

## DEALING WITH ANGER IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY

In this article we will look at:

- Four reasons why it is important to deal with our anger in a constructive way
- Eight things to remember when dealing with anger
- Suggestions for dealing with anger in a constructive way

Psychologists tell us that anger is the emotion we most often feel—with sadness coming in as a distant second. This will surprise most of us because we are such experts at repressing our anger. Learning to deal with our anger in a constructive way is one of the most important life skills that we can learn and teach our children. This article has lots of concrete information about anger, an emotion around which there is much misunderstanding. It also has several concrete suggestions on how to deal constructively with one's anger.

Before we look at what makes us angry and why it is so important for us to deal with it in a constructive way, it might be helpful for us to reflect on the following questions:

- How did your parents deal with their anger? Did they tend to repress it, or express it? If they usually expressed it, how did they express it—in an explosive, frightening kind of way or in a more appropriate way?
- As a child, was it okay for you to express your anger, or was it something you had to keep in tight control?
- At this time in your life, how do you generally deal with your anger? How easy or hard is it for you to express your anger? In your relationships, is it your tendency to "keep peace at any price," or do you frequently express your anger in an explosive or destructive way? Or are you generally able to express your anger in an appropriate way?
- Do you agree that the appropriate expression of anger can bring about positive results, or is anger usually a war zone for you?
- How aware are you of the tendency for most of us to repress our anger or minimize it? We may say "I'm concerned" or "a little upset" when, in fact, we may be very angry.

- How often do you get angry at yourself? A lot of anger at ourselves is a form of self-hatred which, of course, is very destructive to our self-esteem.

- Most of us receive very poor training in dealing with anger in a positive and appropriate way. As a result, we may be afraid of our anger or other people's anger, or we may only be able to express it in a destructive way. As I revise this article, which I first wrote several years ago, I am very aware that there is a lot to understand about this emotion and that there is still much for me to learn about it. But, hopefully, the following can be the start of a discussion and reflection on the emotion that we most often experience whether we are conscious of it or not.

### What makes people angry

It might be an interesting exercise to track our anger for a day or two to see what gets us ticked off or infuriated. The following are some common triggers of anger:

- We do not meet our own expectations or others do not meet our expectations.
- We have a big need to control life or others.
- Long periods of caring for a loved one, our own physical limitations, injuries to ourselves or others, acts of injustice against us or others.
- It is normal for grieving people to often feel anger with their situation. They may be angry at God, the doctor, church, other family members, or just the situation they find themselves in.
- Psychologists remind us that most of our anger occurs when our need for *security*, *affection* and *control* is threatened. We certainly see this as we watch people deal with the economic recession. Also, our anger may be due to the fact that we are working too much and are stressed out, not appreciated, tired or powerless, etc. What makes *you* angry?

### Four reasons why it is important for us to deal with anger in a constructive way

Psychologists and spiritual counselors point out that failure to deal with our anger in a constructive way will have dire results on our relational, mental, physical and spiritual lives.

**Relational.** If we are interested in having good and wholesome relationships, we must develop the skill and virtue of dealing with our anger in a constructive

and appropriate way. So many relationships are wounded or destroyed because one or both parties are unable or unwilling to deal with their anger. In a similar way, so many work situations are filled with tension and unhappiness because the leader and/or the workers are unable or unwilling to work through their anger.

**Mental.** Failure to deal with our anger in a constructive way often leads to depression. A frequently used definition of depression is *anger turned inward*. Somewhere in the journey of life, we may have learned that it is not okay to express anger outwardly, but it is okay to express anger inwardly. (Of course we need to remember that anger is not the only cause of depression.)

**Physical.** Repressed anger can even impact our bodies. Experts in this area tell us that physical disorders commonly associated with repressed anger are tension headaches, high blood pressure, impotence and frigidity, chronic itching and rheumatoid arthritis. Any of these disorders could come from other causes but we can be sure that if we do not express our anger in a healthy way, we will only aggravate whatever disorder we may be suffering from.

**Spiritual.** Failure to deal with anger may cause our relationship with God to become flat and dull. It is normal for us to feel angry with God just as it is normal for us to feel angry with a friend. But because of our spiritual formation, we may repress our anger at God, judging it disrespectful or sinful. Just as repressed anger with a friend will have a negative impact on the relationship, so will repressed anger with God have a negative impact on our relationship with him.

