

THE FOUNDATIONS OF EFFECTIVE ANGER MANAGEMENT: Where To Start If You Want To Change What You Do With Your Anger

Sometimes it seems like anger is all around us. We continually hear stories from the media about domestic abuse, road rage, gang violence, school shootings, and wars and genocide all over the globe. Unfortunately, this type of behavior is not so unusual in our society.

But is this really anger? I think not, after working with men, women, couples, and families since 1985 in my practice as a psychologist. All too often, we become very confused about what it really means to experience and express the emotion of anger. To change explosive, punishing, and disrespectful anger that has become a problem in your life, it is critical to understand what anger is and what anger isn't and to learn how to address anger that does arise in a more effective and respectful way.

Your anger does not have to be a destructive and hurtful force. It does not have to create shame and remorse, destroy relationships and intimacy, and create negative emotional and physical consequences in your family, on the job, in your car, with your health, or in other important areas of your life. Rather, it can be an energizing and useful force, helping you to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect, and assisting you in actually enhancing your relationships with others. The way it goes depends on how you actually address the anger that does arise in your day-to-day living.

Many clients who come to see me about their anger say that they want me to “get rid of” or “completely eliminate” all the anger that they feel. But that is just not the way it works. When hostile, cynical, and disrespectful thoughts and behaviors have been a significant part of your life, it is unrealistic (and perfectionistic) to think that you are, “all of a sudden,” going to become a “mellow” and “laid back” individual.

I have had many personal experiences with anger issues of my own throughout the course of my life. I will never be that “mellow” or “laid back” person. There will always be a certain intensity to the way I say and do things and the way I think about and experience my life. But what I have done, what many of my clients have done, and what you can also do, is to learn to recognize and handle your anger more effectively when it does arise. Developing this ability makes daily living a whole lot easier for you and everyone around you. This section is designed to give you some things to think about and some concrete ideas about how to begin to recognize and intervene in the anger you feel.

The place to start to modify what you do with your anger involves identifying the basic foundations of effective anger management. Building a solid house requires a good foundation. So does understanding and changing the way you experience and express your anger. Below are thirteen critical concepts that need to be understood and accepted if anger is to be effectively handled in your day-to-day life.

The 1st Foundation: Anger is a normal, natural human emotion and can, in fact, be a useful and important part of your life.

In reality, anger is an integral part of your humanity, absolutely necessary for your emotional and physical well-being. Anger is a fact of life and was part of our survival as a species in the distant past. How you handle your anger determines whether it will become a helpful or a destructive force in your life.

Anger can be appropriate and positive whenever it is expressed respectfully and effectively. The wonderful thing about your anger is that it can truly be a source of discovery for you. It can tell you that “something important is going on” within or around you that needs to be attended to. It can clarify and illuminate you who you really are: what you like and dislike; what your personal limits and boundaries are; when a “core hurt” from the past has been activated by a person or situation in the present; when something feels threatening to you; when you have compromised yourself in some way; or when an injustice has been done to you or to someone you care about.

Anger can also be a catalyst, a tool to promote assertiveness and personal empowerment, and a motivator when you use it to move toward effective and productive problem-solving, limit-setting, and conflict resolution. Anger can actually even serve as a “gift” to others when it is expressed effectively and can dramatically increase the potential for closeness in your relationships with them. This occurs because, when you respectfully share anger or any of the emotions you experience, you have taken the risk to become vulnerable with that other person. As a result of doing this, you have invited them into your “life space” to dialogue with you about the issue or situation that has triggered your feelings in the first place. This is the road to trust and intimacy in relationships.

The 2nd Foundation: Anger is NOT the same thing as hostility, cynicism, withdrawal, aggression, abuse, or violence.

This is an especially tough idea for many people to grasp, especially if you have grown up in a shaming and abusive family and/or experienced bullying, ridicule, and humiliation at the hands of others outside your family during your childhood (or if you yourself behaved in these ways with others).

