

Understanding and Managing Anger

By
Jay Uhler

Anger is an emotion, not an action. It is a form of energy. People fear anger because they associate it with violence. Anger is not violence. Violence is an action. Anger is an emotion. When we are able to make this clear distinction, we can develop a much better attitude about anger.

If we can accept anger in ourselves and in others, then we have more control of ourselves and we can have a different attitude about anger in others.

Anger as I am using it is an umbrella emotion that ranges from mild irritation to rage. It includes resentment and many other terms that connote anger. People often talk about frustration as anger, but it is a combination of anger and helplessness.

One reason that we are afraid of anger is that we associate it with someone getting hurt. Another reason we have difficulty with anger is that no one has taught us the skills to manage it for a positive outcome. Instead, we see a lot of people who mismanage anger in ways that are frightening to us. There are few models of how to express anger that leads to positive results.

The biggest difficulty with anger is that people often experience what they believe to be anger without knowing that there are other emotions under their anger. It is amazing how often the true emotion that is motivating them is fear, pain or helplessness, yet they are only aware of being angry. If you do not know that you are feeling helpless, afraid or in pain and you are experiencing anger, anger is what you will show.

Here are some examples that illustrate when other emotions are under the anger. We immediately get angry if someone cuts us off in traffic. Usually the underlying feeling is fear of being involved in an accident. When we are stuck in traffic, can't move and we need to be at an important meeting or want to get home to be with our family or are hungry and can't eat, the emotion that we experience is anger. Seldom do we realize that we are feeling helpless to get what we need. When we get angry because a friend betrayed us, we may be aware that we are hurt, but seldom do we recognize that the anger stems from the pain related to the betrayal.

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Why is this important? If we express anger, other people will usually attack or withdraw. If the underneath emotion is fear, pain or helplessness, to have the person withdraw or attack can make us feel more afraid, more pain or more helpless. If on the other hand, we express the core emotion, most people will respond by comforting us or attempting to assist us by meeting our needs.

It is much easier for others to address our feelings if we can clearly state our core feelings.

Each emotion is best managed in a different way from the others. If we deal with each of them as though they are anger, we will act as though we are angry and may do something we will later regret.

If we recognize our helplessness, we can stop to consider our options in the situation. Then we can act on them. If we are stuck in traffic, we may think that we have no options. Yes we do. We cannot move the traffic, but we can take deep breaths, we can sing or put on relaxing music if we have a CD or cassette player. If we are stopped, we can write something or think about a special project. That does not get us home more quickly, but it can make the time pass more quickly and it is more healthy than getting ulcers, hollering at people in neighboring cars or getting out of our car and punching someone.

Helplessness is one of the most difficult emotions to recognize. Often when people look angry, are having a "temper tantrum" or are "in a rage," it is because they feel helpless.

When a person is truly angry without helplessness, they will generally focus their anger toward a solution to the situation that is generating their anger.

An example: I came upon a group of people standing in a circle in the middle of a four-lane highway. When I stopped, I saw that a car was on its roof with a man still in it. I helped the man out through the shattered rear window, then organized some men to help push the car off the road into an empty parking lot. The proprietor of a fruit stand adjacent the parking lot came running out yelling, "Get that car out of my parking lot. You can't put that car in my parking lot."

I was angry that he was insensitive to the needs of the man who had been in the accident and ignored that another traffic accident could occur if we did not move the car. There was no fear pain or helplessness at that moment. My emotion was anger.

I responded, "I am a minister. I'm helping this man. We're putting his car in your parking lot.

He said, "OK" and helped us to push the car off the road and into his lot.

My anger was not violent. It hurt no one. Because of it, someone was helped and other people were saved from the pain of another accident.

Let us consider the effects of unexpressed anger. Anger can build intimacy in relationships when it is expressed in a positive manner. Unexpressed anger can smother affection for another person. To tell someone that you appreciate him/her and that your relationship with her/him is important to you, before you explain your anger, lays a foundation for a positive response.

"You are important to me and I need to tell you something that is bothering me so that it doesn't get in the way of our relationship. I am upset because"

The problem that occurs when we do not express our anger is that it builds up inside and festers. The anger begins to eclipse our affection toward the person. When we express our anger and it is received and discussed, it clears the air. Often there has been a misunderstanding or misinterpretation on our part, or a misstatement by the other person. These can all be clarified when we raise the issue for discussion.

Sometimes when we attempt to express ourselves, the other person will do more to anger us. The benefit of expressing our anger soon after an incident is that we get to know what the other person is like. If the person is mean or hurtful, we know to prevent future contact or know that we must find ways to protect ourselves from being mistreated again if contact is inevitable.

To look at anger from another perspective, it is important to recognize that when we are angry, we can choose to express kindness. Giving another person the benefit of the doubt can develop lasting friendships. To receive another's anger without responding with attack or withdrawal can allow them to get it off their chest and bring appreciation and affection for your acceptance.

When we have anger toward someone who is needy and vulnerable, we can choose to be caring. An example is a child who has done something about which we experience anger, but realize that the child did not intend to anger us and needs our affection, we can choose to give it. An older parent who has not responded to our needs when we were growing up, may need assistance when they become elderly. Even though we resent the lack that we experienced, we can choose to make their life easier for them now.

Let me summarize. Anger is an emotion that can be expressed in a variety of either negative or positive ways. To understand that when a person looks angry, they may be experiencing fear, pain or helplessness allows us to respond to them differently than if we perceive their anger as a threat and respond with fear of our own. When we let others know our core emotion, they can respond to it and comfort us, if that is our need.

When we understand that under what looks like anger in another person, we will respond to them differently if we know that fear, pain or helplessness is under what appears to be anger. Often when I have let another person express their anger yet stayed connected by truly listening without responding, the other person will run out of fury and begin to cry or decide to discuss the situation in an rational manner. It makes no sense to add fuel to a fire that is burning. It makes a lot of sense to let it burn itself out.

Let us now consider ways that anger can be constructive for society. To be angry about social injustice or when people who are vulnerable are taken advantage of can lead to constructive action to change social ills. Martin Luther King is an example of a person who chose to confront outrageous mistreatment of people in the United States and in Vietnam. Yet, he did it from the perspective of

love for all people—including being thoughtful and caring toward the hate filled people who perpetuated the violence toward others.

This is not righteous indignation, which often is arrogance, not righteousness. When a person is angry about injustice, it comes from a concern for all people. Those who perpetrate emotional and physical violence have violence in their lives—not peace. Love for all human kind comes from a respect for the sacredness of each person. We need to accept our anger that can motivate us to create positive change.

If we do not accept our anger, it will control us. We need to accept our anger if we are to take control of it. Then we can make decision about how to express it in ways that will benefit our life and the lives of others.

Best wishes to you as you attempt to learn new ways to address your own anger, and the anger of others.

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