#### **Eight things to remember when dealing with anger**

1. In discussing the topic of anger, we should differentiate between "*righteous*" and "*unrighteous*" anger. "*Righteous anger*" is what the prophets in the Old Testament expressed when they saw injustices and false forms of worship in their communities. It was righteous anger that motivated Jesus in today's Gospel to throw the sellers out of the Temple for turning his Father's House into a place of business. Jesus was angry at the exorbitant prices the poor were charged for animals used to offer sacrifice. In fact, we can say that our conscience is dormant if we do not feel a "*righteous anger*" when confronted with a blatant injustice, whether involving ourselves or others. We can be grateful for the anger that moves us to right an

injustice. "*Righteous anger*" impelled Martin Luther King to fight racism in this country. "*Righteous anger*" moved mothers to get legislation passed against drunken drivers. Conversely, "*unrighteous anger*" results from *perceived* injustices, hurts and rejections. We express our anger in a destructive manner when, for example, we don't get our way.

We can say that feeling anger and rage and expressing it in an appropriate way can be a positive and Christian thing to do. Sometimes our anger is calling us to right some injustice.

2. Rarely are relationships hurt when anger is expressed in an *appropriate way*. In fact, when couples, friends or coworkers learn to express their anger in an appropriate way, their relationships and work situations are usually enhanced. On the other hand, when anger is repressed or expressed in a negative way, we can be sure relationships and work situations will deteriorate.

As a corollary to this point, we can say that *mentally healthy* people are not without anger. Rather, they have learned to deal with their anger in a constructive way. On the other hand, mentally unhealthy people may not have "too much" anger. Rather, they express their anger in a *destructive way*.

3. Sometimes the anger we feel is "our problem" and we shouldn't make a big fuss about it. We just need to deal with it and get on with our lives. For example, we may be mad when someone challenges our opinion or viewpoint. We may get "hot under the collar" and want to put down the other person in some way when we should instead be open and grateful for the other person's input. Of course such a response demands much maturity and humility.

4. St. Paul says: "*Be angry but sin not*" (Eph 4:26). It is good and healthy to feel our anger and to express it in an appropriate way. Sin only arises when we nurse it and *express* it in destructive ways, e.g., sarcasm, nagging, withdrawal, negative humor, cold silence, procrastination, sexual affairs, harsh sermons and "looks that could kill." The more we nurse our anger, the deeper it becomes. It can grow into the "poison of resentment." Harboring resentment is a sure way to kill a relationship. When we express our anger in a destructive way, we are simply adding more darkness to an already dark night. Before we can forgive a hurt, it is important that we give some expression to the anger around the hurt.

5. Allowing anger to emerge, taking time to befriend it, and expressing it in a constructive way is often the beginning of a more authentic life for those of us who

tend to repress our anger in order to always appear "kind and nice" to others. Needless to say, it will not be easy to move from being "Mr./Mrs. Nice Guy" to being one's real self, which always involves some experiences of anger. Most of us may need the help of a counselor to coach us through this transition. But the effort involved is well worth the cost when we experience our newly discovered feeling as we move from a spiritless, going-through-the-motions existence to a life that is more vibrant and in touch with what is really going on within and around us.

6. Sometimes the manifestation of our anger is *misplaced*. For example, we are mad at our boss but we take it out on our spouse, friend, co-worker, child, or the dog.

7. "Free-floating anger" is another important element of this emotion. We may be trapped in a bad marriage or with a permanently ill spouse, or in a job that we do not like. We may be in denial about a recent loss. We may be constantly mad because life is dealing us a poor hand. On a regular basis, we "fly off the handle" and get mad with someone who has done nothing to offend us.

8. As we deal with our anger, seeking to understand where we or the other person is coming from can be very challenging but also very helpful.

### **Learning to deal with our anger in a constructive way**

We will begin to live our best life *now* if we decide to do what we can to learn to deal with our anger in a healthy way. Can you imagine how much more peaceful our family and social lives and the world at large would be if all of us learned to deal with our anger in a constructive way? I should warn you that the following suggestions are far from easy to embrace. They need motivation, lots of discipline, constant effort and great cooperation with the grace of God. Now for the practical suggestions:

**Take time out to cool down.** When our "anger button" is pressed, our immediate reaction may be to strike out and "get back" at the person who hurt or Offended us. *A big challenge will be to take time out to cool down before we take any action.* This step demands much self-discipline, self-control, prayer, and a strong desire to become a wholesome person. Sometimes I use my journal to write down my thoughts and feelings. I may write a nasty letter to the offender, but of course I don't mail it. My journaling exercise invariably helps to defuse the anger. Physical exercise, meditation and deep breathing are other good ways to defuse our anger.

I've often been very grateful that I have taken time to cool down before expressing my anger in a destructive way. When nasty words are said, it can take a long time to undo the harm caused by them. When we are caught up in our anger, we don't *think clearly, speak rationally or feel compassionately*; hence, the absolute importance for taking time to cool down and reflect.

