

ANGER MANAGEMENT CHOICES

by
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Anger shows us many faces in our day-to-day interactions. This article talks about five common ways in which people express or handle their anger. These are your options for managing anger. Understanding these options for handling anger gives you choices about how you want to manage feelings of anger when they present themselves.

With some work, you can gain control over your anger and make conscious choices about how to handle one of the most intense and, for some, most troublesome emotion

YOUR FIVE ANGER RESPONSE OPTIONS

1. Suppression and Passivity

Suppression is one of the unhealthy ways to deal with anger. People who regularly suppress anger tend to be passive in relation to the people in their world. As a result, they can frequently feel victimized or have the sense that they are not in control of their world.

Suppressing anger is not effective in situations calling for assertiveness, and it can lead to some unexpected problems. I will be discussing the assertive option later in this article.

First, suppressed anger is internalized anger. Other destructive emotions can grow out of suppressed anger. These can be feelings of failure and inadequacy or feelings of anxiety or depression.

Second, suppressing anger usually increase one's sense of frustration over not being able to resolve issues in a personally satisfying way. This can cause people to feel impotent in situations that might be changed with assertion. Suppressed anger can also transform angry feelings into feelings of dislike or hatred for the person or situation evoking the anger.

Third, suppressed anger does not always remain suppressed. Like an unattended pot, filled to the lid and left on the stove to boil, suppressed anger may build-up to the point where it boils over. Sometimes, these angry eruptions are triggered unexpectedly and misdirected at people for minor incidents.

Why do some people habitually suppress anger? Many have had experiences early in life that taught them "anger is not normal," or "anger is "bad," or that

expressing anger results in worse consequences, such as retaliation. People who tend to suppress anger sometimes have had a history of having their thoughts and ideas invalidated by parents or other authority figures. As a result, they tend to behave passively in situations where they should be assertive.

Learning to assert oneself after many years of suppressing one's anger can be a difficult task. It involves recognizing the feeling of anger, being able to differentiate between it and other emotions, and a lot of work learning and practicing assertiveness skills. Therapy with a trained professional is helpful in the process.

2. Aggression

Aggression is another unhealthy way to express anger. This is the form of expression that most people associate with anger. People often imagine anger as an explosive outburst that might include rage, intimidation, blaming, or other unpleasant behaviors. There are also more subtle forms of aggression, including sarcasm, bickering, criticism, and complaining.

Aggression is easily recognized because it does not hide anger in the ways that suppression and passive-aggressiveness do. Aggression usually arises out of a focus on one's personal needs to the exclusion of the feelings, needs, and rights of others. This insensitivity to the feelings, needs, and rights of others is the trademark of angry, aggressive people.

Most of us have had angry outbursts that could be interpreted as aggressive, especially by those who are on the receiving end. Of course, the intensity of the aggression largely determines the impact it has on the target of the aggression, usually another person. Angry words cannot be taken back, and aggressive behaviors are not easily atoned for with others.

Remember that a person's patterns of expressing anger can be as important as the level of intensity. A person's frequent and consistent use of aggression to express anger is a problem for others, and it presents problems for the angry person, as well. Being on the receiving end of aggression is an unpleasant experience for others, regardless of its intensity.

Aggression does not enhance relationships, and habitually aggressive individuals can lead lonely, antisocial lives. Most people don't want to be around people who are frequently angry or quickly become aggressive. Conversely, chronically angry individuals do not like being around other people. This is because others tend to agitate their anger and aggression. Angry-aggressive individuals are easily annoyed by other people; others are constantly "pissing them off."

3. Passive-Aggressive

I deliberately placed passive-aggressive after defining aggressive anger. As the name implies, passive-aggressive anger shares a common characteristic with straight-forward aggression: The focus is on one's own needs and feelings to the exclusion and insensitivity to another's needs and feelings.

Passive-aggressive behavior is perhaps best described as cloaked aggression; it is a hidden, but conscious, "pay-back" for some indiscretion or offense by another. Passive aggressive behaviors can be deliberate and consciously planned for a specific event or be held in reserve, waiting for a good opportunity to present itself.

At other times, passive-aggressive behavior takes place with little thought at all. This type of passive-aggression often exists on the fringes of consciousness, where the person makes little to no connection between anger and his or her behavior.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a subtle, but destructive, form of anger. Whereas, straight-forward aggression is observable and undeniable, passive-aggression is not so clearly recognized and can be emphatically denied when the behavior is confronted by others.

Nearly everyone has been the victim of passive-aggression at one time or another. It occurs between spouses, between parents and children, and often in work settings. The emotional reasoning behind passive-aggression is "you made me mad! Now, I'm going to 'pay you back' - and you won't even know it."

