribution. The moment Moore hit the ice the mood immediately changed to disgust, shame and after-the-fact moralizing. Bertuzzi was criminally charged, lost hundreds of thousands of dollars and became the poster boy for anger gone awry. Notwithstanding Moore's injuries, this was an extremely costly event for Bertuzzi.

Similarly, less famous men frequently pay a remarkably high price for anger in their daily lives. Having run groups for men with anger problems for many years, I have been amazed to see the price men willingly pay for their anger-related behaviour. In family situations, it is frequently the wives and children that suffer physically and emotionally, but the men often lose their marriages, lose access to their children, lose their reputations and obtain criminal records. Outside the family, men do even worse. Young men are the most frequent victims of street violence and homicide. While fathers of daughters are always worried about their safety, I would in some ways be more worried about a son's safety, as boys are often the targets of random violence at teen parties and on the street.

New research demonstrates that high levels of anger, combined with poor conflict resolution skills are correlated with an increased risk of cardiac disease. Even if a man is non-violent, he increases his chances of an untimely death if he is constantly angry at work, at home or at the kid's hockey game. His body is in a constant state of alert and eventually the biochemicals released in this on-going adrenalin rush wreak havoc on his cardio-vascular system.

If high levels of anger carry such dire consequences for men, why are they so prevalent? The Bertuzzi story illustrates part of the answer. Men receive a lot of encouragement to vent their anger. Fans were licking their chops for revenge, the Canuck management clearly did not do anything to control their players during the game and the league did not take any pre-emptive action in response to Moore's hit on Naslund. The stage was set for individual action. Bertuzzi exemplifies the action-oriented, physical, "man of few words" kind of man. Unfortunately, he fell prey to the double standard we have set up for men in our culture. Don't ever back down, don't show weakness, anger is the only acceptable emotion, winning is everything, loyalty at all costs, power and control over others is rewarded - but if you really hurt someone, you're a pariah.

You only have to watch young boys playing in the schoolyard to see that in general they have a lot of physical energy and a penchant for competition. Some of men's greatest accomplishments involving bravery and courage have emanated from this energy and drive. So have many wars and tragedies. If men are going to increase their average life span and contribute to a healthier world, they are going to have to get emotionally smarter. This means having the courage to learn more about the emotions that accompany anger, to become able to express feelings other than anger and to learn alternative methods for conflict resolution. I have seen many men do this, but usually not until they have paid a heavy price. Since we can't rely on schools to do everything, it is influential adults like fathers and coaches who will need to play a key role in teaching boys to do this...and role models like Todd Bertuzzi.

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