



Extinguishing the Fire: Managing Angers Destructive Potential

Anger is a tough and unpleasant emotion we all feel and show from time to time. It is a natural response when you feel threatened in some way. Anger signals you to pay attention to what is happening both within yourself and with others. It may be a warning sign that you are getting hurt or being violated, your needs are not being met, you are giving more than you are receiving, or you are not addressing an emotional problem in your life. Anger is a feeling worth paying attention to. Unfortunately, there is not a how-to manual for anger and there are not always good role models to demonstrate productive ways to manage, cope and learn from anger. As a result, we don't always use our anger effectively. Experiencing anger does not mean you have done anything wrong, just as if you experienced sadness, it deserves your attention and is a valid and normal emotion.

You may have learned unproductive ways to deal with anger from those around you growing up without realizing it. For example, you might have had a father who yelled when he wanted something done. Or you may have had a mother who ignored her anger and whisked it away and tried to pretend it was not there. As a result, you might lash out at others when a need is not met, or you might be very passive when it comes to expressing your anger, or many variations in between. It is important to take note of the environment you grew up in and how those around you dealt with anger because it undoubtedly has played a role in how you manage your anger today.

Anger is important to pay attention to when you see it coming from yourself or another person. Unlike yourself, you cannot control someone else's anger or how they will react when angry. What is in your control is noticing and paying attention to anger warning signs both for yourself and from someone else so you can manage it best. Signs of anger can include things like a clenching jaw or clenching your hands into a fist, talking louder or faster, getting visibly agitated such as a flushed red face, intense eye contact, and furrowed brows. It is helpful to be able to identify when anger is happening in order to keep yourself and others safe, both emotionally and physically, to prevent negative consequences.

Let's be clear, it's normal to get angry and there are not any negative consequences unless it is acted out or experienced destructively. It's when you feel angry often or experience chronic anger that this becomes a problem. Chronic anger



can wreak havoc on your life. There are a variety of health concerns related to chronic anger such as high blood pressure, weakened immune system, digestion issues, fatigue, insomnia, and headaches. Chronically stuffing angry feelings as opposed to venting it in a productive way can also cause emotional problems such as depression and anxiety. Chronic anger and lashing out at others, or bottling up your feelings, may destroy your ability to maintain loving relationships, leaving you feeling isolated. Does this sound familiar to you? If so, how is your chronic anger impacting the various areas of your life: school, work, relationships, physical and mental health?

Remember, anger is a normal emotion there to tell you to pay attention to what you need. Caregiving for another can result in feelings of frustration and anger when you don't have the time to care for your own needs or the demands or stresses on you become overwhelming. For example, you may be angry when you have so much to do in a day with little to no time to shower and eat. You might be angry when you try to enlist the help of family members, but no one follows through on what they said they will do. You can become quick tempered when under a lot of stress or when your needs have been neglected. Pay attention to anger's warning signs and consider how you need to take care of you. The problem with anger occurs when you stuff your feelings or when you communicate your anger in ways that end up hurting you or hurting others.

There are many ways that someone can direct their anger. Today we will talk about different ways in which anger can be expressed and provide some tools to help you manage yours and others' anger more productively. We will discuss how to manage if you are the person on the receiving end of someone's anger as well as curbing your own impulses to act out destructively. Can you think of a time when you expressed your anger when it was not productive? How can you tell when the way you express it is productive? We each have somewhat predictable ways of managing our anger; what is your pattern?

OK, let's begin to explore some of the ways in which you or others may act out angry feelings in a destructive way. Acting on angry feelings can come in many forms. You can act out your anger destructively by being demeaning, yelling, becoming physically threatening or violent, and by withdrawing or giving the silent treatment. Let's look at each of these destructive behaviors and alternative ways to cope.

Let's start by exploring demeaning behavior. Demeaning behavior is when someone acts out anger by criticizing, insulting or name calling, and this results in diminishing someone's dignity or respect. Have you been demeaning when you felt angry with someone? Do you notice when you're being demeaned or being put down?



