

Anger and the Need for Safety and Justice

We feel ANGRY when

- We feel like a helpless child
- We feel violated by somebody
- Present situations remind us of past ones which were unsafe
- We let many little irritations pile up, ignoring small signals
- We form an anger habit, and become addicted to our own adrenaline

The world is full of injustices. People hurt each other, violate one another's personal boundaries and take advantage of each other every day. Some of it is deliberate; much of it is not. Especially when it comes from children who are simply unaware of the other person's needs and boundaries. Much anger is defensive: people attack because they feel attacked themselves.

Anger and related emotions are signals that protect us from danger. We feel irritated or annoyed or furious when we experience or witness an injustice. We feel frustrated when we lose control over something in our lives. When we feel our personal boundaries have been seriously violated or when we feel helpless we become angry. Underneath anger are usually other feelings such as hurt, anxiety or fear. When we feel anger adrenaline is pumped into our bodies. This prepares us for the "fight or flight" reaction by giving us energy to attack or run away.

Anger is viewed negatively and for good reason. Often anger leads to violence or hurtful actions. But the emotion of anger is not the same as the action of aggression. We can be angry with someone without calling him a name or punching him. Anger the feeling is important to our well being. Aggressive behaviour needs to be stopped and controlled.

It is possible and necessary to pay attention to the early signals and underlying feelings that arise before full-blown anger. Men especially need to allow themselves to feel hurt or anxious, which were feelings that may not have been accepted when they were boys. Women may not have been allowed to express irritation or frustration and they may need to get in touch with these feelings in

Working with Anger

order to have clear boundaries.

Our upbringing plays a large part in how we handle anger. If we grew up with an unusually privileged lifestyle, we may feel entitled to more than our ordinary human share. We have all heard of the princess who stomps her feet demanding that her needs be met right away. It might be normal at age four, but at forty it just doesn't fit.

We may also become angry too easily if we had an unsafe childhood, and have learned to perceive things as threatening which are not actually dangerous to us. An anger habit can also build up from observing, experiencing and enjoying the sense of power, which comes with the rush of adrenaline.

Often we can perceive a put down where the person had no intention of offending us. Misunderstandings such as these can happen frequently and it is best to hold back on retaliating with hurtful comments. It pays to hold ourselves back before we lash back at others for what we think they intended. When there is an initial hurt, hold the tongue and give it time!

There are many lesser emotions that give rise to anger if not attended to. It's important to pay attention to our irritation, frustration, hurt, anxiety and fear in order to problem-solve about the situations that caused them. This will eliminate or decrease the anger outbursts. If we are upset at something someone said or did, we need to discuss it with them directly and assertively. In some cases there is more than a misunderstanding, and the necessary corrective will be to set firm boundaries or terminate the relationship.

Old Triggers Contribute to Anger

In our childhood, we protect ourselves from overwhelming experiences by shutting out our consciousness of them and storing them in an unconscious part of our mind. This part of us remains immature and because we don't have conscious control of it, it has the potential to control us. Old experiences attach themselves onto present ones which remind us unconsciously of those past events. We find ourselves overreacting and thinking that the feelings are related to the present situation when in fact, they go back to the original pain.

If we have undergone significant unpleasant experiences in our past, that have not been worked through, we will find ourselves

Working with Anger

triggered into childish feelings. Every adult has within him a “child of the past” that is capable of taking over his adult life during stressful times. Our unreasonable feelings, those which seem (to others if not to us) overly intense, uncalled for, unrealistic or inappropriate, are not inappropriate for a child. We have to accept these childish feelings as an influential part of our adult make-up.

Dr. Hugh Missildine, author of “Your Inner child of the Past”, says that we know our “inner child of the past” is interfering with our adult life when we overreact emotionally to a situation, when we are in frequent conflict with others, when we have major difficulties with self-control (e.g. drinking, rage outbursts, loafing), or when we lack a balance between work, rest and play. Another way of putting this is that the feelings from unresolved childhood emotional experiences are being triggered, and are trying to come up to our conscious mind for resolution.

These signs of childish feelings and behaviours happen to all of us to some extent or another. If they happen frequently, so that they dominate our lives, those are often signs that we experienced some kind of childhood trauma or deprivation. The most common situation is growing up in a dysfunctional family, one which lacks boundaries, does not provide the kind of love a child needs, and does not protect the child. Sometimes the childhood trauma happened outside the family, with a neighbor or in school. We can also experience these symptoms as a result of later life experiences, for example an abusive marriage. These emotional intrusions are signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, something that happens to victims of any kind of trauma (such as natural disasters or wars, as well as unhappy childhoods.)