Passive-aggressive acts are usually subtle enough that one can deny any malicious intent if confronted about the behavior. In other words, passive-aggressive behavior might be overt enough to be recognized, but it also has an element of innocence that makes difficult to prove it was "pay-back." A frequent, "I don't know what you mean! I was just doing so-and-so" is a common plea of innocence a following passive- aggressive act.

Passive-aggression is a hostile behavior. Passive-aggression is not immediate, like pure aggression. The offense triggering the person's anger occurs much earlier than the passive-aggressive response. Passive-aggression may be planned-out, but often it is opportunistic – a situation arises where the angered person sees a chance for a stealthy strike-back at someone.

Passive-aggression is insidious. It can become a behavior pattern that is difficult to change. Passive-aggression becomes a personality characteristic, over time, and it eventually becomes an easily recognized trait. Others tend to avoid people who display passive-aggressive behavior patterns.

4. Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the jewel of anger management. Assertive expressions of anger preserve one's own convictions and rights, while considering the feelings, needs, and rights of others. Assertive behavior maintains and bolsters self-worth, while advocating for your needs to be met.

Assertiveness is not meant to harm another's self-esteem or injure their feelings to obtain a personal objective. Assertive behavior is firm, yet respectful. A good assertive response usually contains the following elements: (1.) What occurred and by whom, (2.) How the occurrence affected your feelings or impacted your values, and (3.) What you would like to happen in order to resolve the issue, now and in the future.

An assertive statement between spouses might go something like this, "You didn't support me when I corrected (child). I felt angry about you leaving it up to me to set limits with (child). I would like you to support me in front of (child) in the future – it will show we stand together about parenting issues."

Assertiveness is fundamental in preventing some of the detriments that occur from either suppressing anger or behaving in either aggressive or passive-aggressive ways.

Assertiveness training and the development of assertive skills are topics far too complex to adequately cover in this article. There are many excellent books and articles to be found on assertiveness and how to become more assertive in relationships with others. The Internet is a good resource for books reviews, and there are free articles to be found there, as well. For those wanting a more practical approach to learning assertiveness skills, I would recommend taking assertiveness classes. These are often offered as adult education classes through community colleges and universities, or sometimes as groups facilitated by psychologists, therapists, and counselors.

5. Dropping the Issue

This option for managing angry feeling might seem contrary to the expressive and forthright assertive approach. Sometimes, as you will see, dropping the issue is the best choice. It is how you respond emotionally (and behaviorally) to compromising your values that is important. Dropping the issue is really discarding your anger about the issue.

There are times when people must make difficult choices about whether to be assertive in an anger provoking situation or to drop the issue. You may have appropriate convictions to communicate, but being assertive either will not work or it may even intensify the situation. The best choice might be to acknowledge

that you have done your best and adapt to what is an imperfect solution, from your standpoint, by dropping the issue.

In some cases, asserting yourself may be to your detriment or even worsen the situation. An extreme example might be if you were confronted, alone on the street, and asked for your wallet. It may anger you, violate a personal conviction, or make you want to assert yourself, but safety is the best option – drop the issue and hand it over! Another example is asserting yourself when a boss' behavior angers you. Depending upon the boss, dropping the issue (and your anger) may be the best option, if you want a raise (or want to keep your job).

Remember, dropping the issue isn't the same as suppressing your anger. When dropping the issue, you accept that you can do nothing more than let go of your anger in the situation. Don't harbor your anger or slide into passive-aggressive thinking. Drop the issue - drop your anger.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

The above discussion illustrates the importance of making conscious choices about how to manage anger in a given situation. Some options are *healthy* responses or in your best interest. Other options may be detrimental to your wellbeing or the wellbeing of others who are important to you. Being aware of your options and understanding them gives you choices in how to respond in anger provoking situations.

Sometimes, emotions happen very quickly, and we respond to them just as quickly. Making a choice about how to express your anger involves slowing down your response enough to make a thoughtful decision about what to do next. There is something to be said in support of the old adage, "Count to 10 when you're angry (before you react)." Counting to 10 removes the automatic response and slows things down long enough to make a good choice about how you want to manage your anger.

It is very important to remember that our responses to feelings become automatic when they reoccur many times over. Years of suppressing your anger, displaying angry outbursts, or behaving with passive-aggressiveness requires that you do a lot of conscious work to form new habits. Assertiveness training classes or a professional therapist can help you develop effective ways of managing your anger.

Remember, anger is not uncontrollable, even though many times it is not controlled. Choose how you want to express yourself and how you want others to see you – at your worst or at your best.