One of the most important steps in learning to experience and express your anger differently is to break this mental equation that we often have between anger and abuse. Anger does NOT equal cynicism, hostility, aggression, and violent behavior, nor is it the same as a punishing emotional withdrawal like sulking, pouting, or ignoring someone else. The emotion of anger is not what I was talking about in the examples in the first paragraph of this section. Those behaviors are, in reality, distortions and perversions of anger, that very human emotion. Anger the emotion is, ultimately, significantly different from this.

The 3rd Foundation: How we express anger is learned, primarily from important people in our childhood.

Frustration does **NOT** automatically lead to aggression, despite much of what has been espoused

by “experts” in the past. More recent research clearly indicates that this is not even true in the animal kingdom, which is where this way of thinking originally arose. How you express your anger is not simply an “instinctual” or biochemically determined process. In fact, the most important part of how we express anger is learned. This is not to say that there are not genetic predispositions to depression, anxiety, irritability, and other emotional states. But how you express and act these out is often clearly related to what you have experienced in the living of your life.

One way to think about this learning process is to start to realize that the family where you grew up is literally like a laboratory where you learned how to be a human being. If anger was “acted-out” in a hurtful, punishing, or disrespectful way in the family where you were raised, you had powerful role models who essentially molded how you experience and express your anger and how you look at yourself and the world around you. The same is true of your experience with peers and others, even strangers, in your childhood. If you were picked on, ridiculed, or bullied as a child or if you did those things to others, you also experienced powerful messages about anger and dealing with other people. When you respond in ways similar to what you saw or experienced, you are living out a destructive “life script” that was written for you by the important people in your early environment. But this script isn’t “written in stone.” It can be altered. And you are the one who has the responsibility for doing just that. No one else can do it for you!

When you slow down and actually think about what you are experiencing and doing, you can begin to intervene in the escalation process that, for some people, all too often ends in disrespectful, punishing, or abusive behavior.

The 4th Foundation: Both men and women receive strong cultural messages about how to express anger.

Both men and women are programmed by their families and society-at-large to express anger in particular ways, although these ways are certainly changing some in recent decades, especially for women. In general, men are taught to become aggressive and lash out at others when they are angry. Think about masculine images on TV, in the movies, and in sports and business settings. What do many men in the movies do when they confront a difficult situation? They “kick butt!” And we often talk about men who are angry and assertive as “tough,” “strong,” “confident,” and “take-charge guys.” These sorts of family and societal messages invite many men to communicate their anger in hurtful, explosive, and disrespectful ways.

Women, on the other hand, are frequently taught to become passive and “polite,” withdraw from potential conflict, and “stuff” the anger that they feel. Women, in general, are expected to be the emotional caretakers in their relationships with partners and in their families. We saw above what we call men who are angry and assertive. What is the term we all too often use to describe women who are angry and assertive? It does not take long to think of the one word that our culture uses to describe that behavior in women. It is the term “bitch,” and it does not, in any way, have a positive connotation.

This does not mean that women do not get angry. They certainly do. Often, people who are consistently passive carry a huge reservoir of resentment and bitterness. In a study of 535 women ages 25 to 66 entitled *Women and Anger* (in the *Reading List* in this website), edited by Sandra Thomas, she

reported that women frequently get angry, most often at husbands and co-workers. She also found that, the younger a woman, the more likely she was to get angry and express it directly. In addition, she reported that women over 55 reported the least anger.

This also does not mean that women cannot be disrespectful and punishing. They can. It is not okay for either men or women to allow their anger to become demeaning, hurtful, and abusive with partners, children, or others. There are also anger management classes available for women based on the ideas and principles discussed in this website (and women can also use this website to begin to think about and address how they experience and express their anger).

The above stereotypes are certainly not accurate for everyone and, in many ways, may be changing at this time in history (e.g. women are now perpetrating more violence and committing more crimes as they become more “equal” to men in these and lots of other ways, many of which are very positive) but there is still some validity for these stereotypes for many men and women. It is helpful to be aware of how these messages may have affected you personally if you are going to do something different with anger that has become a problem for you.

The 5th Foundation: We need to be honest with ourselves about our anger and how it affects us and others.

