

**HOW TO MANAGE ANGER:  
A KEY TO BETTER RELATIONSHIPS**

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*“Anyone can become angry; that is easy...but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way...this is not easy.” Aristotle*

Although anger can be an energizing, empowering, and adaptive emotion, the inappropriate expression of anger can be a destructive force in relationships. When we express anger inappropriately, we may feel good or powerful at the time of the action, but later we pay the price in terms of feeling guilt or shame at ourselves. Although the adaptive expression of anger may help protect us from harm and may ensure that we are treated fairly by others, the maladaptive expression of anger hurts us by having a variety of detrimental effects on relationships.

In general, people who are chronically angry have fewer and less satisfying intimate, social, and career relationships (Lench, 2004). In contrast, learning to manage anger can be a positive step toward improving relationships with others. Psychologists have identified the basic components of good anger management as well as several specific techniques that can help people express their emotions in a more constructive manner. Rather than thinking about anger management as a goal in itself, it is more of a byproduct of healthy emotional regulation. By practicing these techniques on a regular basis, people are usually able to improve their relationships with others.

**What is anger?** In learning how to manage anger, it is important to understand the differences among the terms anger, hostility, and aggression. Although there is some overlap among these terms, there are also some significant differences. *Anger* is a normal emotion which, despite its adaptive benefits, is considered a negative emotion because most people would generally

prefer not to feel angry. *Hostility* is the pervasive attitude that anticipates aggression in others and justifies aggression toward others. Hostility is a characteristic of chronically angry people, who tend to ignore their own contributions to frustrating situations, which they view as intolerable, unjustified, and intentionally caused. *Aggression* is any behavior that is intended to cause harm (Del Vecchio & O’Leary, 2004). Aggressive behavior can be measured on a continuum ranging from pushy and controlling behavior to violence and rage. Aggressive behavior can involve either overt or covert behavior. *Covert aggression* involves anger that is expressed in an indirect, manipulative, or passive-aggressive manner, including subtle behaviors such as withdrawal, sabotage, or sarcasm. *Overt aggression* includes anger that is expressed in a direct, controlling, or domineering manner, such as raising the tone or volume of one’s voice. It also includes more obvious behaviors such as, arguing, yelling, or violence.

**What anger is not.** Anger is not the same as aggression. Although the expression of aggression usually involves anger, the expression of anger does not necessarily involve aggression. Appropriate expression of anger can be accomplished by assertiveness, which is also different from aggression. *Assertive behavior* involves asking for or stating what you want in a clear and direct manner while taking into consideration the feelings and rights of others. *Aggressive behavior*, on the other hand, involves violating the rights of others. Aggressive behavior can involve saying what you want, clearly and directly, but without the element of empathy or caring found in assertive behavior. In contrast, assertive behavior involves standing up for yourself in such a way that you do not violate the rights of another person. Assertiveness involves a direct, honest, and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions, or requests.

## Consider Changing How You Think

Our emotions are often determined by how we think about things, and our thinking often creates problems for us that the same kind of thinking cannot solve. Because our emotional reaction to a situation is usually determined by our interpretation of the situation (conscious or otherwise), examining our thoughts can help us determine whether our interpretation of events is realistic. Psychologists have identified several cognitive strategies that can be helpful in improving our emotional functioning. Using effective cognitive coping strategies can help alleviate negative emotions by altering our perception of ourselves and others (Lench, 2004). The following suggestions may be useful in improving how you think about things.

*Examine unrealistic expectations.* Unrealistic expectations can serve as premeditated resentments. If you don't get what you want in a situation, it may be because your expectations are not realistic. Unrealistic expectations can set the stage for disappointment, resentment, and frustration. Good anger management requires self-examination and the development of realistic expectations in dealing with specific situations.

*Consider attribution errors in thinking.* Angry people often magnify the focus on what happened to them, while they minimize their own contributions to a situation involving the other person. Angry people also tend to attribute their anger to the personal characteristics of the other person while neglecting to consider situational variables that may have contributed to the other person's behavior. *Attribution errors* involve perceiving the actions of others as indicative of the "kind" of person they are, rather than the kind of situations that may motivate their behavior. To reduce attribution errors, a good place to start is with a simple question, "What's my part in it?"

*Consider an attitude adjustment.* There are several cognitive distortions and errors in thinking that can lead to negative emotions (Burns, 1999). *Absolutistic thinking* occurs when a thought is equated with reality. The underlying belief is, "If I think so, then it's so." This type of thinking leads to rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of emotional and

behavioral freedom. A little attitude adjustment can go a long way toward better emotional management.

*Be aware of your feelings.* People who lose their temper are often unaware of their underlying emotions until they reach the boiling point. Good emotional management requires increased self-awareness into the subtle nuances of emotions, including the ability to detect low levels of anger such as irritability. Accurate identification and appropriate expression of low-level frustrations can go a long way toward preventing the buildup of anger.

