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Anger: Resource or Relationship Killer?

By Kenneth A. Sprang, MA, JD

- *Anybody can become angry, that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power, that is not easy.*

--Aristotle

One of the most troublesome of human emotions is anger. Some of us wear our anger like nitroglycerin—it can explode at any moment with only the slightest stimulus. Others of us bury our anger deep within ourselves and never let it show. Sometimes we turn it so far inward that we become depressed (some therapists characterize depression as “anger turned inward.”) So how should we handle anger anyway, particular with intimate partners or children?

Let me begin by saying that anger is a normal, healthy emotion. It is neither good nor bad—it just is. The challenge with anger is expressing it in an appropriate way so that our anger does not have a damaging effect on us or those who witness or are the object of our anger.

Anger usually arises from some circumstance in which we are emotionally wounded or compromised. The nature, intensity, and object of our anger are usually tied to our childhood experiences. Often, for example, when we get angry with a spouse or domestic partner, we are really venting buried anger at a parent or someone else from our earlier life. What feels like a slight or a deep wound from our present partner may in fact be pretty minor in reality. However, our feelings are intense because deep down in our unconscious there is a memory of some similar event in childhood.

In our couples practice Carol and I often see the phenomenon where one or both partners have a real and intense “charge” about some issue, which may lead to ugly conflicts in which names are called and things are said that should never be said.

That was part of our own experience in the early years of marriage as well. I grew up with an abusive stepfather, abusive of both my mother and the children, and the message was clear that children were to “be seen and not heard.” Therefore, I learned to bury my anger at the abuse and wrongs done to my mother and sister and even strangers, as well as myself. In my first marriage I continued the pattern of stuffing all the anger inside, both past and present. By the time my wife Carol and I met, I had worked through a lot of issues in my own therapy and journey, and was feeling more comfortable about expressing anger.

In those early days I would sometimes get furious with Carol over the silliest little things. I soon realized that there were two reasons. First, it was safe to get angry with her. In my household growing up when someone got angry, someone else was either hurt or abandoned. I discovered that if I got angry that no one would be either hurt or abandoned. Second, I had suppressed the anger for years, and I had a lot to be angry about. I had to discover the source of my anger and learn to express it appropriately.

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When we get angry, that anger is 90% about our “stuff” and only 10% about our partner. Why is it that a set of circumstances, for example an unkempt house, makes one person furious and has no emotional impact on another? The cause of our “charge” is ours, not our partners—90% about us.

Second, we need to own our anger and express *our* feelings. Use “I” messages. For example, rather than saying “You forgot to fill the gas tank again and now we are out of gas. What an idiot you are,” say “I am really angry that you did not fill the gas tank when you were driving the car. It really irritates me to have to run out of gas.”

The anger is yours. Tell your partner, or whomever you are addressing, how *you* feel without judging him or her or their behavior. There are safe, appropriate ways to ask for behavior change, and we teach clients to do that in our Imago training. But demeaning someone in the context of your anger simply makes them defensive, and reduces the probability that they will hear what you are saying.

If a couple say they have never had a fight, I wonder whether one of them is comatose. Healthy persons disagree. Manage anger carefully and it will enrich your relationship. Manage without consciousness and it can destroy your relationship.

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