



There's More to Anger than Getting Mad

by Sue von Fange

Who Is the Mightiest?

There was a tiger who woke up one morning and felt just great (yes, just like Tony the Tiger). He felt so good that he went out and cornered a small monkey and roared at him, "WHO IS THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?" The poor, quaking little monkey replied, "You are, of course. No one is mightier than you."

A little while later, the tiger confronted a wildebeest, and bellowed, "WHO IS THE GREATEST AND STRONGEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?" The wildebeest shook so hard it could barely speak, but managed to stammer, "Oh great tiger, you are by far the mightiest animal in the jungle."

Seeing he was on a roll, the tiger swaggered up to an elephant who was quietly munching on some weeds. The tiger roared at the top of his voice, "WHO IS THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?"

The elephant grabbed the tiger with his trunk, picked him up, slammed him down, picked him up again and shook him until the tiger was just a blur of orange and black, and threw him violently into a nearby tree. The tiger staggered to his feet, looked at the elephant, and said, "Man, just because you don't know the answer, you don't have to get so mad."

We can laugh at the expression of anger in this joke, but consider the following excerpt from the November, 1999, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

"After Ms. Foster cut off Ms. Henson [in traffic], the two women played a cat-and-mouse game of tailgating, lane changing and slamming on brakes until they got off at the same exit.

"Ms. Foster, the mother of three, was racing to pick up her 4-year-old daughter at an after-school program for children with cerebral palsy. Ms. Henson, a former Cub Scout Den Mother, was headed to her home in a quiet cul de sac. When the two cars came to a stop at a traffic light at the exit ramp, Ms. Foster jumped out and started toward Ms. Henson's vehicle. As Ms. Foster approached, Ms. Henson lowered the window about halfway, and reached for a .38-caliber revolver she kept in the console. She had permission to carry the weapon under Alabama's conceal-carry law. Ms. Henson fired a single shot, striking Ms. Foster in the left cheek. Ms. Foster crumpled to the pavement and died.

"As Ms. Henson realized what she'd done, she said, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe I shot her.'"

Anger's reality is evident! You only need to look at a few news headlines to see that anger is a major issue in our society. In fact my own web search on anger identified 841,000 sites dealing with the subject and one online bookseller listing 860 titles on anger. What about you? When was the last time you felt angry?

Poorly managed anger is the root of many serious physical, social and emotional problems including poor physical health, chronic disease, depression, unhappy relationships, violence and crime. By contrast, the benefits of managing anger in constructive ways are

- lower heart rate and blood pressure;
- better sleep;
- better digestion;
- better relationships;
- improved problem-solving ability;
- more constructive communication;
- increased self-discipline and self-confidence.

Angry Feelings: Friend or Foe?

Some people are taught that it's wrong to get angry. Others are taught it's their right to get angry! The truth is that everyone gets angry. Anger is a natural feeling that shows you something is wrong and can stir you to action against that which hurts you or others.

In our world we see much that isn't right—homelessness, hunger, war, verbal or physical abuse. These are situations of unfairness and injustice about which we should be angry. Many times, though, anger isn't so clearly justified. It may arise out of a threat to your security, identity or control. Your anger is a gift that shows you something is out of order. Common causes of anger include

- Frustration... You feel misunderstood or that no one cares what you think.
- Mistreatment... You're misjudged, and people spread rumors or publicly cut you down.
- Injustice... You're doing an excellent job at work but barely make enough money to get by.
- Irritants that make you feel out of control... You live near a construction zone where there is constant noise from sunrise to sunset.
- Hurt pride or embarrassment... Someone makes fun of you or shames you.
- Disappointment... You volunteer for a community event hoping to meet some new friends, but everyone else comes with a group and doesn't talk to you.
- Betrayal... A friend you trusted tells others about a personal conversation.
- Loss, grief... A loved one dies, or you lose your job. You think, I did nothing to deserve this!
- Need to be right... You know exactly what to do, but other people insist on disagreeing with you!
- Stress ... You're constantly on a tight schedule and overloaded.
- Impatience... You have to wait in a long line at the grocery store when other things must get done.
- Conflict with your values... You are always on time, but your best friend repeatedly shows up 20 minutes late for lunch dates.
- Boundary crossing... Other people tell you what to do, or they behave in ways that make you uncomfortable.
- Fatigue... You never get enough sleep and are often on edge.

Think back over the last day, week or month. Did any of these issues stir up anger in you? There was a time in my life when I was chronically angry. My abilities weren't being used and I felt diminished as a person. I lived with a lot of anger for a while, then came to see its sources as frustration, hurt pride and disappointment. Self-awareness is a first step in learning how to deal with anger constructively.

What's Your M.O.?