*Avoid emotional reasoning.* While errors in thinking can lead to negative emotions such as anger, negative emotions can also lead to errors in thinking. *Emotional reasoning* occurs when a feeling is equated with reality. For example, emotional reasoning occurs when a person assumes that a situation is truly negative (e.g., hopeless) just because he or she feels that way (e.g., sad).

*Be responsible for your emotions.* Forget thoughts like, "You make me mad." It may be more honest to think, "I am making myself mad." Focus on yourself rather than others. In other words, remember that you are the owner of your emotions, so take responsibility for your own feelings rather than blaming them on others.

*Quit trying to control others.* Inappropriate anger is often related to attempts to control others. Learn to accept differences in the opinions and preferences of others. Learn to take no for an answer. Rather than attempting to control others, focus on controlling yourself.

*Place principles before personalities.* Rather than reacting to someone else's personality, consider responding on the basis of your own principles. Base your behavior on foundational moral principles such as *beneficence* (doing good for others), *nonmaleficence* (avoiding doing harm to others), *honesty* (being truthful), *justice* (being fair with others), and *fidelity* (being faithful, keeping one's promises, and honoring one's commitments).

*Notice the early warning signs.* People who often lose their temper don't see any early warning signs because they usually don't look for them. Before exploding into rage, most people do subtle things like bite their lips, grit their teeth, roll their eyes, clench their fists, or make sighs. Noticing these warning signs gives you a choice. As you begin to identify your warning signs, you'll become able to learn earlier signs to help you break the behavioral chain of anger before you lose control.

*Use counting to increase your patience.* A hasty comment is often one that is later regretted. It is usually easier to inflict harm by saying something that shouldn't be said than it is by not saying something that should be said. Inappropriate comments can often be prevented by simply holding your tongue. If you don't know what to say, count to 10. If you do know what to say, count to 1,000.

*Consider the benefits of practicing of forgiveness.* Forgiveness can be defined as the process of letting go of negative emotions such as resentment and anger. The key to understanding how to let go is contained in understanding how we hold on to negative emotions in the first place. We usually hold on to resentment because of the *interest*—the payoff. In other words, we get something out of it, even though at the same time it is destructive to us. As long as there is a payoff for holding on to resentment, forgiveness is impossible. The investment in resentment ties us to the problem--and binds us to the person--through anger. When we lose interest in the investment, we can learn to let go of the anger. When we are able to let go of our anger, we have taken a step toward forgiveness. In this context, forgiveness involves letting go of anger. Forgiveness is a decision, which begins with the mind and goes to the heart. The benefit is primarily for us, rather than the other person.

### **Consider Changing How You Act**

When we cannot think our way into better acting, we may be able to act our way into better thinking. Psychologists have identified several behavioral strategies that can be helpful in improving our relationships with others. Using

effective behavioral coping strategies enables us to manage our behavior and express ourselves in ways that encourage others to respond positively (Novaco, 2000). The following suggestions may be useful in improving communication with others.

*Use proactive rather than reactive behavior.* Aggressive behavior is often reactive rather than proactive in origin. *Reactive* behavior occurs in response to the external behavior of another person, whereas *proactive* behavior involves taking the initiative by acting on the basis of internal principles within oneself. Whether through religion, counseling, or self-help reading, develop a set of principles to help you govern your behavior.

*Practice using assertive behavior.* Anger can sometimes build up when we do not speak up for ourselves when we are being harmed or when our rights are violated by others. Chronically angry people tend to either suppress anger, which does not allow resolution of emotions, or they tend to express anger aggressively. Rather than being submissive or aggressive, being assertive involves stating what we want in a clear and direct manner while taking into consideration the feelings and rights of others. When we act assertively, we take control of our actions and accept responsibility for ourselves while respecting the rights of others.

*Consider opposite action.* Sometimes our feelings can result in escalation of a tense situation. In such times, it is often helpful to consider the actions that are opposite of our natural response. Rather than moving toward, consider stepping back. Rather than standing, consider sitting down. Rather than talking louder, consider a lower tone of voice. Rather than puffing up, consider relaxing.

*Listen and learn.* Good communication is 90% listening. Limit your own talking, because you can't talk and listen at the same time. If you are thinking about what you are going to say next, then you are not listening.

*Avoid asking "why" questions.* In general, statements that begin with the word "why" are more likely to be perceived by the other person as

indictments or blaming statements. Instead of asking “why” questions, consider asking “how” questions.

*Avoid using “you” language.* In general, questions that begin with the word “you” are more likely to be perceived by the other person as accusatory indictments rather than communication facilitators. Rather than making “you” statements, which place blame on the other person, consider making “I” statements, which place responsibility on you.

*Avoid stockpiling resentments.* When feeling angry about a specific situation, some people tend to bring up a stockpile of resentments from the past. Throwing in the kitchen sink can bring up the other person’s defenses to a new level. Stick to the present discussion at hand, and avoid bringing up the past.

*Be responsible for your actions.* Forget comments like, “You made me do it.” Replace blaming others with taking responsibility for everything you say and do. You are the owner of your own mouth, so take responsibility for everything that comes out of it.