What is the impact on you? Does it result in you feeling insecure, scared, unworthy? Does it result in you losing confidence or questioning your own abilities? Maybe you realize that as a result of such criticism, you become depressed. Or do you tend to react to such insults by lashing out in return with your own angry put downs?

How about yelling? Just because you feel angry, does that give you the right to yell at someone? Yelling sends a powerful message. Yelling can intimidate others or send a message to back off or that the situation is dangerous. Yelling at someone not only intimidates, it sends a message that you are intending to hurt or diminish the person. Yelling can be a release of anger, but it can also further ignite the flames of anger making it even stronger. Yelling is not productive, especially when it is directed at someone else. Unfortunately, everyone has moments when their anger causes them to lash out by yelling at someone else, especially someone they love. This impulsive reaction to anger can leave you and others regretting their behavior later.

Having someone yell at you or demean you is stressful. You may feel hurt, powerless, shocked, confused, or angry in return. You may feel scared and want it to just stop. When this happens, are you the type of person to immediately yell back to defend yourself? Do you stay quiet during the shouting? Do you leave the situation? Do you become sad or scared?

What can you do if you find yourself in a situation where someone is yelling at you? First, resist the urge to yell back. Yelling back is never helpful and usually creates a more emotionally charged situation. Second, find a way to calm down. It may be tough to stay calm and not react back with yelling. You might try taking some really deep breaths to calm down. If you stay calm you will be more able to keep your perspective and then be able to respond in a productive way to the other person. Staying calm sends the message that you are a safe person, and this will help prevent the situation from escalating further.

Third, set limits and boundaries. Although you cannot take away someone's anger in that moment as much as you want to, you can set limits about how you are spoken to or treated. For example, when your loved one yells at you, you want to calmly set a boundary. For example, you may say "please lower your voice, I am here to help you and I'd like to understand what's causing you to be upset." In doing so, the goal is they hear your limit setting and take a moment to reflect on their anger and then continue to communicate their needs without yelling. If they do not stop yelling after you've stated your boundary, it is important to set another boundary. You could say something like, "Since you're not willing to lower your voice, I'm going to go downstairs



and give you some time to calm down, I'll come back in a little while when you're not yelling."

Fourth, leave the situation. Physically leaving the situation sends the message that you are not going to tolerate being yelled at and if that means leaving the room completely then that is what you will do. It is likely the person will stop yelling if they no longer have an audience to hear it and watch them. If you return to them still yelling at you, continue to verbally restate your limits, "I can see you're still upset, I'm here to help, but if you continue to yell, I will leave the room again until you're able to talk calmly" and be sure to follow through with your limit.

Also, keep in mind staying silent when someone is yelling at you sends a message as well. Staying silent conveys that you are accepting being yelled at. It is not anyone's responsibility to absorb another person's anger. You may have provided some leeway when someone you are caring for or someone you love is yelling out of frustration or in pain, but it is important to not make a habit of accommodating this behavior because it can send the message over time that you are willing to tolerate being treated in a destructive way.

Now let's talk about if you are the person who is yelling. Being in a caregiver role, undoubtedly, you have experienced anger yourself and it may have escalated to the point of yelling at your loved one. The first thing you want to do if you are the person yelling is to recognize that this is happening. In doing so, notice your body's anger cues such as feeling hot, sweating, racing heart, or foggy thinking. Try to observe yourself from a bird's eye view. Also, take cues from your loved one, such as if they are looking upset, scared or verbally asking you to stop yelling. It is important to pause and listen to what they are saying and for you to notice the volume and tone in your voice.

Secondly, once you recognize that you have yelled or are yelling, stop and take a time-out before it escalates further. During this time out, practice deep breathing in through your nose and deep into your belly. Do this until you feel your heart rate come down. This is a form of biofeedback, or a self-regulation technique to bring your bodily functions to their baseline or normal place. Another scenario of taking a time out might include taking a walk around the block or taking a shower. Engaging in something outside of the emotionally charged mindset you are in, will allow you space to cool off and think more rationally. One place you can obtain examples of breathing and meditation exercises is on our Web site at www.caregiver.va.gov.



