

DEALING WITH ANGER

DEFINING ANGER

Anger is not always what you think it is. Anger may be what you feel when you initially react, or it may be a secondary emotion that happens when the primary emotion is too painful to experience. Unresolved or unrecognized anger of all sorts is disastrous for relationships. It hurts those who receive it.

RECOGNIZING ANGER

Anger is expressed in many ways including quiet verbal attacks, yelling, physical attacks, and many sorts of passive-aggressive behaviors.

Passive aggressive means not meeting someone's needs or desires in ways you would have if you weren't angry. It could be not talking, "accidentally" forgetting to do something important for another person, "feeling sick" so you withhold sex, or not doing your share of the work.

Passive-aggressive anger is sometimes the hardest to recognize. Consider how often you withhold love from those close to you. Could you be reacting in anger even though that anger isn't overt? Because this anger is subtle and sometimes unseen, it can be dismissed and allowed to grow until it destroys a relationship.

So where does anger come from and what can you do about it? Anger is normally preceded by several events that can happen so fast, they seem like one, but if you are aware of the process, you can take steps to reverse it.

STEPS LEADING TO ANGER

When things don't turn out the way you planned, you can feel exploited, disrespected, unloved, unfairly treated, sad, or a myriad of other uncomfortable feelings. These are called primary emotions.

Anger, on the other hand, although uncomfortable for others, is normally much more comfortable for you than experiencing the primary emotions. Most men were taught not to experience those feelings from boyhood. Dad and other kids would "teach" you to stifle feelings with "don't cry, shake it off, and hit back harder." To make things easier on yourself, you skip over your real feelings and go directly to anger, a powerful secondary emotion. Anger is similar to drug and alcohol abuse as it medicates people to avoid unwanted pain.

ROOTS OF ANGER

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS are the basis of many problems with anger. For example, you expect people to never drive below the speed limit or always be on time, or you expect things to never break down. In spite of your experience, you act as if those expectations are realistic, and you are easily disappointed.

If you are realistic, you expect that sometimes you will get stuck in traffic, people will be late, and things will break down. Then when one of those events happens, you can say to yourself, "This is one of those times." There usually won't be a strong emotional reaction when the expected happens.

Being realistic isn't the same as being negative. Accepting difficulties does not mean you believe there is a problem around every corner. Life is neither perfect nor full of problems. Watch for unrealistic expectations you have in your relationships.

Now, let's step back and figure out where our unrealistic expectations come from. The generation born between 1979 and 1994 is called the "entitlement generation," and those born outside it many times find its views repulsive. However, for all of us, most of our unrealistic expectations have their root in entitlement. We believe particular events in our life should turn out better than they are turning out.

PAIN FROM PAST EXPERIENCES can provoke anger in a seemingly unrelated situation. One indicator of this cause is when you overreact to an event. Feedback from people around you may be more accurate than your own perception of what constitutes overreaction. The overreaction may indicate that you are still hurting about something. The hurt can be from unresolved issues with the person, but usually it is from pain you experienced as a child or a traumatic experience you experienced as an adult.

STEPS LEADING TO VICTORY

ACTION STEP 1: RECOGNIZE THE ROOT

If your anger is primarily based on unrealistic expectations, you need to base expectations on your past experiences rather than your current view. Make a short list of the things that can get you angry. Jot down next to each what expectation was not met. Was the expectation realistic? If not, make a note of what would be realistic. Take at least three minutes to picture the event happening again and you now experiencing it with a realistic expectation. The success you have when the event recurs will depend on how much time and energy you put into this step. If you start to get angry with an event, **STOP** and consider whether or not your expectations are realistic. Many times just making that mental switch will immediately stop the anger.

*EXAMPLE: You are on your way to an important engagement, like meeting a friend or getting to work. Several drivers are not driving intelligently which will prevent you from reaching your destination on time. You are upset! **STOP!** Ask yourself, "Is it realistic to expect that over 80% of drivers will drive in a competent and considerate manner? Is it realistic to expect those who drive poorly to do so at a convenient time?" If not, then say, "This is one of those inconvenient times when drivers are displaying their incompetence." Flipping this mental switch will be a tremendous help in dissipating unnecessarily strong emotional reactions.*

If your anger is tied to unresolved childhood pain, ask yourself: Did either of my parents or an older sibling treat me in a manner similar to the current situation? If your dad told you that you were stupid, you will react strongly to any implications of your lack of intelligence. If Dad always complained to you about Mom not doing the dishes, you will normally react with much stronger emotion to a sink full of dishes that you would have otherwise. When you are aware of the source of some particular pain suffered from caregivers you are able to take another step in dealing with your strong feelings.

