



Caregiver Support Line Audio Recording - Transcript

Series: Care for the Caregiver

Topic: Tempering the Tyrant: Finding Anger's Rightful Place

Hello. I am so pleased that you were able to set aside this time to listen to this presentation. We all know how difficult it can be to take the time to focus on you and your own needs, so we hope this presentation will be a worthy use of your valuable time. The topic for this presentation is, "Tempering the Tyrant: Finding Anger's Rightful Place"

In this group we will be exploring anger; the often avoided, denied, at times destructive, as well as actually quite purposeful, and useful, of human emotions. Anger is human; it is a natural, human, biological, response. Our anger serves the rightful purpose of alerting us when we need to protect ourselves or to make sure that we give voice to our instinctual needs being met. While anger can be a vital force for our own self-preservation, if ignored or not tempered, it can actually result in causing us harm or result in harming others.

What do we mean when we use the word temper? The word temper describes two very different states of being. It can be defined as a state of anger, such as when people describe an outburst of anger as a temper tantrum. However, temper is also defined as the ability to be composed, to exercise restraint or control. The word temper can be used to describe making something stronger or more resilient through hardship, such as to temper steel or glass in order to make it strong.

Interestingly, both meanings of the word temper encompass on the one hand, the fire of the angry emotion while it also describes the process of becoming composed, strengthened and resilient. These two meanings are what we hope to recognize and reinforce, both the natural, instinctual, purposeful existence of anger and recognition of the equally important need to temper this emotion.

We will discuss how you can clearly recognize the emotion of anger when it occurs and the differing signs you may notice when and how it is expressed. Finally, we will identify some of the skills that can help to temper this emotion. We don't want to ignore or deny this emotion rather we want to learn to channel this passion, energy and protective emotional mechanism to serve its rightful purpose of defining what is important to us and as a protective force for ourselves and our loved ones.



Let's begin.

The ability to recognize and manage feelings of anger is important for all human beings but may be especially important for Caregivers. Why is it so critical to Caregivers well-being to recognize and cope with anger? Caregivers are often managing the very taxing demands of caring for another's needs and this can begin to deplete the Caregiver of their own needs being met. When our needs are not met anger will warn us that we are not getting our needs met. We know that Caregivers as a group run the risk of becoming worn down by the demands on them. Caregivers in need of sleep, supports, comfort, fun and relaxation, finances or free time, among many other needs are naturally at times going to become depleted. Your angry feelings may be alerting you that you are in need.

Caregivers also are more likely to find themselves in the difficult bind of feeling they have no right to be angry or frustrated, nor the right to voice this when their loved one is also suffering. It is a source of real conflict when your loved one is struggling and you are doing your best to meet their needs but are in need yourself. You are human, and no matter how much you love someone, your needs for care will also come into play. It is not a reflection of your love or a flaw in your character that a part of you inside is frustrated, angry, impatient, or annoyed, when many of your needs are left unattended.

Understandably, tempers are more likely to flair when attempting to balance the conflicting demands of caring for you and the Veteran, especially if the Veteran is also struggling with their own anger and frustration. Furthermore if the Veteran is not able to temper their own anger and the Caregiver is chronically exposed to an intense or angry environment, it is even more critical to find tools to help you manage without becoming destructive to you or the Veteran.

Recognizing anger as a simple, understandable human emotional response or warning sign is the first important step towards caring for you. Finding anger's rightful place is what we hope to explore in this presentation. How do you come to notice and respect this red flag of anger that is alerting you that you are in need or are threatened? Once you are aware of the anger then next you will want to sort out what is that is threatened or what it is that you need. Finally, how can you temper this powerful emotion, work with this force of energy to take wise and rightful action on our own behalf?

All of our feelings really only emerge in relation to our needs being met or our needs not being met. Our feelings are a reflection or an indicator of a need being satisfied, frustrated or unmet. We are sad when our need for closeness or affection is interrupted by the loss of a loved one. We may feel happy when our spouse meets our need for



appreciation by noticing how nice we look in our new outfit. Anger is no different in the respect that angry emotions surface when your needs are being frustrated or threatened in some way.

So for example, let's say you have been waiting all week to have a daylong visit with a friend and the person providing care for your Veteran cancels at the last minute. Would you potentially feel angry? Of course, you might be angry, because this person just interfered with a need of yours being satisfied. Or for example you finally fall asleep after a long day of caregiving and you're awakened by your loved one who needs you, might you feel angry? Absolutely! It is a completely normal and natural reaction to have. Can you imagine feelings of anger if someone walked into your house uninvited? Of course, you may feel angry as it is threatening when a boundary is crossed. We have personal physical and emotional boundaries, and if those boundaries are crossed or not respected you may feel anger rise to the forefront.