Resolving Anger

Anger is the emotion which causes the most difficulty, especially between family members. The following anger chart, arranged around the letter ‘ANGER,’ summarizes effective ways of dealing with anger and the other emotions that underlie it.

Working with
Anger

	Steps to awareness:	How this can be effective:
A	Attend to your early signals of anger. What do you feel in your body? How do you behave?	You can catch anger before it escalates. When you increase your awareness of the early signals, you can create choices around your behaviour.
N	Negotiate with those around you about your anger, not about specific issues. Choose distance and time.	Discuss this strong emotion with your family. Come up with a signal that means you need time out: <i>Give me five, Grumpy guy alert, Bag lady alert</i> . Or negotiate with yourself and just choose distance until you have calmed down. Even turning your back and breathing can be effective.
G	Gear down from behaviours to exploring feelings, and identify them if you can. Pay attention to your own triggering thoughts that may provoke anger.	G = Get alone E = Express your emotions A = Analyze your thoughts R = Recognize your needs. Catch negative trigger thoughts and replace them with healing ones. Use your feelings to explore what your needs are.
E	Express your feelings and needs assertively.	When you _____, I feel _____ because _____. I want/would like you to _____.
R	Resolve issues if possible. It may be as simple as making a positive request. It may mean engaging in conflict resolution. It may mean resolving the issue within yourself.	Resolving conflict stops the circular motion of old issues and patterns from constantly recurring. Resolution doesn't have to be complicated, but it can't exist without the preceding steps. Often we need to feel anger to know there is a boundary that needs to be addressed.

The A-N-G-E-R of Anger

A= Attention

Pay Attention to the Early Signals

Many people will get a feeling in their body as they are escalating to anger. Some people feel their fists clench or their chest feel tight. Grinding teeth, upset stomachs, increased heart rate, shortness of breath or various other physical symptoms can be felt. How does your body respond?

Others notice speech changes in themselves: flatness, whining, getting loud and other changes in tone of voice. Perhaps you can notice how you are reacting before your reactions trip you. Although anger can seem to come on suddenly, if we pay attention to its early stages we may be able to increase our awareness and catch it before we move into lustful actions.

Other emotions also have bodily signals – a lump in the throat, welling up behind the eyes, fluttering in the chest, flushing, and so on. If you don't know how to identify what you're feeling, try noticing what your body is telling you. Other emotions usually precede anger. Frustrations, irritation, anxiety, or hurt are common precursors of anger. Many people can't tolerate these more vulnerable emotions so move quickly to anger instead. It's important that we learn to identify these emotions and get their messages rather than defending ourselves against them by becoming angry.

N = Negotiate Your Anger

Give a Cue

When emotions run high you need to negotiate with those around you concerning your anger, not concerning the issues. Resolving issues takes time and often can't be done while intense emotions are present. I have used a signal with my children since they were very young. When I start to feel early warning signs of anger or stress I give a warning signal. My signal is "Bag Lady Alert." I have explained to my kids that these feelings are all mine (my kids aren't responsible for them), but when I get triggered it means that I need a little space to deal with my feelings. My kids have responded well to this, and it was they who created the name. When I feel as if my rope is coming close to the end, I give my signal and the kids give me space. It hasn't been overused and I don't expect my kids to jump to attention either. I do recall my son handing me some orange string one day, announcing that next time I was at the end of my rope, I could use that. I put that string in my jewelry box and ten years later it is still there, reminding me of how much my children want me to cope and be okay.

One of our group leaders from the LIFE parenting course had been using the "Grumpy Dad Alert" with his son for some time. He and his wife were separated and their son spent one week at each home. One evening when he picked his son up at his mother's house to take him for the week his son announced a "Grumpy Kid Alert". Although the Dad was excited to see his son after a week's absence and was anxious to get caught up on all his activities, he recognized that this was great awareness on the part of his son. Instead of making small talk, he gave him the space he needed and drove without chatting. In a short while, the mood was over and there was no hassle. This was progress and ownership on his son's part.

G = Gear Down

G = Get Alone -Time Yourself Out

Time yourself out when you need to in order to say “NO” to the adrenaline rush that comes with anger. Take time to change gears and shift your actions and your thinking. I practiced this ahead of time with my children when they were young, because they needed to understand that I wasn’t rejecting them or going away forever.

