

Four Proven Techniques for Managing Anger

Many people in relationships struggle with managing their anger. Increasingly we find in psychological services that people seek anger-management to deal with their aggression. When assessing someone for anger management I often have to distinguish between abuse-management and genuine anger-management. Many people who are abusive to their partners do not have a genuine problem with anger, they have a more serious problem with abuse. Abuse grows out of a dis- respect or contempt for another person that is fuelled not by anger but by a righteous entitlement to oppress or diminish their partner for not being the kind of person they want.

While anger is a component of abusive behaviour, it does not cause it. Most abusive personalities actually have a high degree of control over their anger and only unleash it with targeted intent. In fact the most devious of abusive men is the ‘velociraptor’ of domestic violence – unleashing anger with a chilling self-control. In fact research shows that the heart-rate of a large percentage of violent men actually drops when in the midst of an aggressive conflict with their partners. So while they look like they are angry, they are in fact chillingly self-controlled.

However, if the problem is not one of abuse there are a number of techniques you can use to help monitor and manage your angry emotions and reactions.

The first step towards managing anger in our personal relationships appropriately is the identification of the mistaken attitudes and convictions that predispose us to being excessively angry in the first place! Once these mistakes have been corrected, we will be less likely to fly off the handle than we were in the past. These include the beliefs that

- *Others should give me what I want.*
- *If I am angry then others must be provoking me to feel this way.*
- *If others would just comply with my requests then I would not be angry.*

The second step is the identification of those factors from our childhood that prevents us from expressing our anger as appropriately as we otherwise might. These factors include fear, denial, ignorance and so on. These impediments to the effective and appropriate management of our anger towards others can be removed so that our suppressed anger will NOT compound itself inside of us as it has been doing for years.

For many people their childhood experiences can result in them developing a hyper vigilance against threat and a tendency to over-react to small provocations in order to prevent imagined bigger one’s. This person is already ready for a fight, always ready to defend him or herself, is always on their guard and let’s rip before the imagined attack of the other begins. A mother, for example, may find herself shouting and roaring at her children all the time because

- *she believes that the children should co-operate with her or else she bursts into anger following periods of depressive withdrawal herself as a mother.*
- *The anger is at the child who intrudes into her depressive self-soothing or entitlement to her time.*

I have noticed many angry mothers following the same pattern where their anger at their child rises up from the following:

ANGRY MOTHERS:

In recent weeks I have found myself working with a number of mother's that struggle with controlling their anger at home. In some cases this is very distressing for the children. It got me thinking on the different kinds of anger experienced by mothers who have a problem with their own frustration and rage. Very often their anger emerges with a triangle of experiences including inadequacy, helplessness, selfishness, and anger. Here are some of the more subtle issues at stake for some aggressive mothers.

- An anger with the child that exposes her inadequacy as a mother, that exposes her lack of empathy for her child. For example, a 4 year old boy who gets upset with his inability to master a task and needs patient encouragement. But his mother, who is unable to patiently teach and encourage her child, gives out to her little boy for being 'tired' and 'whingy'.
- An anger with the child that intrudes into her depressive withdrawal. For example, some mothers suffer from a kind of depressive negativity that requires that they withdraw from their children into a world where they pamper and soothe themselves. When their children naturally try to approach or break through that depressive withdrawal by acting up – e.g. the child that asks her a question during the soaps, the child that interrupts her bottle of wine at night, the child that seeks her attention when she has prioritised her own need for self-attention – the mother lets rip with foul mouthed anger and rage.
- An anger with the child that is by nature harmlessly un-cooperative. She, however, expects that the child should co-operate with her instructions or orders. Some mothers expect their little children to really be little adults and are constantly frustrated with their children's age appropriate need for teaching. They get frustrated that their children need to be helped focus on things and to persist with things. The mother screams at her six year old, who has got distracted from her task, "I TOLD YOU TO BRING THOSE SHOES UP STAIRS, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU". The child jumps with fright, brings her shoes upstairs, and lies on her bed crying while her mother fumes about downstairs at her siblings.
- An anger with the child that gets defiant with the mothers anger, thus allowing the mother to explode into rage. In this situation the angry mother provokes an angry defiance from her child which gives the mother the excuse to escalate her anger into rage. The mother's rage here has nothing to do with the child but has been bubbling underneath the surface waiting to explode. "NOW LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO" the mother roars at her child after she knocks over her coffee in her fit of rage.
- An anger with the child that she expects to be a little adult and able to understand what she needs as a mother. In this situation the mother

expects a form of empathy from her child that she never got from her parents. She expects her child to understand her emotional life and needs. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, CAN'T YOU SEE THAT MOMMY IS TIRED. JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!" roars the mother.

- An anger at the child by the mother who herself is a frustrated child who therefore competes with her child and experiences her child as a rival in trying to gratify her own needs. Mother roaring at her six year old; "Goddam it, why are you stopping me from doing what I want. Give me back the TV controls. Can't you see I am trying to watch the TV. Just get out. GET THE HELL OUT!"
- An anger at the child who is tired and cranky and needs her mother's soothing and encouragement. At the end of the day the child's needs begin to conflict with the mother's. The child who is tired, hungry, or irritable is so at a time when the mother is equally fatigued and fed up after a long day. A mother can explode into a rage when her needs are competing with her child's and the angry mother will frighten the child into compliance.

The third step is learning the appropriate modes of expressing our "legitimate" anger at others so that we can begin to cope more effectively with anger provoking situations as they arise in our personal relationships. When we are anxious or depressed in our relationships, we are often experiencing the consequences of our suppressed anger. The problem is that we have suppressed our anger so deeply that we succeeded in concealing it from our own selves! All we are left with is the residual evidence of it, our anxiety or our depression. When we are depressed, very often we are also angry at our self without realizing it.

Learning to appropriately manage our anger at ourselves is the antidote to much of alcoholism and drug abuse. But the management of our anger does not end in learning these new and more appropriate ways to express it. There remains one last step.

The fourth step in the Anger Management process is to bind up the wounds that may have been left by the potentially devastating emotional impact of anger. "Anger wounds" left in us against those who have wronged us. If we do not complete this mopping up step, we will cling to the resentment of having been done wrong and will carry the festering residue of our anger and rage in our hearts forever.

One of the most effective means of giving ourselves immediate relief from anger in our personal relationships is to forgive others. Many of us cannot forgive those who have trespassed against us. Something below the level of our conscious awareness prevents us from relieving our residual anger by forgiving the other person and we then carry a grudge in our hearts for thirty years! This unresolved anger poisons our relationship with our friends and loved ones. It even spoils our relationship with ourselves! We make our own lives mean and miserable instead of happy and full. Very often the feeling is, "Why should I forgive them? What they did was WRONG!" But, is forgiveness for those who only do us right? Most people have a hard time forgiving others simply because they have a wrong understanding of what forgiveness is! When you forgive someone, it does not mean that you condone or are legitimizing their behavior toward you. To forgive them means that you refuse to carry painful and

debilitating grudges around with you for the rest of your life! You are "refusing" to cling to the resentment of them having done you wrong. You are giving yourself some immediate relief from your OWN anger!

To forgive, then, is an act that we do on our OWN behalf.

It has nothing to do with "lifting" the other person's sin! You are not doing it for their sake. You are doing it for yourself. This is a choice you are making on your OWN terms in order to relieve your OWN pent-up emotions.