No parents are perfect; all "abuse" their children in one way or another, many times simply out of ignorance. They may not have known how their actions or words would hurt a small child. Because you may not have understood the emotions you felt at the time, you bottled them up, and they may quickly turn to anger now.

ACTION STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE PRIMARY EMOTION

In order to keep anger at bay, as soon as you feel the first signs of it you need to **STOP**.

Say you have recognized that your anger was tied to unrealistic expectations, and you've already implemented step one above by changing your expectations. Now do your very best to determine what you are really feeling, because it is extremely rare for your primary feeling to be anger. This is harder for some than others. If you have a hard time feeling certain emotions, such as being sad, put down or overwhelmed, learn to identify those feelings. For a list of feelings see the [Feeling List links](#) below.

If on the other hand, your anger is related to childhood pain, you can use counseling, self-help, or both to address it. Several books listed below discuss this process. If you were able to complete the first action step and determine some sort of similar childhood event, you can mentally separate past from present.

EXAMPLES: A friend, Joe, has criticized you. Say, preferably out loud, "Part of my feelings stem from my dad calling me stupid so many times when I was growing up."

Your spouse has not done an expected chore. You might say, "Part of the reason I am upset at my wife Karen for not keeping the house clean is that my dad always complained to me that my mom didn't keep the house clean."

This mental exercise can help to immediately reduce the intensity of the current emotion.

ACTION STEP 3: EXPRESS THE PRIMARY EMOTION

Once you determine your real feeling, you need to express it. Being able to experience a broad range of feelings rounds you out as a person and is an essential tool in winning the battle against anger. If your feeling was precipitated by a person that you view as caring and safe, you can share how what they did “made” you feel. Say, “When you _____, I felt _____.” This does not blame the other person for your feelings. At the same time, no one can argue with your feelings. Every time you **STOP** and experience your real feeling, you won’t feel anger.

Even if your feelings don’t seem to fit the situation, you need to experience them, because they ARE your feelings. At the time these emotions overwhelmed you in childhood, you ended up being a victim, and there was no hero to protect you. If the person you are with is not safe to share with, then you should experience them privately. Spend some quiet time re-living those events. When you do so, visualize your adult self or Jesus standing up for the little child who was unable to stand up to what the caregiver was saying or doing.

[See note about experiencing feelings below.](#)

The final victory step is to share your feeling(s) with God in prayer. He understands. He has been through the pain you are dealing with. Tell Him how you feel. Then listen. Read in the Psalms how David cried out to God with his painful feelings. Read the blessings of those described in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). Hebrews 4:15-16 describes God as being on your side:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

SUMMARY

Notice that one helpful word in this entire process is **STOP**. When you are dealing with anger, you need to slow things down and determine what is going on. You need to let your mind rather than your emotions rule during those times. STOP and reset your expectations to realistic ones. If the angry feeling persists, STOP to determine what your true feeling is. If that doesn't work, you still need to slow things down so you are not ruled by your reactions. Anger can be conquered. The Bible says, "Man's anger does not bring about the kind of righteous life that God desires." (James 1:20) He has given you appropriate outlets for your emotions, and He will show you how to utilize them.

PERSONAL NOTE

I want skeptics to know how much I would have considered this all a bunch of rubbish years ago. My thinking was "I'm an adult now. I've forgiven those who hurt me in the past. Experiencing all those feelings is for women after all. If someone doesn't want me to get angry, they shouldn't do things that make me angry." So from a true skeptic, give it a try. Don't be controlled by your anger. Don't let your anger ruin your relationships. Don't pass it on to your children. Rule your anger by having realistic expectations and experiencing what you are really feeling.

EXPERIENCING FEELINGS

Some men may think that experiencing feelings is typically what women, not men should do. This is not true. Consider that someone shows disrespect to you. The natural response is to feel disrespected. A very emotional person may cry about it or be sad about it for a long time. They may feel the emotion deeply. You don't need to be over emotional. However, to be "healthy," you need to experience the natural result of the event, in this example, disrespect. If you may think that this feeling stuff is for sissies, consider this. It's easy to get angry, to medicate your pain. It takes strength and courage to feel an uncomfortable feeling.