



Caregiver Support Line Audio Recording - Transcript

Series: Care for the Caregiver

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

The topic for this presentation is, "Tempering the Tyrant: Finding Anger's Right Place"

In this group we will be exploring anger; the often avoided, denied, at times destructive, and purposeful, and useful, human emotion. Anger is human; it is a natural, 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 needs being met. While anger can be a vital force for our own self-preservation, if ignored or not tempered, it can cause us or others harm.

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 in this presentation today. We will explore both the natural, instinctual, purposeful existence of anger and the need to temper this emotion.

We will discuss how you can clearly recognize the emotion of anger when it occurs and the different 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 anger. We want to learn to channel its passion, positive energy and protective purpose. Anger can help us to identify what is important to us 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. 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 going to become depleted. Your angry feelings may be alerting you that you have an unmet 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 overwhelmed. You are human, and no matter how much you love someone, your need for self-care is real. Anger is not a flaw in your character when a part of you inside is frustrated, impatient, or annoyed, due to your unattended needs.

Understandably, tempers are more likely to flair when balancing the conflicting demands of caring for yourself 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 yourself. Finding anger's rightful place is what we hope to explore in this presentation. How do you identify the red flag of anger alerting you of a possible need or threat? Once you are aware of the anger then you will want to understand what the threat or need could be. Finally, how can you temper this powerful emotion and work with it to take mindful action for yourself?

How we think about anger is in relation to our needs being met or not met. Many of our feelings are reflections or indicators of needs being satisfied or not provided. We feel sad when our need for closeness or affection is interrupted by a loss or disappointment. We may feel happy when our partner meets our need for appreciation with a compliment or gratitude. Feeling anger is similar to feeling other emotions as it relates to needs.

Imagine 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 an unanticipated event. Would you potentially feel angry due to your sleep being interrupted? Absolutely! It is a completely normal and natural reaction. Can you imagine feelings of anger if someone walked into your house uninvited? Of course, you may feel angry or threatened 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, recognizing, paying attention to it is important if you want to take good care of yourself. If you don't notice the anger, you won't be properly responding to a danger or protecting yourself. If you try to deny or ignore this feeling, 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 your loved ones. 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 ways that one can purposefully bring the recognition and energy of anger into finding a productive solution or setting a boundary.

Now let's explore how you may be personally impacted by anger. The first step in managing your anger is to notice it within you. 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? Are you aware if you are recklessly acting out your anger in an aggressive fashion? How do you express your anger? 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 physical expressions of anger; for example, make loud sounds, attempt to look larger clench their teeth and stare intently. These instinctive behaviors are meant to warn aggressors to back off. We also experience some internal 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 hot, or your hands tighten or teeth clench, you may notice your muscles tense, 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 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.

Thinking about today were there times that you noticed feeling angry? Maybe you noticed some version of anger like feeling frustrated, annoyed, aggravated, furious, enraged, impatient, or irritated. Do any of these feelings sound familiar? In the past week were you aware of any angry red flags? Pause and reflect now to remember that moment of awareness that you felt angry. What occurred just before that moment which caused this feeling?

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? Was your face red? Were you gritting your teeth, or 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 your anger. Think about the feeling of anger; what prompted it, how you expressed it, and what the camera would show.

Generally, anger is expressed passively or aggressively. Let's explore.

You may express your anger through silence. When you passively express anger, you are absorbing 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, or avoiding conflict. It could also look like becoming overly critical, overly apologetic, gossiping, brooding or withdrawing from others. Passive anger has the potential of harming an individual's energy, overall mood and relationships with others.



Why is passive expression of anger harmful? Some may feel that it is a virtue to keep anger inside. The fact is we are all human and will have angry feelings. Trying to avoid, deny, or silence this feeling does not make it go away, rather the energy of anger is carried inside. This store of unresolved energy has the potential of impacting your health, stressing your immune system, or raising your blood pressure. The unresolved angry energy can result in becoming depressed anxious or other mental health challenges.

On the other side of the continuum, you may notice that you tend to express your anger outwardly or aggressively. This could look like bullying, threatening, blaming, refusing to listen, finger pointing, name calling, shouting, slamming doors, reckless driving, destroying objects or becoming physically violent. Acting out expressions of anger also has many negative effects both on the person that expresses it and the person who receives it.