There is more to anger than just what causes it. What you do with anger can make a big difference in the results you see. Here are some ways people handle anger:

- Ignore it—You ignore the situation thinking it will go away. You may rationalize that it's not as bad as it seems or conclude there's nothing you can do about it anyway.
- Stuff it—Your motto is "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." No matter how angry you are, you hold it in and say things are all right. You keep peace at any price, which may mean stomachaches, headaches, depression, a feeling of helplessness or seeing your anger leak out in sarcastic and hurtful comments. The peace is just a smooth veneer covering a relationship that's decaying because of anger.
- Withdraw—You walk away from relationships in which you experience anger. You hold a grudge and give people the cold shoulder of silence hoping they'll feel guilty and do what you want. But no one can read your mind and others may quickly tire of trying to figure out what's wrong.
- Blame—If there's a problem, it's always someone else's fault, not yours! If the other person has a strong sense of self-esteem and the blame honestly isn't theirs, they may simply walk away from the relationship. If they have low self-esteem, they may accept the blame but be afraid of doing something that will set you off. Eventually they, too, may recognize this relationship isn't what they want.
- Triangle—Talking about your anger with everyone else—friends, family, colleagues, the repairman, anyone but the person with whom you're angry. At best, this approach resolves nothing. At worst, it alienates everyone as they tire of your anger and wonder when you might get angry with them and tell everyone else about it.
- Explode—Punching a hole in the wall, breaking dishes or hitting people may make you feel better, but abuse and destruction are not acceptable in any situation.
- Control—You demand that other people do what you tell them to do, or else! This is another form of abuse and exercising power over others. It doesn't create mutually satisfying relationships and it doesn't resolve anger. In fact, it can escalate to physical abuse when people repeatedly don't live up to your demands.
- Escape—You depend on drugs, alcohol or other substances to make you feel better and soothe the pain. The pain may be relieved temporarily, but like a scab that doesn't heal, the anger stays just below the surface waiting to break out.
- Be Assertive—Being assertive means affirming yourself by expressing anger clearly while respecting the other person. The way you deal with your anger is not dependent upon the other person's response.

Which approach do you typically use? What are the results? At times I have stuffed my anger because I couldn't confront people in authority. The result was depression. At other times, I have been guilty of creating a triangle, talking with one or two trusted friends about my frustration rather than going directly to the person with whom I felt angry. In either case, the issues creating my anger were left unresolved and those relationships were a no-win situation for me.

Express Yourself?

As common as all these ways of handling anger are, the assertive approach is the only one that deals with the underlying causes of anger. And as we've seen, the other approaches tend to alienate others by breaking off a relationship or by humiliating or hurting them. Those methods also ignore your role in the situation that made you angry by not considering how you may need to change.

Learning to express your anger in appropriate, non-destructive ways is challenging because it requires you to accept your anger, learn to understand it and deal with it. It won't go away on its own. Anger is an opportunity to know and understand yourself better and to learn to resolve conflict. Think back to when you've been angry recently. What does the anger tell you about yourself, what you value and what is going on in your life? Paying attention to your anger will help you deal with it constructively. Once you recognize its source, you can decide what to do with it.

Here are some questions to help you decide how to deal with your anger:

1. What made you angry? What did you want that you weren't getting?
2. How did you respond?
3. Did you get the result you wanted? If not, how could you have responded differently to get that result?

Consider Serena, who is already running late to the office and gets stuck in a slow lane of traffic. She's stressed, frustrated and angry because she's not in control. She recklessly pulls into the next lane, cutting off another car and yelling, "Get off the road! Who taught you how to drive? Idiot!"

What's going on here? Using the questions above as an outline, this is what happened:

1. Serena was angry because the other drivers did not respect her need to go faster.
2. She responded by fighting back—cutting other people off, yelling at them.
3. The result is that when Serena got to the office a few minutes late, she was angry and tense. What she wanted was to get there on time and be ready to get to work.

The next time she's in this situation, she could

- stay relaxed and use the time to think about what she'll do when she gets to the office, and arrive feeling relaxed and ready to work;
- leave a little earlier so she doesn't feel anxious about getting to work on time;
- find another, less busy route to the office.

Take time to evaluate angry moments, what's behind them and what options are present. Sometimes, you'll discover that what you were angry about isn't worth the emotional energy it requires. You may decide to change your thinking and behavior to rid yourself of inappropriate anger. The important thing is to remember that you do have choices and can control your response to frustrating situations.

Kenny Rogers' song, *The Gambler*, says "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run." You can learn to recognize anger and choose to drop it. That's not the same as pretending it isn't there and pushing it away. Dropping it means consciously choosing not to act on it.