Another way to deescalate your own anger may be to phone a friend. Make a list of friends or have one friend in mind who will help talk you down rather than rev you up more. Possibly share with your friend in advance that they are a source of calm for you and that you might call on them from time to time for support.

Thirdly, you will want to acknowledge your role in yelling and apologize as soon as you can with sincerity. For example, you might say, "I am really sorry for yelling at you, you don't deserve that; my anger got the best of me." Apologizing will not only help to rebuild your relationship with this person that may have been damaged by the conflict, but it can also help you feel better when you know you have hurt someone. Importantly, remember to listen to what your loved one says after your apology, and really try to understand their experience of what happened.

If you find yourself yelling or demeaning your loved one often, this is a red flag to dig deeper into what is causing your short temper. Anger is oftentimes referred to as a secondary emotion or umbrella emotion. A secondary emotion is an emotion that in a sense covers up a deeper more vulnerable and painful feeling. You may only feel the secondary emotion of anger without even realizing there is a primary underlying feeling at play. Some examples of secondary emotions are fear, guilt, or hurt. For example, you may have come close to getting into a car accident, and immediately you felt anger that the other driver put you in harm's way; when really, your primary emotion, or the emotion underneath the anger is fear. You were really scared that you almost got seriously injured and covered up your more vulnerable feeling of fear by getting angry.

You may also experience anger in response to covering up an underlying feeling of shame. Shame expert and Social Worker, Brene Brown, defined shame as an intensely painful feeling of believing you are flawed and unworthy of acceptance and belonging. So, for example, you may get angry with critical feedback that your boss gave you instead of facing the more painful underlying feeling of shame that you did not feel like you were adequate or good enough. In many cases, the secondary emotion of anger is easier to feel and react to than the primary emotion. It may be a helpful exercise whenever you feel anger to not only sort out how you have been hurt or threatened, but to ask yourself, is this anger covering up a deeper more painful emotion?

Next, let us talk about when angry feelings result in threatening behavior. What is considered threatening behavior and how do you safely manage it? Threatening behavior is defined as intentional behavior which would cause a person to fear injury or harm. Some examples include acts of aggression such as yelling at a someone,



pounding fists, slamming doors, blocking someone from leaving, and sending threatening messages by voicemail, email, or text. Threatening behavior is not just rude or disruptive; rather, it creates a real sense of fear. This type of behavior can happen anywhere, both in person and not in person.

If you are experiencing threatening behavior, it is important to take this behavior seriously and not ignore it or discount it. Also, if the behavior is directed at you and you are feeling like harm could happen, it is important to protect yourself by setting limits, disengaging, or removing yourself from the situation as soon as possible.

What if the threat moves beyond these threatening behaviors to aggressive behavior? Although you hope physically aggressive behavior does not happen, physical abuse unfortunately occurs. It is important that you recognize the behaviors and the risk and take active measures to protect yourself from harm. Physically aggressive behavior directed at you may include things like biting, hitting, kicking, or damaging your property. When violence appears imminent, it is important to get out of the situation as soon as possible.

The first step in avoiding physically aggressive behavior is to recognize the body language of anger that we described earlier, which will help you see that the person is getting angry. You may find that your reactions of arguing back is fueling the fire so you can back off, take a break by going outside for a walk around the block to cool down or get yourself to a safe space. If you begin to see the warning signs that someone is losing control of their anger and may engage in aggressive acting out, remove yourself and reach out for help. When your loved one is displaying physically aggressive behavior toward you such as hitting or damaging property, exit the situation as soon as you can and call 911.

If you have children, it is important to recognize that when they witness this behavior or are exposed to violence it has significant damaging effects on their wellbeing. It is important that you show them by what you say and what you do that this kind of behavior is not acceptable and should not be tolerated. It is also important that they know who to turn to if they are unsafe. Help them to learn what to do and who they can reach out to for help if they are being hurt.