Addressing anger effectively means that you need to do an honest self-examination about whether your anger is creating problems, for you or those around you. Denying that anger is a problem when it is actually taking a toll on your life and the lives of those close to you is never helpful and essentially stops the process of doing anything different and constructive about it.

Noticing how others respond to you when you are angry (e.g. do they “shy away” or seem fearful and intimidated around you?) and listening to others’ verbal feedback about how they are reacting to you (i.e. do people tell you directly that they think you have an “anger problem” or that they do not like how you are expressing your anger?) can be helpful “reality tests.” Often chronically angry people do not think much about how they are impacting those around them. It often appears that they just don’t seem to care much about how they are affecting others.

Being honest with yourself about whether you have experienced consequences like emotional distance and estrangement from those you love or the complete loss of important relationships, difficulties at work, and even legal problems can be another way to assess whether you need to do something different with how you experience and express your anger.

Finally, it is important to be clear about whether chemical use and mental health issues may be contributing to what happens with your anger. This does not mean that either of these “causes” your anger problem (they don’t!). But this does mean that it is critical to notice whether there is a connection between alcohol and drug use and disrespectful anger or whether there are underlying issues like depression or anxiety or personality traits (e.g. a sense of entitlement or a lack of empathy) that are part of what needs to be addressed in looking at your anger. If these issues do exist and they are not adequately addressed, little will probably change about how you handle your anger.

The 6th Foundation: Anger and all our other feelings are, ultimately, our responsibility.

No one “makes” you become explosive, punishing, or disrespectful. Others can certainly trigger and contribute to anger and other emotional reactions that you experience, but no one has the power to “cause” you to feel or behave in a certain way (with the possible exception of someone who is actually threatening your life). In fact, different people can experience very different reactions to exactly the same situation or person. And, the very same trigger that can create a powerful angry reaction in you on one occasion can provoke a very different and more positive (or at least neutral) response when you are feeling good about yourself and in a more “upbeat” mood. Your feelings come from within you and are a unique and complicated mixture of biology and your life experiences. Ultimately, you need to realize this and become accountable for the emotions you experience.

So often, we expect others to “fix” our feelings or “make us feel better.” And when they do not do this (because, in reality, they can’t), we then have even more reason to respond with frustration or punishing and explosive behavior. At some point, this process needs to stop. You will never be willing to handle your anger differently if it is someone else’s responsibility to do it for you.

The 7th Foundation: How we express our anger is ALWAYS A CHOICE!

It may sometimes feel like you are “completely out of control” and have absolutely no choice about how angry you get or what you do when you get angry, but the reality is that you are constantly making decisions, even if they are not apparent to you at this point in your life. I often hear from clients that they “*just saw red*,” “*were completely out of it*,” and “*didn’t know what they were doing*” when they acted out in a destructive and explosive fashion either toward others or themselves. But, in fact, you are continually making choices about how you express your anger and “**feeling out of control**” is very different from actually “**being out of control!**”

We all have “lines in the sand,” actions we won’t take no matter how angry we get. Many men with whom I work use the term “bitch” with their partners when they are angry, but not the term “cunt.” They are acutely aware, even in the midst of their explosive and volatile anger at the time, that the latter word is even more demeaning and derogatory to most women than the former (sometimes their partners have even told them this). Some people throw things but won’t pick up an expensive item like a TV or a computer and toss it on the floor. If they did this, it might mean quite an expense to replace. Some people, no matter how angry they are, will not grab, push, slap, or punch a partner. Think about whether you get explosive or disrespectful when you become angry at work or in a public setting like a restaurant. If you don’t, why not? Probably because you could experience some serious consequences if you allowed this to happen: you might get fired from your job and lose your livelihood or someone might intervene and actually call the police. Start to notice places where you may be handling your anger differently from your problem areas. You can build on this knowledge to learn how to handle it more effectively elsewhere as well. An important part of the process of change is to look for times when you are willing to handle your anger more effectively and respectfully. These can form a blueprint for what needs to happen in other situations where you want to do something different.

The 8th Foundation: Acting out or “ventilating” anger is not helpful in effectively addressing and discharging it.