Gearing down can take place over a few minutes when you remove yourself from the situation and breathe. Sometimes a few moments is all we have as parents but even that can make a difference. Sometimes gearing down can take days or more. The purpose is to change direction with the habits we are trying to break and give ourselves time to turn the volume up on what we want to do and what we really believe is right for us.

Sometimes just a few minutes to take some deep cleansing breaths and reframing thoughts can prevent outbursts from happening. In modeling this for kids, they too learn to choose “flight” over “fight” and time themselves out for self-comfort and calming.

E = Express Your Feelings

If you’re highly upset, when you get that time alone, you may need to rage or cry to discharge some of the strong feelings. It’s best to do this away from the person who’s triggered your emotions, especially if that person is a child. Children will feel afraid if you’re raging, and anxious if you’re crying. They need to feel their parent is calm and has control, is safe to be around and can make their world safe.

A = Analyze Your Thoughts

The next step is to take a look at what is happening for you. This can take time, and sometimes you need to talk to someone to figure out what is going on. Ask yourself what thoughts are going through your head right now. Our feelings often arise from our thoughts, and our thoughts from our beliefs. What thoughts are you having which give rise to your anger or anxiety? For example, “My kids are so selfish,” or “I’m a bad mother.”

Working with Anger

The challenge of being a parent gives us an opportunity to examine many of the beliefs underlying the way we live. We all grow up with unexamined beliefs from our childhood. In order to be more effective parents (and human beings), we need to look at these beliefs and see whether they are worth keeping. Look at the following examples of how our belief systems influence our responses to children's behaviour.

Watch what you believe!

R = Recognize your needs

Use your feelings to explore what your needs are, in some of the ways we discussed earlier.

Watch Those Trigger Thoughts

Researchers Fanning & McKay discovered that parents with high levels of anger were using certain kinds of trigger thoughts. These anger-fueling thoughts consisted of three categories: magnifying, labeling, and assuming intent.

When a parent is stressed, trigger thoughts that magnify the seriousness of a situation, label the other person, or assume a hostile intent on the part of the other person can start a downward spiral toward aggressive behaviour. Becoming aware of not only our feelings but also our thoughts has proven to defuse emotional build-ups and over-reactions. When we become aware of thinking errors, we can practice 'thought stopping' and learn to reframe our thoughts, preventing escalation of anger and other intense emotions. Think of some behaviour of your child that upsets you, then see which of the thoughts that follow fit you.

Trigger Thoughts

Realistic View

Assumed Intent

He's doing it to annoy me.

He isn't really trying to annoy me; it's just how he's coping right now. What does he need?

She's trying to test me.

This is a stage – the "I don't listen" stage. It's natural; she can't help it, or she's doing it to cope with something.

Working with Anger

He's doing this deliberately.

He's doing this to cope with his feelings and needs. It's not about me.

Example of Assumed Intent

A two year old pours his milk all over the floor from his high chair.

Old Belief: Parent believes the child is doing this on purpose and that the behaviour won't change. Parent gets angry, loses her temper, shouts at the child to stop, and slaps the child's hand.

New Belief: Parent believes that the child is acting like any other two year old and that this is normal. The parent cleans up the mess and puts a plastic tarp under the high chair for next time. She can encourage the child to learn to keep the milk in the cup as he matures.

Magnification

I can't stand it.

Kids have to go through these stages. I can cope. I can get through it without blowing up.

This behaviour is intolerable.

I don't like it, but I can accept it. She can't help doing this; it's how she tries to cope. I'm the grownup. I can handle this.

He never listens.

Okay, don't exaggerate. Sometimes he listens, but it's pretty natural for kids to tune out. I need a plan to get his attention without anger.

Example of Magnification

Seven year old Ashley has a temper tantrum when her parent says "No" to her.

Old Belief : Parent believes this is extremely embarrassing and makes the parent look like a fool and like a bad parent. So he loses his own cool and has a temper tantrum right back., making Ashley angry and resentful.

Working with Anger

New Belief: Parent realizes that children need to learn to delay gratification and to respect others' limits and needs, but temper tantrums are normal and not a reflection of his parenting. Parent ignores the tantrums, and after a grueling two weeks of constant tantrums, Ashley learns to accept a "No," and to respect her parent.