Violence is often a learned behavior and just with any other learned behavior, it can be changed with time and effort if one is willing to make these changes and seek some help. You may not be able to control another person's decisions to engage in violent behavior, but you can control your own decisions to not to engage in this



behavior. You can do what is within your power to keep yourself safe and to set limits to protect yourself. If you are not sure how, reach out for help.

Another way in which anger can be expressed is in a passive manner. Passive anger can come in the form of the silent treatment and purposefully ignoring. The silent treatment on the surface can seem like it is not a big deal, but it can be an intentional way to hurt another person. The silent treatment typically looks like the way it sounds, your loved one not responding to you or acknowledging you when you speak. Have you ever been ignored, excluded, or shut out by someone you love? How did this make you feel?

The silent treatment is often an attempt to punish the person you are upset with. It is a sign to you that you are angry over something they did. When you give the silent treatment, you might hope the other person knows they hurt you. This is not always the case, and often, it will leave them feeling confused and hurt; while leaving you stuck in an unproductive communication style. This is a lose-lose situation.

When you realize you are giving the silent treatment, rather than continue to not respond to your loved one, state why you are upset and what you need. For example, "I feel angry that you don't seem to care that I have not slept today, I need time by myself to calm down, then we can talk." Seeking temporary distance is different from a cold, emotional cutoff. Rather, this allows your loved one to know you are angry, why you are angry, and what you need.

When you notice the silent treatment happening to you, speak up and name the experience such as, "I'm realizing you're not responding back to me." This neutral observation provides an invitation for your loved one to know that you're addressing their silence, so it is out in the open. The goal here is to acknowledge what they are doing and encourage them to share why they are not responding. This directness can begin to open communication and remove the silence. While acknowledging their silent behavior is helpful you can also share how being given the silent treatment makes you feel. For instance, you might say, "Dad, it seems that you are angry with me and as a result aren't really talking to me like you normally would. I love you and I'm here to help but it hurts me when you don't answer me and leaves me feeling confused. It would help me if you would talk to me about what you are upset about so we can work it out." These steps of addressing the silence and asking for what you need will help to build and model healthy communication. This is taking care of you.



Let's review the strategies we have discussed to avoid anger becoming destructive. First, we talked about simply recognizing this natural feeling when it surfaces. Recognize what happens to you and what others look like when they are angry. Notice destructive patterns of acting out anger such as yelling, demeaning, threatening, violent behavior and silent treatments. Take steps to interrupt destructive patterns of acting out angry feelings such as: taking a break, belly breathing, setting limits, describing what you see happening and communicating limits, asking for what you need, exploring the underlying vulnerable feeling, or reaching out for help. While you cannot control another person's destructive acting out of their anger you can make decisions to care for yourself. Learn to keep yourself safe and care for your feelings in a productive fashion.

One of the most important elements of being able to manage your anger effectively depends on your ability to calm down and get perspective when it arises. This is not always easy. One way you can prevent anger from causing negative outcomes is to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is the ability to be completely present in the moment, paying attention in the here and now to how you are feeling emotionally and physically with greater awareness of what is happening around you and inside of you. Mindfulness encourages you to attend to the present moment with an attitude of kindness and acceptance. That is not to say being mindful will rid you of unpleasant emotions or situations; rather, it helps you to suspend judgement toward others and toward yourself.

What is great about practicing mindfulness is that it can be done anywhere, any time. One way to practice is simply focusing on your breath. Taking the time to focus on your breath is helpful because using your breath's rhythm in and out gives you something in the moment to anchor your attention on. Keep in mind, it is normal and expected to have thoughts, feelings and distractions occur during mindfulness. When this happens, notice the thoughts and allow them to simply go by returning to focus on your breath.

Mindfulness has been shown to have numerous benefits. Some of the benefits include having a better relationship with others, anxiety decreases, intuition develops, attention span improves, increased immunity and helps to fight disease, increased feelings of gratitude, improved sleep, metabolism and brain function, and makes you and those around you happier.