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, it was common practice for mental health professionals to encourage angry people to strike pillows with fists and bats, hit punching bags and “bobo dolls,” all the while screaming expletives at the top of their lungs (some counselors still have people doing this today). Since that time, research has clearly disproved these methods as effective ways to help angry people learn to handle their explosive and disrespectful anger.

First of all, ventilation and catharsis (e.g. yelling, screaming, and swearing; acting out anger in a physical manner by throwing or hitting something) tend to increase rather than decrease our physical arousal level, making us more likely to respond with disrespectful anger whenever we perceive “provocations” by those around us. Secondly, these sorts of behaviors circumvent our abilities to think more rationally about what we want to do and essentially train us to lash out at others in an aggressive and disrespectful way. This sets the stage for volatile and explosive anger and abusive behavior to actually be directed at other human beings.

One of the most disturbing examples of the problems related to acting out anger in this way came when I was working with a domestic abuse client in the early 1990’s. He reported to me that he had used this “ventilation intervention” in the late 1970’s with a therapist who was supposed to be helping him learn how to deal with his explosive anger. The therapist had him go to his knees on the floor, pound his fists into a pillow, and yell and scream whatever came to mind as he was doing this. When I asked him how this process had seemed to work for him at the time, he responded by saying, *“I thought it worked great. In fact, I could actually see my wife’s face on the pillow as I punched the hell out of it.”* Keep in mind that, over a decade later, he was now court-ordered to attend domestic abuse treatment for an assault against his partner. He was actually being taught in his therapy to be explosive and abusive with his wife and others.

The 9th Foundation: We often lapse into ineffective and destructive patterns and “dances” when expressing anger.

All too often, we lapse into unproductive and damaging patterns and “dances” of expressing anger, especially with those who are important to us. Frequently, it may even feel like we are on “automatic pilot:” we react to something that has happened, the other person reacts to what we have said or done, we react to them again, they react to us again, and the process continues without much thought or awareness, eventually leading to hurt feelings and emotional distance in the relationship.

These “dances” may occur between spouses over issues like dividing up household chores, their sexual relationship, how to parent the children, one partner watching too much TV, a partner’s spending habits, or a partner “working all the time.” They could occur between parents and children over the kids not picking up after themselves, fighting and squabbling with each other, or not doing their homework. They could occur with co-workers over someone not attending to important job tasks that need to get done or a boss who tries to micromanage your work life.

If you think about it, expressing anger ineffectively in these “dances” is a lot like the relationship

between a puppet and puppeteer. When you simply react to that other person, someone else is “pulling your strings” and determining what you end up doing in a particular situation. You essentially give away your personal power to be who really want to be and just react to what that other person is saying or doing. Part of what is important to realize is that you can take a different “dance step” at any point in this “power struggle” process and figure out what makes more sense to you than simply repeating the same old interactions that go nowhere productive (taking a respectful time-out is an example of doing this). This allows you to identify and begin to follow your own “game plan” for who you want to be, which can often lead to more effective problem-solving and conflict resolution.

The 10th Foundation: Handling anger poorly can create significant consequences in many areas of our lives.

The potential consequences related to explosive or disrespectful anger are myriad and create enormous havoc in many peoples’ lives. In your family, you can create emotional distance; a decrease in trust, safety, and intimacy; and eventually even the complete loss of relationships with your loved ones through separation and divorce. Legally, explosive and abusive behavior can lead to involvement with the police, getting arrested, being put on probation, restraining orders, and even ending up in jail. On the job, disrespectful anger can lead to being suspended or put on “probation” for acting out at work, quitting jobs abruptly due to continually feeling hostile and dissatisfied, or eventually lead to even to getting fired. Socially, disrespectful attitudes and behavior can lead to feuds and grudges with extended family and friends and even to the complete loss of long-term connections with other important people in your life. Emotionally, volatile expressions of anger can lead to guilt, remorse, embarrassment, anxiety, depression, and even more irritability, which can then trigger acting-out behaviors like drinking too much, compulsive gambling, and sexual activities like having affairs or the compulsive use of pornography. And finally, don’t forget your physical well-being. Hostile and cynical attitudes and explosive and punishing anger can lead to significant health consequences, including headaches, back pain, gastrointestinal distress, chest pain, and even major cardiovascular events like heart attacks and strokes.

