

Dealing with an Angry Person

When dealing with an angry person, it is natural not to know how to respond. Have you ever reacted in a defensive manner, only to make the situation worse? Or found yourself digging in your heels, preparing for a conflict? Anger is a natural and often necessary emotion. It is unrealistic not to feel angry at one time or another. If you do experience anger, your goal should be to deal with it constructively. Learning to eliminate behaviors that aggravate anger, whether your own or someone else's, can help to create an environment where angry outbursts are less likely to occur.

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Reasons for Anger

There are three main reasons why someone would feel angry, either personally or professionally:

- Something has happened to create a situation that is perceived as unfair
- A situation exists over which one has no control
- Control that someone has over a situation has been taken away.

The anger comes when a person tries to make the situation more fair or regain control. Unfortunately, these natural, instinctive behaviors can create an unwanted paradox: The angrier someone gets, the more out of control the person becomes. The more out of control someone feels, the less rational the person's behavior is. Sometimes, feelings of anger can be so intense that an individual loses the ability to remain calm. The less rational someone is, the less likely the person is to succeed in achieving the desired result.

Reactions to Avoid

If you are the unfortunate recipient of such extreme emotions, or if you are an innocent bystander and therefore the target of misdirected anger, it is a mistake to think that any explanation offered can quickly and easily resolve or remove these feelings. It is very difficult to change the perspective of the angry person, especially if you:

- Deny the person's anger or claim that it is not justified: Do not say, "You're not right to be angry because. ..."
- Compete with the angry person for attention: One of the most common reasons people display anger is to focus the attention on themselves. If the angry person feels the attention is being taken away, it is sure to magnify the feelings of anger because the behavior is not achieving the desired result.
- Try to change the focus from what the angry person feels and thinks to what you feel and think: The angry person wants his or her feelings and thoughts to be heard. If the angry individual is not allowed to express these thoughts and feelings, it will probably increase the anger.
- Try to explain away the anger: Past a certain point, anger is not a rational emotion. Therefore, rational explanations are not effective in reducing the other person's anger.

Instead, deal with another person's anger constructively by trying to:

- Let the angry person speak first: Often, just allowing the opportunity to vent anger verbally is enough to diffuse the anger.
- Listen to, acknowledge and validate the angry person's feelings: Use phrases such as, "Yes, I see how that could make you angry," or, "You have every right to be angry," or, "I would be angry too, if. ..."
- Talk about the actual underlying issues that are making that person angry: Anger often is expressed in reaction to a stimulus unrelated to the issue actually causing the anger. Finding and addressing the real problem can resolve a difficult situation effectively.

Conflict vs. Anger

Remember, anger is an individual's emotion; conflict is when that anger causes problems between two or more people. Anger and conflict should not be confused with each other. One person's anger does not make a conflict. Try not to let one person's anger draw others into a conflict. Three common reactions to conflict include:

- Avoidance: Even though it is apparent that one person is angry, the other acts as if nothing is wrong or leaves the situation altogether. This could backfire, as it does not validate the anger or allow the angry person any opportunity to safely express his or her feelings of anger.

- **Impasse:** When a conflict surfaces and neither party is willing to change position or acknowledge the anger of the other, the situation can arrive at an impasse. This unhealthy, unproductive state exists when the parties remain polarized and neither will budge from their anger-causing position.
- **Confrontation:** While it may seem the most obvious and natural expression of anger, confrontation is the least common reaction to conflict. Handled with care, confrontation actually can be the most effective first step in constructively resolving feelings of anger and conflict. Following a problem-solving approach that focuses on the underlying issues and common goals rather than personal attacks, confrontation quickly diffuses a conflict situation. Unfortunately, when handled inappropriately, confrontation also can lead to an escalation of anger and damaging personal attacks.

Conflict as Opportunity

When handled constructively, confrontation can be turned into a positive opportunity for:

- **Innovation:** People finally acknowledge that a problem exists and begin to try to solve it.
- **Dialogue:** If nothing else, confrontation gets people talking rather than seething in silent resentment or remaining at an impasse.
- **Diversity in thinking:** If everyone had the same viewpoint, there would be no conflict. By definition, conflict requires differing opinions. Voicing these opinions brings to light different ways of thinking about one problem.
- **Identification of problems:** If it were not for the conflict, the problems that cause anger might never be identified.
- **Promoting change:** Resolving a conflict requires some compromise or movement in position. Without this, relationships would never change or improve.
- **Boosting morale:** Nothing can damage employee morale or feelings of confidence quite like the resentments that build up when one does not have the opportunity to constructively express feelings of anger or conflict.

It is natural to feel anger. There is no denying that these feelings are a normal part of life. When viewed as an opportunity for change and growth, anger and conflict can be transformed into a powerful tool for improvement and positive results, in both personal and business settings.

Resources

- **National Institutes of Health:** www.nih.gov
- **National Institute of Mental Health:** www.nimh.nih.gov

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