There are many scenarios one might imagine that have the potential of inciting anger when needs are frustrated or unmet, or when our safety or boundaries have been threatened. These feelings serve a purpose. Angry feelings are a warning sign, trying to get us to pay attention. Anger stirs energy and prepares us to stand up and take care of ourselves.

Given that angry feelings serve as a warning, alerting us to something important, you wouldn't want to ignore or try to deny that warning. Noting it, recognizing it, paying attention to it is important if you want to take good care of yourself. If you don't notice it you won't be properly responding to a danger or properly protecting yourself from being taken advantage of or exploited. If you try to deny or squelch this feeling, by tucking it away, you are tucking away an energy that has the potential to eat away at you or cause you to become depressed or defeated.

Anger is a powerful emotion and is a force intended to alert you and engage your efforts to care for yourself and to care for whom and what matters to you. It is an energy that can be channeled into powerful and positive action. Anger may be the fire that bolsters you to fight for what matters. For example, you may have felt your rights were not protected and you fought for justice. Maybe a friend borrowed some money and didn't pay you back so you respectfully confronted them and negotiated a pay back. You may have wanted better medical care for your loved one and you became a strong advocate. There are many small and large ways that one may purposefully bring the recognition and energy of anger to finding a productive solution or to set a protective boundary.



The first step in managing your anger is to notice it. How do you know when you are angry? How might you notice that you have been ignoring the warning signs and swallowing your angry feelings? Do you notice or are you aware if you are recklessly acting out your anger in an aggressive fashion? How do you express your anger? Are you more prone to passively swallowing it or are you more prone to blowing up and acting out? How would others know you were feeling angry? How do you act? Do you get loud, or silent, mean or cold; do you withdraw, stuff it away and get depressed? Are you someone who screams and shouts, swears and pounds your feet?

Humans like animals exhibit some common expressions of anger; for example; make loud sounds, attempt to look physically larger in their stance, bare their teeth and fix their stare. These instinctive behaviors are meant to warn aggressors to back off. We also experience some physical responses such as increased heart rate, blood pressure and increase in adrenaline that is meant to help us prepare to fight off a threat.

There are a number of physical, emotional and mental experiences that you may notice when feeling angry. You may notice your face get flushed or red/hot, or your hands clench or your teeth clamp down, you may notice your muscles tense or tighten, you may raise your voice, or stomp around pounding your feet, you may feel like you are going to explode with a rush of adrenaline, you may talk louder, faster or use profanity or swear. You may have difficulty thinking clearly when you are angry or become narrowly focused on the source of your anger and as a result lose your objectivity or perspective.

Think about this past day, were there times that you noticed feeling anger? Maybe you noticed some version of anger like feeling frustrated, annoyed, aggravated, furious, enraged, impatient, and irritated. Do any of these sound familiar? In the past day or week can you identify an angry red flag that you noticed and paid attention to? Bring your attention now and remember that moment of awareness that you felt angry. What occurred that caused this feeling to spike to the surface?

Bring your attention to this time for just a moment and try to observe as if you are behind a camera watching your reaction. How did you express your angry feeling? What would the camera see? Were you red in the face, gritting your teeth, raising your voice? Did you silence and swallow your frustration or did you blow up? Maybe you took a deep breath, calmed down and decided what you needed to do. Think for just a moment about this situation and how you expressed it. Think about the feeling of anger; what prompted it, how you expressed it, and what the camera would show.



You may express your anger in a passive manner. When you passively express anger you are actually swallowing the energy, silencing your voice, withdrawing, or diverting the anger into sarcasm, judgement, or criticism. Indirect or passive anger may appear as giving the cold shoulder, showing no feeling, shutting down, the silent treatment, avoiding conflict, becoming overly critical, or overly apologetic, or secretly sharing resentments by gossiping behind people's backs, or brooding and withdrawing from life and others. Passive anger certainly has the potential of harming an individual's energy, their overall mood and their relations with others.

Why is passive expression harmful? Some may feel that it is a virtue to keep anger in as if they are above having such gritty emotions. A superior attitude does not negate the fact that you are human. You will instinctively have angry feelings, no one is above it. Trying to avoid, deny, or silence this feeling does not make it go away, rather this burning energy is carried inside. This store of unresolved energy has the potential of impacting your health, stressing your immune system, raising your blood pressure. The unresolved angry energy can result in becoming depressed, anxious, and can drain your own life force attempting to make the anger disappear.

On the other side of the continuum, you may notice that you tend to express your anger outward or aggressively. Aggressive expression of anger may be displayed outwardly; in bullying behaviors, threatening, blaming, refusing to listen, finger pointing, name calling, shouting, slamming doors, reckless driving, unwillingness to forgive, destroying objects, or becoming physically violent. Acting out expressions of anger also has many negative effects both on the person that expresses in this way and also for those that happen to be the target or in the path of this kind of behavior.