Being angry at someone you don't know requires a different response than feeling angry with someone you love. For example, last week I was awakened before five o'clock one morning by the blasting noise of a concrete pad being broken apart in preparation for my patio to be poured. It was irritating to wake up so early after a restless night, but the work needed to be done and chewing out the workman wouldn't have helped at all. It may even have delayed the project if he got angry at me.

I could have continued to be angry and say nothing, but it wasn't worth the emotional energy. I decided to let it go and actually gave thanks he was committed to getting the project done by getting up early. I later found out he worked overtime on another job the night before, and simply had no other time to do the work. How easy it is to jump to conclusions, without knowing the whole story. It is wise to heed the advice that "... *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry*" (James 1:19b).

Anger is a different story when you're in relationships that are important to you, but it is still important to consider whether a situation is worth the emotional energy of anger. I remember once my brother weeded the garden, pulling up all the small plants he thought were weeds, but were actually the beginning of the garden flowers. The damage was done innocently. He thought he was being helpful and was mad at himself for doing the wrong thing. It wouldn't have served any purpose for my parents to get angry with him. Instead, they showed him the difference between weeds and seedlings and enlisted his help to plant new seeds.

Jesus spoke the words which we know as the Golden Rule, "... *Do to others what you would have them do to you*" (Matthew 7:12b). In all these instances—slow traffic, construction noise, unintentional damage—how would you want to be treated? I hope people would help me see what happened, forgive me, continue to accept and love me, and even laugh about it with me.

What to Say

Once you've accepted your anger and understand where it's coming from, if it's an issue that's important to you, you need to know how to express anger in appropriate ways.

The Bible offers some practical guidelines for how to express anger:

- "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*" (Proverbs 15:1). This is at the heart of the assertive response to anger. You have probably seen a harsh response feed anger and can appreciate the wisdom of this proverb. You may even be afraid of people when they're angry because you've experienced and seen how it destroys relationships. "A gentle answer" can mean staying in control, not raising your voice, and focusing on how you feel rather than on accusing the other person.
- "*A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control*" (Proverbs 29:11). Giving full vent to your anger can result in destruction—as with the two women in Alabama. How foolish! And for what? Nothing is solved. You can control your anger and let it motivate you to communicate better and accomplish things for a positive effect.
- "*In your anger, do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold*" (Ephesians 4:26-27). You will get angry, but you don't have to let anger take hold in your life. If you go to bed angry, you may lose sleep, become angrier and be less able to deal with it constructively. When you nurse your anger, it intensifies and gains a foothold in your life, inhibiting your self-control. Anger is a red flag warning you to turn around before you do something you'll regret. Deal with it before it goes that far.
- "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you*" (Ephesians 4:32). Acknowledge that you aren't perfect. Everyone makes mistakes—sometimes you might get mad at yourself because you did something that disappoints you. When that happens, forgive yourself and move on. When someone else makes you angry, forgive them also.

We also do things that disappoint God—making other things in life more important than God, doing things that hurt us or other people. The Bible calls all these things "sin," and sin keeps you apart from God. But God's Son, Jesus Christ, gave His life to pay for all of our sins and because of that God forgives us.

Just as God has forgiven you for everything you have ever done that offends Him, you can forgive yourself or others for the things that offend you. That's how relationships keep going.

How to Say It

So, how can you express anger constructively? The New York Online Access to Health (www.noah.cuny.edu) suggests the following guidelines for expressing anger:

1. *Say what happened.*

Do

- Be very specific.
- Say exactly what happened, when, where and how often.

Don't

- Describe your emotional reaction to it yet.
- Use abstract or vague terms.
- Generalize.
- Guess about the other person's intentions or motives.

2. *Say how you feel about it.*

Do

- Speak calmly.
- State feelings in a positive way.
- Say how you feel about the situation, not about the person.

Don't

- Deny your feelings.
- Unleash emotional outbursts.
- Put the other person down.
- Attack the entire character of the person.

3. *Say exactly what you want the other person to do.*

Do

- Request a small change.
- Request only one or two changes at one time.
- Say exactly what behaviors you want to see stopped and those you want to see continued.
- Ask for something the person can actually do.

Don't

- Merely imply that you'd like a change.
- Ask for too big a change.
- Ask for too many changes.
- Ignore the other person's needs.
- Assume that only the other person has to change.

4. *Tell the other person why.*

Do

- Say exactly how their change in behavior will help you.
- Say exactly how their change in behavior will be good for them.
- Say how bad things will be if their behavior doesn't change.

Don't

- Be ashamed to say why you want the change.
- Threaten.
- Bully.
- Be ashamed to say how important their behavior is to you.

Here is an example of how you might express anger using these guidelines. Suppose your child came home late one evening, and that upsets you.