*Treat others with respect.* One of the best ways to be respected is to be respectful to others. When the other person is speaking, make eye contact, listen carefully, and don’t interrupt. Don’t sigh, make faces, or roll your eyes. Pass up opportunities to attack, insult, or criticize the other person.

*Offer no resistance when criticized.* When criticized, consider coping with the criticism by offering no resistance. In other words, avoid offering any hard psychological striking surfaces to the other person’s statements. Instead, agree with any truth in the criticism. Agree in principle with any statement that you can. In other words, become like a fog bank, which does not fight back or offer resistance to penetration.

*Let negative assertions work for you.* When criticized, there is a natural tendency to respond defensively by denying the matter or offering a counter-criticism. Instead of defending yourself, assertively accept those things that are negative

about you. In other words, accept any kernel of truth in what the other person is saying. If you are negatively assertive about yourself, you cannot be manipulated by the other person through feelings of guilt or anxiety.

*Respond by inquiring for more.* When criticized, actively prompt further criticism about yourself or the perceived wrongdoing by requesting specific information in a thoughtful, reflective manner. This response requires the use of radical acceptance rather than denial, defensiveness, or justification. *Radical acceptance* involves the conscious effort to not only accept, but also to actively welcome, any and all critical comments from the other person---no matter how odd, disturbing, or provocative they may be. Responding by asking for more negatives may decrease the potential for manipulative criticism on the part of the other person.

*Avoid the harsh startup.* When a discussion starts with criticism or sarcasm (a form of contempt), it has begun with what is termed the “harsh startup.” The most obvious indicator that a conflict discussion—and marriage—is not going to go well is the way it begins. Statistics tell the story: According to Gottman and Silver (1994, 1999), 96% of the time, the outcome of a conversation can be predicted on the basis of the first three minutes of the interaction. If the discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end with a negative outcome.

Consider using the gentle startup. Also known as a *softened startup*, this approach to dialogue is basically the way we treat guests—with courtesy and respect. It is basically the opposite of the harsh startup. According to Gottman and Silver (1994, 1999), the gentle startup involves six components or rules:

1. Start the conversation gently; it is okay to complain but not to blame.
2. Make statements that start with “I” instead of “you.”
3. Describe what is happening; don’t evaluate or judge.
4. Talk clearly about what you need in positive terms.
5. Be polite and respectful.
6. Give appreciations.

## **Be Aware Of Your Body Language**

In some situations, what we say is not as important as how we say it. Remember the proverb, “A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Proverbs 15: 1). In conflict resolution, *process* (how something is said) is sometimes more important than *content* (what is said). The process of communication involves how we speak with our body language. The following guidelines may be useful in monitoring how you are speaking with your body language.

*Maintain appropriate eye contact.* Glaring or staring directly at another person can be a subtle way of attempting to push, control, or pressure. Although it is generally a good idea to look at a person who is speaking, too much eye contact when responding can sometimes be perceived as intimidating. Good communication involves a balance between maintaining and restraining eye contact.

*Remember body posture.* To use a term in boxing, “leading with the chin” can be a way of inviting aggression rather than good communication. Although a raised chin adds to a dominant posture, dominance does not necessarily add to good communication.

*Be aware of facial expression.* An angry scowl can add fuel to the fire, whereas a simple smile can often defuse aggression. Have you ever seen anyone trying to express anger while smiling or laughing?

*Monitor voice tone, inflection, and volume.* A loud, sarcastic, or shouted response will raise the other person’s defenses. On the other hand, a well-modulated statement can be convincing without being controlling or intimidating. Talk slowly, quietly, and calmly.

*Minimize hand gestures.* Like too many exclamation points in a paragraph, over-enthusiastic gestures can be a distraction. Instead, good communication involves appropriate gestures.

*Avoid finger pointing.* Pointing or waving a finger at another person is a nonverbal indictment. Rather than pointing, stick to the point when talking.

*Avoid touching when angry.* As a general rule, it is a good idea to avoid touching the other person when you are angry. Otherwise, the other person is likely to perceive your gesture as pushy, controlling, or aggressive.

*Take a break when angry.* As a last resort, if you are about to explode, take a break until you can cool down and talk in a calm manner. However, simply walking away and slamming the door won’t work. Taking a break is different than running away. Calmly tell the other person that you’re too upset to talk, that you’d like to take a break, and promise to return when you can talk without losing your temper. Go back only when you are ready to talk calmly. Otherwise, you are just setting yourself up for another round of fights.

## **Practice Good Communication On A Daily Basis**

Good communication is more than using strategies and techniques. Good communication requires taking responsibility for your own feelings and behaviors. It involves increased self-awareness, learning new ideas, practicing through role-playing, and experimenting with new ways of interacting and communicating with others. By practicing these principles on a regular basis, you will be able to improve your relationships with others. While many people can learn better emotional management on their own, the process can often be facilitated by consulting a psychologist who has training and experience with these principles.

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