When acting out in the heat of anger, your objectivity or perspective is off, meaning you're not altogether fair and logical. You may use your words as weapons and potentially permanently harm others with words fired off in anger. You may use your anger as a weapon to intimidate, to harm others or to get your own way. When you act out in this way, you appear out of control and as a result, your own self-respect and the respect of others suffer. Certainly your physical wellbeing, and others wellbeing, is at risk when acting out this way and places significant wear on your overall health.

Often anger and its aggressive expression is the result of the person feeling out of control or vulnerable. Expressing anger in an aggressive manner can be a way to return a sense of power or control to the individual who is feeling out of control or vulnerable. Puffing yourself up in anger can give the false impression of power and control but actually behind this facade most often is someone scared of losing



something important or afraid of losing control. It could be you act out aggressively if you are lacking confidence, fear losing another's love, or feel vulnerable because you don't know something, or fear how things will turn out. Sometimes these outward fits of anger can in fact work to get needs met by force, getting others to give in and go along out of fear.

On the other side of the continuum the person who passively expresses anger by withdrawing may do so to seek safety, if they fear their own angry feelings, or they fear how others may react if they do express they are angry. By withdrawing however the individual begins to disappear, their voice is silenced and their energy is caught up in trying to keep their feelings at bay and in doing so become depressed and devoid of their life energy.

Passive anger can also be used as a ploy to get control or to get others to meet your needs. For example, withdrawing, not speaking, or giving the cold shoulder can be very threatening to others. Distancing and silence can send a very powerful hurtful message to others about whether they are still in your favor or still connected to you. Passive anger may be expressed by purposefully interfering or undermining someone's efforts, or passively withholding giving of yourself. These are quieter, so to speak, expressions of anger, but no less powerful in sending a message.

Both the aggressive expressions of anger as well as the passive expressions have potentially very detrimental impacts both on the person who expresses anger in this way and to those who are impacted by their anger.

The first step again is to at least notice when you are angry. Notice what you look like and physically feel like when you are angry. How do you act? If someone were observing you in that moment, what would they see? Would they see someone acting out aggressively or someone passively swallowing the feeling? What happened that sparked this response in you? What need were you trying to get met? How were you feeling threatened?

Finding this balance of acknowledging the angry feelings and tempering them into a productive force is the challenge we will now turn our attention to.

How can a Caregiver, who may be pressed to the limit, find the composure and restraint to be thoughtful, and purposeful when angry feelings surface? Let's face it human beings are more able to be reasonable when they are not emotionally, physically and mentally spent. How do you remain reasonable when you are tired, fearful of the future, worn down from focusing on another's needs, impacted by the unpredictability of illness



and constrained by another's care needs? Under such conditions Caregivers are challenged like no other when attempting to temper their angry feelings.

What does it require to succeed at tempering this anger, either not swallowing it or acting it out aggressively? Both of these options describe a reaction as opposed to a thoughtful productive action. How do you keep yourself from lashing out, saying or doing something you regret because you are angry? How do you encourage yourself not to withdraw and shut down when you feel angry but rather stay in the game speaking up and out respectfully? This is no easy task for anyone. If you are able to act instead of react you will have that feeling of strength and resilience that comes from being empowered to speak up and protect yourself, while not harming or diminishing anyone else in your attempts.

Where do you begin, you might ask? While it may seem obvious, it really does start by paying attention to yourself, noticing your feelings, recognizing what you need and taking responsibility for it. You want to find a way out of the trap of blindly reacting and find a way to heed this warning call of anger and transform it into positive action.

Caregivers can find it especially difficult to keep proper attention to their own feelings and needs as they are focused on others. Proper attention doesn't mean being selfish or self-centered, it means actually just noticing how you feel, what you need and then properly caring for it.

Another benefit when you pay attention to yourself is that you can get some perspective. You get perspective because you are observing yourself and observing what is happening around you. This skill of observing as opposed to mindlessly reacting will be a vital skill needed when you are angry. As was mentioned earlier, when you react in the heat of anger there isn't much perspective or much thinking for that matter. The mindless reaction of either passively withdrawing or aggressively acting out does not contribute to any positive outcomes. So the trick is how you can hold off the reaction long enough to get some perspective so your actions are thoughtful and balanced. How many times have you swallowed your angry feelings and didn't express what you needed or stand up for yourself, reactively withdrawing from your anger? How often have you launched into a tirade or reacted aggressively and then regretted it after the damage was done?

You may wonder how you can interrupt this pattern of simply reacting. Well first, if you are paying attention to yourself you will begin to notice what is happening for you and most especially, you will begin to notice that moment, even in the heat of anger where you can decide to pause, stop the reaction, and step back. It may take practice but



finding that deciding moment and making the decision to step back is available to you. This holding off, getting perspective, bringing your reflective thinking into play is the cornerstone of shifting from a destructive pattern of managing anger to the tempered wise positive outcomes that will benefit you.

