

ANGER MANAGEMENT 101

Jane sits fuming silently at her desk and doesn't speak to her co-worker Cathy who earlier in the day had criticized her work in front of the boss. Edward yells at his teenaged son for not cleaning up his room. These two people have something in common. They have both experienced situational anger and have handled it poorly. Jane has taken a passive approach to dealing with her anger, while Edward has used an aggressive approach.

Passive approaches involve stuffing the anger inside, sulking, pretending there is nothing wrong and keeping it to yourself. A passive person experiences a lot of internal tension, feelings of powerlessness and victimization and an inability to resolve the problem. As a result, they don't get their needs met and may end up feeling depressed.

Aggressive approaches involve spewing out anger either verbally or physically in a way that injures the other person or puts them down. While in the past, some mental health professionals promoted the idea that "getting your anger out" was healthy, we now know that aggressive ventilation of anger can poison relationships, stress the body, and impair accurate communication. Once begun, aggressive ventilation of anger can become a self-perpetuating habit as the person learns to enjoy the temporary release of tension and feelings of power.

A third approach to anger is the passive-aggressive approach to anger expression in which the person punishes their target indirectly by intentionally making mistakes, "forgetting" to do important tasks or gossiping about the other person to others. All of the above approaches to anger do not resolve the problem and tend to reinforce a chronic level of anger or resentment in the person.

Now that we know what doesn't work, how can we understand and express our anger in a way that puts us firmly in the driver's seat? The answer is to use an assertive approach to anger expression. Anger is seen as a healthy human response to a perceived challenge or a problem. The body's sympathetic nervous system is stimulated to meet the challenge (the classic "fight or flight" response) and provide energy and focus. Properly channeled, our anger can give us the courage and strength to face difficult problems. The assertive approach involves being aware of your anger, sizing up the situation and planning a way to communicate your anger in a direct, clear and non-abusive manner. The following steps to assertive anger expression can serve as a guide.

1. Know your own anger signs: Practice paying attention to your own set of physical reactions (e.g. rapid heart beat, flushing, muscle tightness, etc.) and behavioural signs (pacing, talking faster, slamming doors) that you are getting angry. The earlier you are aware of your anger, the better.
2. Know your sensitive points: Take an inventory of issues that you are sensitive about and situations that have been difficult for you to handle in the past. This information will allow you to prepare for "high risk" situations.

3. Monitor your self-talk: How you talk to yourself about a situation is often as important as the situation itself. It is helpful to be aware of how you can talk your own anger up by dwelling on negative assumptions and thoughts (“she did that on purpose”, “how dare she do that to me, I’d like to . . .”) and to work on just responding to the facts.
4. Direct yourself: Once you are aware of your anger and “talk-up” process, you can begin to direct yourself by acknowledging your anger and channeling it into a plan. For example, you may say to yourself “I’m getting really angry, I need to calm down and think about how I’m going to handle this.” This implies that you are responsible for your own reactions and gives you a sense of control.
5. Buy some time: It is a rare person who can communicate anger effectively when they are at a “10” on the anger scale. Most people find it helpful to take some time out to calm themselves down before acting. Taking ten slow deep breaths while counting each breath is one simple way of lowering arousal enough to improve effectiveness. Exercise can be a longer term way to increase resistance to anger arousal and stress.
6. Prepare to direct your anger: Bower and Bower in their book “Asserting Yourself” describe an effective verbal format for expressing anger called a DESC script. It involves four simple parts:
 - Describe: A factual description of what the person did or said (“you criticized me in front of the boss”)
 - Express: A statement of your feelings (“I felt angry and humiliated”)
 - Specify: What you would like (“I’d like you to talk to me privately if you have any criticisms”)
 - Consequences: What incentives are there for the person to comply (“If you do this our working relationship will be much better”)

It may be a good idea to rehearse what you are going to say before you actually try it.

7. Assertive anger expression: Pick an appropriate time, ask if “it’s a good time to talk” and express your feelings using the DESC script format. Using this format does not guarantee compliance or even that you will be heard, but it increases the chances dramatically. It may create an opportunity for dialogue or negotiation or convince you that you need to follow other options (e.g. speaking to a supervisor).

The above steps are useful in dealing with situational anger. If you are experiencing chronic anger (you’re always idling at a “5” out of “10”), then you may want to speak to a psychologist or counsellor. Your anger may be coming from old childhood hurts or serious dissatisfactions in other areas of your life.