1. *Say what happened:* "You left a note on the refrigerator last night that said you would be home by ten o'clock, but you didn't come in until eleven."
2. *Say how you feel about it:* "It upsets me when you aren't home by the time you said you would be, because I get scared that something bad has happened to you."
3. *Say exactly what you want the other person to do:* "If you won't be home by the time you said you would, please call and tell me when you will be home."
4. *Tell the other person why:* "If you call, I'll know you're okay. If you don't call, I worry and get our friends concerned when I go looking for you."

You can express anger in a way that respects you and the other person, and clearly communicates what you want to change.

I'm TRYING, but...

"Anyone can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose—and in the right way—that is not easy." Aristotle

You may be saying, "I'm trying to resolve my anger appropriately. I'm following all the rules, but nothing's changing." The truth is, you could master ten different sets of guidelines for expressing anger but still feel like you're not always in control of it. We've dealt only with being angry "in the right way," but there are still the problems of being angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time and for the right purpose.

The core of the problem is our hearts. We are born self-centered. Like the tiger who wanted everyone to say he was the best, we want our own way and don't value others as much as ourselves. That tiger was so focused on himself that he didn't realize the elephant was stronger than he was! Anger can be fueled by illusions of your own goodness—by a self-righteous attitude that says, "I'm right, you're wrong. My way counts, yours doesn't. You're a nobody."

If you want to know how to do anger right, watch God. He is perfect, complete and always sees every side of the issue. He never feels threatened or misinterprets a situation, He is always angered by injustice and sin. You and I, on the other hand, are limited. We misjudge situations, take things personally, feel threatened or hurt and can be vindictive.

Each of us has a deep craving for things to be right—to be right in our relationships with others and with God. Maybe you know the story of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. They wanted things to be right in the very beginning. God created them with His own hands and wanted them to love Him, each other, and everything He had created. They lived in the Garden of Eden, a perfect place where everything was in harmony. God provided everything they needed and told them to take care of the earth. The only thing off limits to them was the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

A time came, though, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command. The harmony and perfect love He had designed were destroyed when they ate the fruit of the Tree. Afterward they were ashamed and hid from God among the trees in the Garden. Let's look at what happened next:

The LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Genesis 3:9-13).

Did you notice what happened there? God asked Adam if he had disobeyed, and he blamed Eve. So God asked Eve what was going on, and she blamed the serpent. "It's not my fault," they both said. They knew they had disobeyed Him, but they didn't want God to be angry with them. They wanted God still to love them and for everything to be right. To do that, they tried to hide their responsibility for the disobedience and blamed the problem on someone else. But it didn't work. Their mistake was still a problem. (If you read the rest of the story, you'll see that God had to evict them from the Garden.) A first-century writer named Paul knew about selfishness and kept trying to overcome it, but he was continually frustrated. "... I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out," he wrote. "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Romans 7:18b-20).

Paul recognized that there was a point at which no matter how much he wanted to do the right thing, he wasn't successful. Ultimately, there was something wrong inside that got the better of him. He was at his limit and could not be the good person he wanted to be.

Can you identify with Paul? Does anger get the better of you sometimes? Do your best attempts at self-control fall short? Do you lack a sense of peace and rightness in your relationships with others? Are you unable to forgive? Do you feel distant from God? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, God invites you to come as you are, with all your frustration and failure. This is how much God loves you "... He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (John 3:16b-17).

Believing in God's Son gives you a right relationship with God right now, today. We all make mistakes, like Adam and Eve and Paul. The mistakes hurt our relationship with God. God has fixed that problem by sending His Son, Jesus, to earth to pay for our mistakes, or sins. By admitting that you do wrong things and knowing Jesus has paid for your sins, your relationship with God is made new again.

Perhaps you think you have to learn to control your anger before God will accept you. That's not the case.

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).

God invites you to be loved and forgiven.

Use the words of this prayer or a prayer in your own words to express the faith God has put in your heart:

Loving God,

Thank You for loving me and for inviting me to come to You just as I am. As much as I’ve tried to deal with the anger in my life, I continue to be trapped in it. I can’t see my way out. I don’t have a sense of peace or rightness with myself or the people in my life or You. Just like Paul, I need You to rescue me. Let Your words of love and peace be more than words I’ve just read. Bring healing and hope to my heart. Give me faith to trust in Jesus and to live freely and lightly in Your love. Amen.

If this prayer expresses your sincere belief, you can trust God’s promise that *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

As you continue to learn to manage your anger in a healthy, productive way, God is with you. Remember to speak gently, use compassion and express your anger assertively. Whenever you feel weary from the effort or frustrated by failure remember this invitation from Jesus: *“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28).

Notes

*Check out LHM's online store
for a variety of ministry resources*

If you would like to get hard-copy booklets
of this item, you can do so by going to

<http://www.lhmgift.org/storefront/products.asp?by=topic&id=7>.

There you will find this and other **Project Connect** booklets,
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