There is one simple very powerful and effective way to at least put the reins on when anger has a hold on you and that is to breathe. Seem too simple? Try it. Notice the next time that you get angry, what happens to your breathing? I bet you will not be breathing deeply, deep enough to make your belly stick out because when you are reacting in anger, either passive or aggressive reactions cause your breathing to constrict, or become shallow. Does it seem silly to think that just taking a few very deep breaths could alter things, could give you that moment to slow down and get perspective, well try it and see for yourself if it helps?

Finally, we want to suggest communication tools that can be of help when you are clear and calm to communicate your distress and advocate for yourself. Communication skills at times when you are angry can be quite challenging. It can be so easy and tempting to get into a battle and so critical to choose your words and use restraint in your communications when angry.

The first recommendation would be to hold off or limit the communication if you feel too upset for good perspective and too tempted to lash out. It may be better to stop, calm down, take a breath, and get some space. I know it isn't easy but the benefit of restraint will pay off for you.

Next, it is important to remember that anger is your warning sign that you are feeling threatened or a need of your is not being met. I emphasize the "you" part because it is so easy to get into blaming others for how we feel or blaming them for not meeting our needs when the only one who is responsible for taking care of your safety and your needs is you. It is up to you to take care of your own needs and up to you to set limits and boundaries. If you don't agree with or like the way someone is treating you, you have the choice to get your needs cared for some other way.

What you can do is communicate clearly and provide the best opportunity for others to hear, respect and respond to your anger. A method of collaborative communication was developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960's. The 4 components in this model include stating; what you observe, feel, need, and request. Each of these components are spoken from your perspective, or are "I statements", meaning you are describing you, not what someone else is doing or causing. This part is important because you are not attacking the person you are speaking up for yourself.



So, the first component describes what you observe just the facts of the event, what happened, what you saw, without evaluating or judging the other person. So for example your relief person arrived late, you would say, "When you arrived late today". You are stating just the observable facts.

The next component is stating your feeling. Stating your feeling means a one-word description such as angry, annoyed, or frustrated. Be careful not to use action words such as disrespected or abused, as they actually are assuming what you think someone is doing to you. For example if you say, "I felt taken advantage of when you arrived late today" you are not stating a feeling you are describing what you think the other person is doing, taking advantage. So for example, using the past observation we may say; "When you arrived late today I felt angry." State your feeling as a one-word description of you not what someone is doing to you.

The next step expresses the need that you have that triggered the feeling. So for example, you may need to get out of the house and the late arrival set you back on plans so your statements describes what it is that you need, "When you arrived late today I felt angry because I really needed time out of the house and had appointments I needed to get to"

The final step makes a request of the person. This request should be something you want them to do and also assumes that they have the right to agree or not agree to your request. This isn't a demand it is a request. So for example "When you arrived late today I felt angry because I really needed time out and had appointments I needed to get to, would you be willing to stay a bit later today?"

To recap, the communication includes factual observations of what you have observed, and heard. Next, a one-word feeling, remember, a feeling not your thoughts or assumptions about what someone else is doing. Then describe the need that you have that prompted the feeling. Finally, what it is that you are asking for or want from the person? Now again it may feel awkward when you first try using this format but it does get easier with practice and can be especially helpful when you are trying to negotiate the troubled waters of communicating anger to another.

We have covered a lot of ground today and want to take a breath and just review again the points we hope you will carry with you after the group today. Anger is natural. Anger is a human response to feeling threatened or having your needs frustrated. It is a warning sign to pay attention and to alert you that you are at risk. It is essential to your self-care to heed this warning sign and to find ways to care for it without reactively swallowing it or aggressively acting it out. Taking care of anger includes, paying



attention to it, finding that moment to decide not to react, slowing down and taking a breath, building skills of observation and perspective. Finally, communicate using the non-threatening format provided stating the observable facts, what you feel, need and what you are asking for or requesting. Using the identified communication skills will give a fair and balanced voice to your feelings, needs, limits, and requests.

Incorporating any of these tools will make progress towards your self-care. It is a process to make changes in these areas so take a bit at a time. You deserve to pay attention to yourself. Your wise and purposeful voice deserves to be heard. Your energy to fight for yourself and others can be tempered into a force for good both for you and for others. We hope that our group today has played some small part in encouraging you along the sometimes rocky path of caregiving. We at the Caregiver Support Line are here to support you in this journey forward.

I hope you found this presentation a worthy use of your time. Thank you for listening. If you are a Caregiver of a Veteran and would like to discuss any of the ideas offered during this presentation, I invite you to contact your local Caregiver Support Coordinator. You may also contact a social worker at the Caregiver Support Line at 855-260-3274. Thank you for all you do.