

Dealing with Anger

Anger is one of the most common expressions of emotional distress. At all stages of life, from infancy to old age, people get angry if their needs are not being met. They get angry if they are cheated, lied to, hurt, punished, betrayed, or prevented from realizing their desires. People get angry at others – as a form of self defense – when they feel disappointed with themselves or guilty about something they did (or did not) do.

For many people anger is a difficult emotion to deal with, usually because it is difficult to express. Oftentimes, when it is directed toward an authority figure, anger can be difficult to express for fear of retaliatory punishment. Anger at a loved one is sometimes hard to express because of the risk that the other person may become angry in turn and withdraw his or her love. Some people are confused by their anger at loved ones. They see it as inconsistent with feelings of love and hence become unable to express it, even if they feel justified in doing so. Another reason anger is hard to deal with is that it is often associated with the desire to inflict physical harm.

Psychologists say that anger is the result of frustration, which is the feeling that comes when you are prevented from attaining a particular goal. Therefore, one good way to handle anger is to assess the merits of the goal you cannot attain and the strategy you've been employing to attain it. We often get angry with other people because we ask them for things that they cannot give, or because they are not providing the help we expect from them in attaining our goal. Often, however, we haven't told them what that goal is, or how we expect them to help. So it's no wonder they don't perform the way we want them to.

Before we get angry at someone or something, first ask yourself if your goal is realistically attainable. Have you expected too much of yourself? Have you expected too much of someone else? Have you tried to get what you want in the best possible way? If such self-assessment leads to the conclusion that a goal is not well thought out, then you have no one (or nothing) to blame for your anger but yourself – and this realization usually makes angry feelings evaporate. Remember, most of the time other people don't make you angry. YOU make yourself angry. Being honest and realistic with yourself and being direct with others is one way to prevent anger from occurring, and a reassessment of your goals and strategies is one way to diffuse an anger-provoking situation.

There are times, of course, when feeling anger and expressing it toward someone else is appropriate. For example, anger is justified when someone knowingly abuses you (physically or psychologically) or someone or something you care for. Anger is also appropriate if the person abuses himself or herself. Another time that anger could be deemed appropriate is when someone breaks a promise. It's always wise to be very clear about promises. There would be a lot less anger and frustration if people promised to do only things that they knew they could follow through on.

What about dealing with someone who is angry at you? Being on the receiving end of anger often makes you want to protect yourself from the physical or psychological harm that you imagine will come with hostility. And one way to protect yourself is to get angry in return. Getting angry in return, however, is rarely a good solution. It is better to realize that the angry person is frustrated, disappointed, and emotionally upset. If the angry person were wounded and bleeding, you would certainly try to help. Think of this anger as symbolic of an emotional wound. Be patient with the angry person and try to offer support for his or her feelings. This will help remove the pain of frustration and eventually the anger will subside.