

Confronting and Treating Destructive Anger
By
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Anger is a powerful human emotion experienced in varying degrees by all of us. Anger may be stimulated by internal thoughts, by negatively perceived events or by conflict within a relationship. Some people are extremely sensitive to the routine frustrations of everyday life and feel outraged by situations they perceive as undesirable or unfair. These individuals often have difficulty managing their anger and are likely to respond in a manner that hurts others and themselves.

It is important to recognize that anger is a normal emotion, which when properly channeled, can be a constructive force. Anger can be a useful tool, a signal, that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. It can help an individual identify an aspect of life that is unrewarding or harmful and needs modification. However, individuals must learn to carefully assess the conditions that trigger anger and productively use this information to implement change.

In our practice we work with individuals and families who have difficulty dealing with and expressing anger. Many are frightened by the intensity of their angry thoughts and feelings. Others seek our help because they recognize that they are repeating a pattern of family violence that they experienced as children. Some are at risk of losing their jobs or their spouses and are referred to us by concerned family members or employers. In working with these individuals we often focus on three main areas; communication skills, past experiences and learned behavior, and negative thoughts or self-talk.

We often encounter patients who did not learn how to communicate their desires or needs in a clear, understandable fashion and feel frustrated because their expectations frequently go unmet. Many of these individuals also lack the ability to listen to and accept the perceptions or opinions of others. As a consequence, they often cannot appreciate or empathize with points of view that differ from their own. These *communication problems* can lead to anger and discord in interpersonal relationships.

As a first step towards addressing this situation, we often focus on teaching our patients the skills they need to clearly and assertively express their needs and desires. This might involve practicing how to ask directly for what is wanted, rather than hinting obliquely or simply expecting other people to anticipate their needs. Improving communication may also involve teaching ways of gaining the cooperation of others, rather than demanding compliance.

Frequently significant people in the individual's life have withdrawn and are no longer willing to communicate due to their fear of being mistreated. Thus, an important aspect of communication often involves identifying ways of approaching these individuals in order to repair damage to the relationship. At times family members or significant others may be directly involved in treatment to accomplish this goal.

Another important aspect of learning to control anger is recognizing the influence of past experiences and identifying habitual response patterns. Some individuals have *learned* to use anger or violence to respond to negative situations. This may have been the pattern in their family of origin or one developed after years of abuse or neglect as a child. This behavior may have intensified as the anger produced some desired results and the individual did not recognize the inappropriateness of the actions or did not consider the destructive long-term impact of this response. One treatment goal in this situation involves helping individuals evaluate the cost of their anger. How has their angry response pattern impacted their personal health and well-being? Has it cost them relationships with family or friends? Has it adversely affected their education or job?

We help our patients understand and clarify the long-term consequences of their angry behavior. However, even after they gain insight into these consequences, they may still have difficulty breaking their habitual response pattern. They will need to practice responding in new ways to negative situations before they can comfortably be called upon to act correctly in the heat of the moment.

An individual's *negative thoughts* or "*self-talk*" can also aggravate a situation and increase the likelihood of violence. If anger becomes a way of life, problems multiply as the individual responds inappropriately to any insult, real or imagined, big or small. Individuals who are constantly angry often blame others for their problems. Chronically angry people also tend to constantly dwell on their problems, which causes anger to increase, often to the point of an aggressive or violent response.

Consider a situation where the driver of one car cuts off the driver of a second car. A normal response may be "That was dangerous," or "What a jerk." A person who has a difficulty expressing or controlling anger, however, may personalize the situation and talk him or herself into a rage, with statements such as "He cut me off...he thinks I'm going to let him get away with that...no way!". Such thoughts stimulate intense anger that, if left unchecked, can lead to aggression or violence.

A negative interpretation of comments or actions by others can also generate a high level of anger in personal relationships. A spouse may say, "I have to work late this week" and may be experiencing stress due to a demanding work situation. If the other spouse responds with a cycle of negative self-talk, such as "She is late coming... probably seeing somebody else! After all I've done for the family! Well I'm not going to take it anymore!", the stage is set for conflict. The late arriving spouse walks in the door and is met with a barrage of accusation, suspicion and hostility. The response to being verbally castigated is likely to be defensive and equally hostile. Each spouse's recriminations can easily escalate the situation into conflict that gets out of hand.

Treatment involves helping the individual to recognize thoughts that intensify feelings of anger, and to develop new thought and behavioral patterns; patterns that allow the individual to remain calm, evaluate a situation and respond to it appropriately. Whether an individual is dealing with isolated incidents of anger or is chronically angry, it

becomes important to learn effective coping strategies that can be used on a daily basis.

One coping strategy our patients have found helpful involves learning to identify physiological changes associated with anger reactions, such as increased heart rate and sweating, as well as behavioral changes such as pacing and clenching their fists. These changes signal that anger is escalating and that the individual needs to take immediate action to relax and calm down. The individual may learn to defuse a potentially volatile through exercise, relaxation techniques or a hobby.

We also have found that it is important for patients who have difficulty with anger to formulate more reasonable and realistic expectations of themselves, other people and life in general. Rather than expecting that the world is “out to get them” or that the world should be at their “beck and call,” individuals need to understand that they will encounter a mixture of positive and negative situations each day. They need to realistically assess what they can and cannot control and work within this framework, rather than demanding that other people and situations fit their own expectations or demands.

As people confront and learn to manage anger they begin to experience the rewards of communicating with, rather than threatening, loved ones. They develop a sense of pride gained from taking responsibility and to achieve personal satisfaction through hard work and perseverance. They begin to enjoy the benefits of a long-term positive view of life that comes from making compromises and treating others fairly. Once they understand that uncontrolled anger is a destructive force with grave, serious consequences, they recognize that the task of understanding and managing anger, though difficult, is a worthy endeavor that leads to a more satisfying and more productive life.

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