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 harm others with words said in anger. You may use your anger to intimidate, harm others or get your own way. When you act out in this way, you appear out of control and as a result, mutual respect can be lost. Your physical wellbeing, and the well-being of others, is at risk when acting out this way.

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. Angry outbursts give a false impression of power and control, when underneath, the person is often scared of losing something important to them or afraid of losing control. While sometimes these outward fits of anger can in fact work to get needs met by force, the risk is losing the respect of others who may go along out of fear.

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



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

Now that we have explored anger and the different expressions of anger, let's discuss finding balance of acknowledging the angry feelings and tempering them into a productive force.

How can a Caregiver, who may be overwhelmed, 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 stressed. How do you remain reasonable when you are tired, impacted by unpredictability and constrained by another's care needs? Caregivers have additional challenges when attempting to temper their angry feelings.

What is required to succeed at tempering this anger. Tempering would mean not silencing it or acting it out aggressively? Imagine yourself thoughtfully harnessing anger, rather than losing control. Both silence and aggression describe a reaction as opposed to a thoughtful productive action. This is no easy task for anyone. If you can 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.

Where do you begin? 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 can learn to avoid reacting and by recognizing and paying attention to your anger and transforming 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 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 gain perspective. You get perspective because you are observing yourself and observing what is



happening around you. This skill of observing yourself 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. The mindless reactions of either passively withdrawing or aggressively acting out does not contribute to any positive outcomes. So, the trick is to hold off the reaction long enough by paying attention to yourself to get some perspective, so your actions are thoughtful and balanced.

You may wonder how paying attention to yourself can interrupt this pattern of simply reacting. First, if you are paying attention to yourself, you will begin to notice what is happening for you. You will find a moment, even in the heat of anger, where you can decide to pause, stop the reaction, and step back. It may take practice but paying attention to find that deciding moment and making the decision to step back is available to you. This skill is the cornerstone of shifting from a destructive pattern with anger to tempering anger and allowing positive outcomes that will benefit you.

Another simple, very powerful and effective way to temper anger is to breathe. We mean taking a breath deep enough to fill your belly. This is done slowly and intentionally. Let's try it. Breath in deeply...exhale slowly. Breath in deeply ... exhale slowly. It may seem simple to think that just taking a few very deep breaths could alter things, but we invite you to try this on your own to experience if it helps.

Finally, we want to suggest communication tools that you can use after you are clear and calm. After you have paid attention to yourself, found your moment, stepped back, breathed, then you will be ready to communicate your distress and advocate for yourself. Communication skills at times when you are actively angry can be quite challenging.

The first recommendation would be to hold off or limit the communication if you feel too angry for good perspective and too tempted to lash out. It may be better to pause, calm down, take a breath, and get some space. I know it isn't easy but communicating while calm will benefit 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" because it is easy blame others for how you feel or for not meeting your needs when the only one responsible for your safety and your needs is you. It is up to you to take care of your own needs, set healthy boundaries.

You can communicate clearly and provide the best opportunity for others to hear, respect and respond to your anger. Collaborative communication was developed by



psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960's. The 4 components 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.

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. For example, your respite person arrived late, you would say, "When you arrived late today." You are stating just the observable facts.

The second 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 assume 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. A better example for using the past observation would be to say, "When you arrived late today, I felt angry." State your feeling as a one-word description, not what someone is doing to you.

The third step expresses the need that you have that triggered the feeling. For example, you may need to get out of the house and the late arrival set you back on plans, so your statement 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 fourth and final step makes a request of the person. This request should be something you want them to do and assumes that they have the right to agree or not agree to your request. This is a request, not a demand. 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 seen and heard. Next, a one-word feeling, remember, a feeling is not your thoughts or assumptions about what someone else is doing. Then describe the need that you have that prompted the feeling. Finally, say what it is that you want from the person. It may feel awkward when you first try using this format, but it does get easier with practice. I-statements can be especially helpful when you are trying to negotiate or communicate anger to another.



We have covered a lot and want to take a breath and review the points we hope you will carry with you after the group today. Anger is a natural human response to feeling threatened or having unmet needs. 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 and to find ways to temper it without reactively silencing 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. 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 build progress towards self-care. It is a process to change, so take a bit at a time. You deserve to pay attention to yourself. Your voice deserves to be heard. Your energy to advocate for you and others can be tempered into a force for good. We hope that our group today has played some small part in encouraging you along your caregiving journey. The Caregiver Support Line is here to support you moving forward.