The 11th Foundation: Handling anger effectively can create self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, and the potential for trust and intimacy in relationships.

If you actually learn how to handle your anger and make it a useful and productive force in your life, you can end up feeling better about yourself and the people who are a part of your day-to-day living. By the way, they will also end up feeling better about you and the relationship they have with you. Another by-product of doing this is that you are able to generate a belief that you can truly handle what comes up in your life, no matter what the issue, problem, or conflict happens to be. That is a very empowering stance, since stresses and frustrations will continue to be a part of your life for as long as you are on this earth. The goal in life is not to completely avoid stress and aggravation but rather to learn to handle them more effectively when they do arise (as they always will).

The 12th Foundation: We can, in fact, actually change the way we experience and express our anger.

In both my own life and in my clients' lives, I have seen this happen over and over again. There is a myth in this culture that *"angry men (or people) can never change."* This is a lie. You do not have to stay stuck in the same old destructive ways of dealing with your negativity, resentment, cynicism, and hostility. The ultimate goal in effective anger management is to take back the power to be who you really want to be and to become a proactive player in your life rather than simply being reactive and allowing others to determine who you are, how you feel, and how you act. There is no mystery or magic to this process of changing who you have been. It is just plain hard work. But, if you open yourself to learning new ways to deal with your anger, you can be among those who actually make a difference in creating a saner, more peaceful, and safer world for all.

The 13th Foundation: Changing what we do with our anger is an ongoing and lifelong process.

There are no "quick fixes" when it comes to learning to deal more effectively with your anger if it has become an issue in your daily living and has negatively impacted your own life and the lives of those around you. The reality is that it takes conscious awareness of who you are and how you are responding to what happens within and around you and a willingness to expend the necessary time and energy to focus on changing the destructive habits you have developed from the past. As is frequently noted in Alcoholics Anonymous, the process of change related to abusing alcohol or drugs occurs "a day at a time." This is also very true for issues related to expressing your anger. If you have been an angry and hostile person, it is highly unlikely that you will somehow magically transform into that "mellow" and "laid-back" individual. But, with awareness, consistent effort, and hard work, you do, in fact, have the potential to dramatically alter your disrespectful and damaging attitudes and behaviors and live a much more satisfying and fulfilling life in the present.

A Final Thought:

If anger has created problems for you, start to question the ways you have previously thought about your anger. Consider and try to put into practice some of the ideas presented above and in the information that follows in this workbook. They can offer helpful guideposts for beginning to change how you experience and express your anger in the future. You have the power to acknowledge and get to know your anger so that you take charge of it rather than it taking over your life. Make a commitment to yourself and the ones you love to address your anger if it has become an issue for you. Doing this can literally become a life-changing experience.

SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:

1) Think about a time when you have been around someone who has been explosive or disrespectful in expressing their anger toward you. How did you feel being around them at that time? How did this affect your relationship with them in the future?

- 2) Think about a time when you have been disrespectful, punishing, or explosive in expressing your own anger. How did others react to you at the time? How has it affected your relationships with them?
- 3) What are you like when you become angry at this point in your life?
- What do you think about?
 - How does your anger feel to you?
 - How do you act when you get angry?
- 4) What sorts of things do you become angry about at this time?
- 5) What did you learn (i.e. what messages did you get) about experiencing and expressing your anger from:
- Your family
...From your father, your mother, your siblings, your relatives
 - Your time at school
...From administrators, teachers, classmates
 - Your time participating in sports activities
...From coaches, teammates, opposing players
 - Your time at work
...From supervisors, co-workers, employees
 - Your friends and peers
...Outside of school and work
 - Your religious background and training
 - Your time in the military (if applicable)
 - Your past and current partners
 - The media
...from radio, TV, the movies, video games, advertising, books, magazines
- 6) Think about a time when you handled your anger effectively. What did you do that was different from when you have been disrespectful, punishing, or explosive with your anger?