**Take time to reflect and pray.** Having cooled down, we should take time to reflect and pray about what is happening within us. What is causing the anger? Sometimes it may be very clear, but other times it may not be clear. We may blame the cause of our anger on one thing when, in fact, it is something else. We can ask the Holy Spirit to help us name the *true cause* of our anger. This demands much openness, especially if we are resistant to admitting and acknowledging a certain personality trait. For example, we may get angry when we can't control a situation or someone else's behavior. If this is the case, the problem is ours and we need to take care of it. This may mean letting go of our need to control someone else's behavior or letting go of an expectation that the other person cannot fulfill—at least at this time. Or we may become aware that we are making too much of what happened.

On the other hand, in our reflection and prayer, we may become aware of our tendency to repress anger, thus allowing others to take advantage of us. We may conclude that we have been violated in some way and that we need to do something about it. With reflective prayer, we will hopefully get some clarity on what we need to do with the anger we feel. Martin Luther King rightfully decided that his anger concerning racial discrimination in America was righteous anger, which motivated him to fight till he died for justice for his people. It would have been a terrible mistake if Dr. King had repressed his anger, or expressed it in a destructive way. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, thousands of people experienced righteous anger at the local, state and federal government's poor response to one of the biggest disasters that we have ever experienced in our country.

**Talk to a friend.** Sometimes it helps to talk to a friend who can give us an *objective* opinion on what he/she thinks. We should avoid seeking the help of people who will only tell us what *we want to hear*. So we may need to tell our friend to be really honest with us. And our friend may also have helpful suggestions as to what action, if any, we need to take.

Experts in the field of anger remind us that anger *always gets expressed* either directly or indirectly. Many of us express our anger in an indirect way much more frequently than we may care to admit. We do this because we may not want to admit to someone, or even to ourselves, that we are angry. We may believe it is wrong to be angry. We may feel ashamed of our anger or we may not want the person to know that he/she had indeed pressed our "anger button." Some of the common ways that people express anger *indirectly* are negative humor, sarcasm and displaced anger. The person we are angry at, or an innocent third party, may receive the butt of our anger. We may withdraw and/or give someone who has offended us the cold, silent treatment. We become *passive-aggressive* because we do not want to admit that we are angry and so we do things—intentionally or unintentionally—that will annoy and frustrate the person we are mad at. The feeling of being "bored with everything" is another way our anger can be indirectly expressed. Within marriage, some indirect expressions of anger are excessive drinking and extramarital affairs which often are a mask for the real issues: intimacy, closeness and emotional distance.

We can express anger *directly* in a constructive or destructive manner. We express it in a destructive way when we verbally or physically abuse another. Our aim is to punish and hurt the person who offended us in some way. When our "anger button" is pressed, we may be very tempted to express our anger in the two ways I just mentioned. Both are non-productive. They only serve to destroy our relationship with God, others and ourselves. If we frequently express our anger in indirect ways or in a direct but destructive way, we are faced with a major challenge to our maturing process.

### **Expressing our anger in a constructive way**

If we are not used to expressing our anger in a constructive way, it will take us some time and much effort and prayer to learn this important skill. But if we are to grow into healthy human beings and live more peaceful lives, it is very important that we do whatever it takes to develop this skill and virtue.

If we decide we need to talk to someone about the anger we feel towards him/her, we should first take the steps mentioned above. Cool down, pray and reflect on the situation, talk to a friend who will give us his/her honest opinion, and finally, sincerely and prayerfully decide that the next *best* and *right thing* for us to do is to talk to the other person.

Once we have arranged a good time for the parties to talk, we can pray that the Holy Spirit (and not an evil spirit) will be with both parties. When the time comes for us to "say our bit," we should try to avoid harsh accusatory language which could only add more fuel to the fire. Yet, we should express ourselves with sufficient intensity that our concern/hurt will be clearly communicated. (If it helps us, we may need to write down what it is we wish to say.) As for the outcome, we do not have control over it. Our job is to take the necessary action in the most appropriate and Christian way we can and hope for the best. If the other party's response to us is negative and closed, that is his/her problem, not ours. We should feel good that we approached the situation *prayerfully and reflectively with a cool head and a conciliatory heart*. That is the most anyone can expect of us.

After the encounter, we would do well to reflect on how we did. This is how we learn. Upon reflection, we may conclude we were too defensive, aggressive, too weak, etc. If we feel that our efforts went nowhere because the other party was closed to us, then we must decide how long we want to continue to relate to that person. If the person continues to relate to us in an angry way, we may need to put some distance between us. If this is not possible, we have a big cross to carry. We must ask: What good will be achieved by me holding onto my anger? Will it help me in some positive way, or will the toxicity of resentment only continue to steal my peace and joy and keep me miserable?