Let's all take a moment to practice a guided meditation, a form of mindfulness. To begin, I will ask that you are seated in a comfortable position with your body supported and your legs uncrossed.

Place your feet on the floor and rest your hands in your lap or on your thighs.

Whether you are seated or lying down, take a moment to notice the feeling of support for your body against the surface.

If you would like to remove visual distractions, and if it is safe to do so, you can close your eyes. If not, pick a focal point ahead of you to focus on.

Keep your mouth gently closed, not clenched, and let your tongue lightly touch the roof of your mouth.

Breathe through your nose, unless for some reason you aren't able.

When you are settled in, we will start by taking a few deep cleansing breaths, deep into your belly, and then exhale slowly.

Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.

Now, without trying to control your breath in any way, allow it to find its natural rhythm and depth.

You don't have to force it or control it in anyway. Just follow your breath lovingly and with attention, in and out.

As it rests between breaths, relax, and trust that it will resume.

You have come to this moment of meditation with an awareness of angry feelings.

Notice any angry feelings that rise to the surface.

What happens to your body when anger arises?

Do you become tense, are you hot or shaky, do your shoulders or jaw tense or stomach tighten?

Observe angry feelings in your body.

Observe the angry feelings without clinging to them or exaggerating them.



Just notice.

Your anger is just a warning sign; listen to its warning.

What is it trying to tell you?

Have you been hurt? Do you feel threatened or insecure?

Right now, as you settle into your breath you are safe.

Let your breath in and out act like a gentle rain cooling the hot embers of your angry fire

The coals of anger steam and cool

With each breath your feelings can cool and calm

With each breath in and out you let go of the need to fight

As you breathe in and out; your thoughts can begin to clear.

As your anger subsides your mind opens, making space for your wisdom.

Your breath can lead you to calm and meaningful action to care for yourself.

In the calm of your breath allow your heart to open with compassion for yourself and others.

Observe the calm that is available to you in the depth of your breath.

You may return to this safe and quiet place whenever you need.

You can return to this place whenever you decide to simply focus on your breathing.

Now, begin to slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings and as you are ready, you may open your eyes. We'll take a few moments for our minds and bodies to come back to our surroundings.

The demands as a caregiver are especially great. You are responsible not only for your own needs, but the care of someone else's too. Sometimes caregivers feel so responsible for another's care that they can take on more responsibility for the other person than they need to take on. You will take the best care of yourself when you learn what is, and what is not in your control. You can do this by paying attention to what you



are personally responsible for and stopping your attempts to control or change others. This is not easy to do. Getting tangled up in taking too much responsibility for others and their choices or problems can not only deplete you but also keep others from doing their part in taking care of themselves. Relinquishing that control or attempts to control someone else's decisions will free you up to focus on areas in your own life.

Neglecting your own needs is one way that anger's fire can spark. Take your needs seriously and care for them. It is important to proactively take care of yourself so on those days where you are depleted you have some reserves to use, and to also maintain a healthy baseline given your daily responsibilities. Some things you can do are: Consider taking some time each day for Mindfulness, get enough sleep, eat a well-balanced nutritious diet, avoid misusing drugs and alcohol, take care of your medical and mental health needs and get preventative checkups, exercise, create and use your support system, prioritize your own mental health by engaging in hobbies that you enjoy, accept help from others when offered and reach out for help when you need it.

Are you honoring your body, your mind, your emotions, your spirit? Think about this for a moment and it may help guide you to know if you're taking care of yourself and if not, what areas need tending to. Compare the time you devote to helping your loved one to the time you devote to yourself. Are they completely out of balance? Listen to what you need. Protect yourself from allowing anger to harm you or those you love. Care for your needs so that you are not laying the groundwork for anger's fire to burn.

Lastly, be forgiving with yourself. Remind yourself that life is a journey, one that you are learning from day by day.