

Anger: What's All the Fuss About?

With all the stresses that college students deal with today, from financial burdens and final exams to dollar-eating vending machines and intercampus chaos, what's not to get upset about? Or perhaps you've had one of those steam-out-the-ears-atomic-bomb-dropping arguments that left you hating everything and everyone around you? If the answer is yes, then you have experienced "anger"! I know it may sound "bad," but quite frankly anger is not a bad thing. It gets a bad rap because it is often linked with violence; ironically enough, this occurs only 10% of the time. "How can anger be anything but negative?" you ask. Well, if you think about it, anger is often an adaptive response to some immediate threat to one's mental, physical, and emotional well being. Usually, people get angry because a specific need is not fulfilled. It can be a basic need such as food or shelter or a need such as identity, recognition, achievement and social affiliation. What's more, anger can energize and motivate us to overcome obstacles, solve problems and achieve goals.

So if anger is not a problem in itself, then what is? Ah, that my friend is the real question. The answer lies in the way that anger is handled. The problem arises when anger fails to be expressed constructively. When this occurs, anger can morph into an undesirable expression of emotion. Suppressing, or stuffing, your anger is when you hold in your angry feelings, stop thinking about it, and/or focus on something else. The reasons vary, but common reasons people give for avoiding confronting anger include: fear of hurting another person, thinking it is inappropriate to be angry, fear of being rejected, and/or not being able to cope with the emotional impact of interpersonal conflict. Suppression can be counter-productive because the anger is often expressed in another form, perhaps passive-aggressively, such as avoiding the person or constantly putting others down. Expressing anger aggressively is another way trouble comes into play. Anger externalized improperly can turn into outward violence, which can cause mental, emotional, or physical harm to others as well as the person who is angry. Expressing angry feelings in an assertive-- not aggressive-- way is thought to be the healthiest way to express anger. To express anger assertively, you must understand why you are angry in the first place. It is important to learn to clearly identify the unmet need and how to get it met without hurting yourself or those around you. Anger can be constructive when people frame it in terms of solving a mutual problem rather than only as a chance to vent their feelings. Constructive expression usually involves both people, not just the angry party. If you are angry with someone and they don't know it, or don't know why you're angry, that's not going to solve the problem now is it?

Strategies to Deal With Anger More Effectively

Examine the thoughts you have just prior to become angry

Ask yourself, "What am I telling myself about the situation?" Watch out for distorted thinking such as the following:

Mind-reading: inventing motives and making assumptions, such as, "He doesn't care about me."

Destructive labeling, e.g. "My boss is a jerk," can also perpetuate anger by focusing on negative characteristics without considering evidence that might lead to a different conclusion.

Magnification is exaggerating the significance of a negative event, such as, "My teacher gave me a low grade (and several high ones): he is so unfair."

Imperatives are rules on how you and others "should" act, such as, "I should never be angry with my kids."

Find more adaptive ways of thinking about the situation to neutralize intense anger

Gather more information. Acting on decisions that are based on incomplete information and/or not enough time to accurately appraise a situation is a major factor in anger that is destructive.

Look for alternate appraisals of the event when you are angry, such as:

- Exploring positive aspects of a person or a situation;
- Identifying other possible reasons for the person's behavior;
- Looking at "the big picture" rather than focusing on one relatively small incident.

Develop positive ways of approaching situations

- Accept the fact that problems constitute a normal part of life, and that it is possible to cope with most of these problems.
- Inhibit the tendency to respond either on the first impulse or to do nothing at all. When you encounter a problem, take a deep breath and say to yourself, "stop and think."
- Express your needs respectfully with the goal of resolving the problem. This includes listening carefully and developing empathy for the other person.
- Utilize humor, physical exercise or other enjoyable activities. Sometimes you experience minor irritants or problems that cannot be resolved, or the timing is not right to confront the source of your anger. Finding constructive ways to release your tension can help you to move on, or to
- deal more effectively with the source of your anger when the time is right.
- Seek help if you have difficulty handling your anger in a constructive and effective manner.

Reference:

Controlling anger before it controls you. Retrieved January 19, 2005, from www.apa.org