

Making Anger Work for You

Anger is a difficult emotion for all of us, and as a result we often do not know what to do with it. This situation has not been helped by the media in magazines, newspapers and books that make confusing statements about anger.

We, especially women, are either exhorted to “hold it all in,” which could result in depression, anxiety or psychosomatic ailments, or we are encouraged to “let it all hang out,” only to find ourselves participating in escalating emotional, physical or verbal aggression and abuse.

Being in touch with our anger is vital to our emotional health. It is a signal that something is wrong with our inner and perhaps outer worlds. Either ignoring it or acting it out can be dangerous to our emotional and physical selves. However, anger can be used to our advantage. It can help us first recognize, then diagnose a troubling problem. Once we are aware, we can look for viable solutions.

What makes it so difficult for us to look openly and honestly at our angry feelings? Even in the happiest of families, anger is difficult to process, especially a child's anger. Most of us have experienced parents either ignoring our angry feelings or punishing us for them.

Root of problem

Most people grow up fearing they will lose parental love if they show anger. In dysfunctional families there are added fears of physical and emotional violence. Very few of us have had experience or early training in expressing anger wisely and effectively.

Furthermore, our childhood anger does not just go away as we grow up. It accumulates in us over time, coming out in many ways – sometimes in violent rage- but more often in an insidious manner that pushes us into developing character traits or habitual moods that constrict and distort our own “true selves.”

For example, it manifests itself in the person who is always smiling and never gets mad or the one who eats compulsively to swallow anger. Of course, there is the well know “passive aggressive” individual who expresses anger in indirect and infuriating ways such as being chronically late or constantly “forgetting” what he or she is told or promises to do.

Indeed, as a result of all of the accumulated anger from childhood, we find ourselves reacting to many situations (which are not inherently angering) as if they were enraging. Thus we lose our ability to judge and react appropriately.

Avoid Fruitless Rage

In order to effectively use our anger to redress unfair or hurtful situations, we must be able to distinguish the helpful variety from fruitless rage. Here are some pointers which may be of value:

- The greater the strength of an angry response, the more likely it is that we are responding to “old stuff,” not the present situation.

- If we find ourselves feeling chronically anxious and depressed, we are probably experiencing unacknowledged rage and need to explore the source of our psychic discomfort,
- We see repetitious patterns that we keep falling into with others that are frustrating, whether in our personal or professional lives. Often we may keep choosing the same kind of self-defeating situations or kinds of people who push our worst buttons, ensuring a perpetual state of rage and sense of grievance.
- We become so angry that we are flooded –unable to think or act clearly- on a fairly regular basis. Sometimes we even lose control and become verbally or physically violent.
- We feel “stuck” in life much of the time, unable to confront unhappy situations or relationships, either to attempt to change or leave them.
- We constantly have a “chip” on our shoulder, finding slights and injuries toward us everywhere.
- We find it extremely difficult, even impossible, to talk openly and directly to those with whom we are upset about anger.

Heavyweight Anger

If the above is true of us then, as one client expressed it, we are experiencing “Mike Tyson” rage, not manageable anger. We may need to explore that rage and the old pain that has provoked it in order to be able to deal with realistic anger in the present, effectively. Often, an experienced, empathic psychotherapist can help us to express and work through the past and the dysfunctional patterns that keep us in a constant state of rage.

However, if we can examine our anger realistically, we are then in a position to clear-headedly evaluate what we want to achieve and the risks involved, as well as the best strategies to pursue. In order to do this, we must first assess our options and their possible consequences, including a “worst-case scenario,” keeping in mind that losing our self-esteem just might be a greater loss than losing a job or relationship. Dr. Harrier Lerner calls this “deselfing” in her excellent book *The Dance of Anger*.

Non-Accusatory Statements

If we are able to face whatever risks and possible losses that could occur, we then need to decide what we want to communicate. Statements should come from a non-accusatory place, such as “I feel...,” rather than “You should...” or “You never...”

These need to be put forth in a calm, thoughtful and rational way, giving the other person a real chance to hear and understand our position. And if we are too angry to talk in a reasonable way, we should remain silent until we are.

A major rationalization we all use to avoid confrontation is to tell ourselves that “It’s not important” or “It won’t do any good anyway.” We fool ourselves with these dangerous lies.

While it is true that we may not always get what we want or feel is fair from another person, the act of asserting ourselves is almost invariably self-enhancing.

Remaining silent out of fear is always self-defeating. We need to remember that we want to effect change, not punch the other guy out in an impotent expression of rage.

The careful and honest expression of legitimate anger is a transforming and self-affirming experience that opens up new possibilities for ourselves and for those whom we challenge.