Labeling

She's getting out of control.

This is natural impulsiveness. Kids get wild; kids are intense. Forget the labels and calmly set limits.

This is manipulation.

Don't take this so seriously. He wants his way; that's natural. Kids are less powerful than adults, so they do what they can to get what they want.

She doesn't care (what happens, how people feel ...)

I don't know how she feels.

Example of Labeling

Ten year old Sarah has stomachaches at night and becomes anxious.

Old Belief: Parent believes that Sarah is a "drama queen" and does it for attention. She threatens Sarah with severe consequences if she doesn't settle down. Parent feels overwhelmed and angry. Sarah's symptoms get worse.

New Belief: Parent believes that children's feelings need to be explored and respected. Parent comforts Sarah and gives her tools to calm herself. Over time, Sarah's anxiety decreases.

Coping with Unexpected Trigger Thoughts :

1. Assess the real cause of the behaviour.
2. Realistically assess the size of the problem.
3. Replace negative labels with neutral descriptions.

Working with
Anger

4. Remind yourself that you can cope and keep your cool.

Seven thoughts for effective coping strategies:

1. It's just a stage. This will pass.
2. This is natural for his or her age.
3. Don't take it seriously. Keep a sense of humour.
4. This is just natural impulsiveness.
5. He or she isn't really trying to do it to me. It's just how he or she is coping right now.
6. He or she can't help feel (angry, sad, tired....)
7. I can cope without getting angry.

Working with Anger

Parenting in the real world @#@#@#!

My son had a friend stay for a sleep-over one Saturday night. My mother had offered to take my children and Jarryd's friend downtown for lunch and to a movie on the Sunday. They had a great weekend of fun and leisure, which was well deserved. The chores had been done early Saturday morning, piano was practiced, and homework was up to date. Jarryd and his friend were playing a video game and after one warning I went down to report that it was time to go. Jarryd complained that they were in the middle of a level and asked if it could wait a little while. I replied with a "No" at which point Jarryd's friend immediately turned off the game and grabbed his shoes.

I felt annoyed by Jarryd's attitude and my trigger thoughts got loose on me. "This game is getting out of control. Why did he have to argue with me? That was disrespectful, especially in front of his friend. Jarryd is spoiled and lazy." Jarryd's friend went upstairs and I stomped my feet toward Jarryd and said, "You should treat me with more respect! That game will quickly be pulled if you keep up with this attitude. Blah blah. He looked hurt and started to walk away and so I gave him heck for that too."

Now perhaps I had a point, Jarryd should have turned off the game. Goodness knows I gave him warning. Here is the reality of what really happened when I climbed out of my protective armor. When I looked back and geared down, Jarryd wasn't the one playing the game, it was his friend's turn. Jarryd was rooting for him and felt bad that he didn't get to finish. Jarryd practices a lot of self-discipline and I owed him some respect and trust. I was embarrassed and I wanted to apologize, but it felt a little awkward when I thought about what I would say. I was tired of talking and I was sure Jarryd was tired of hearing me. I came up with something called "second chance tickets."

Second Chance Ticket

I feel _____ about (what I did or said) _____.

I realize that _____.

If I had a Second chance I would do/say _____

_____ instead.

Working with Anger

My second chance ticket said; “I feel sorry that I demanded you respect me while I disrespected you. I realize that you were just supporting your friend and you *are* responsible and respectful. If I had a second chance I would have shown a little empathy and stopped talking after the word *no*.”

Having a chance to gear down can bring us the clarity that we need. The sooner we pay attention to our own behaviour, the sooner we can change gears and deal effectively with situations at hand. Sometimes, if we gear down too late, we will need to apologize to our children. Believe it or not, they know we aren't always right, and they appreciate it if we know it too.

E = Express Yourself

When anger has been triggered, it's only after we sort through our thoughts and feelings that we should go on to express those thoughts and feelings to another person. Particularly if that person was involved with the situation that helped trigger our anger, and even more particularly if that person is a child. How to express ourselves will be discussed in detail in another chapter.

R = Resolve the Issue

Once we have expressed what we feel and need, we may be ready to deal with the issue and come to some sort of resolution. This doesn't always involve another person; sometimes we can find peace within ourselves and “let it go”. But if something has become an issue with someone you care about or spend a lot of time with, it is best to use direct honest communication and come up with creative solutions that fit the needs of all involved. We'll go into this too in detail in another chapter.