

# Warning: Anger - Handle with Caution

## Making the Best of Anger in Relationships

Emily Kuhlman

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Every morning, people awaken from their beds, proceed to get ready for the events planned in their day. Imbedded within these events are emotions. These emotions may feel good or bad, or somewhere in between. Some emotions are simple and others, such as anger, are more complex. What is it about anger that makes it so difficult to dissect? Anger is not a black and white emotion but a strong emotion, encompassing a range of feelings on multiple levels. Anger can be a simple annoyance or it can increase on a continuum into intense rage (Chave). It is a response to something that is out of a person's control or can be a response to physical or emotional pain. While complex, anger is a normal emotion. It is not necessarily a good or bad emotion. In fact, anger is a healthy emotion but issues can arise if one allows the wrath of anger to get out of control (American Psychological Association). Anger is also a social emotion. It is typically directed at another person or target. The "target", however, does not have to be another person. It can be the person who is angry (Mills). Psychologists consider anger to be a secondary emotion because it rises from the primary emotions of fear, frustration and hurt (Smalley 20). Because this complex emotion is a secondary emotion, anger can act as a mask for other emotions. In other words, anger can be a cover-up for guilt or it can prevent a person from feeling other emotions (27; Mills).

All emotions including anger reside in the amygdala, the portion of the brain responsible for emotions. The frontal cortex, located directly behind the forehead, is responsible for critical thinking and decision making. The amygdala is a highly powerful mechanism able to react to the outside world fast enough to cause the body to react to the situation quicker than a person is able to respond appropriately, making anger a very tricky emotion (Mills).

There is no single cause of anger. One thing researchers know for sure is that anger is caused by external and internal events. A person can be mad at themselves or upset with someone else. In addition, anger can be caused by stress (Cunningham 118) and the amount of stress has the ability to influence the intensity of one's anger. Past and present issues can also

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provoke anger. Potential threats can cause anger to arise as well. A person may feel angry because he feels threatened or rejected, or he may be experiencing a type of loss.

Anger can be beneficial by motivating people to find strength to persevere through life situations (Mills). Anger helped African Americans and people like Rosa Parks fight for equal rights. Anger can be used as an way to change circumstances. It is important to keep in mind, however, that changing the circumstances does not imply changing another person to change the circumstance. Anger has the power to strengthen relationships but it also has the power to quench relationships (Lerner 123). Anger can be used to frighten others and control people . It can be a danger to others, even if someone is not using his anger to control a person or group of people (Smalley 19). When a person does not take time to process his anger and deal with this emotion, he allows his anger to linger inside. As a result, he harms himself as well as the other people he interacts with. It creeps around seeping through his words of insensitivity. Anger can be detected through a person's sarcasm. It can be felt through physiological reactions because it is a reaction residing in the nervous system of the human body. Some of these reactions include sweating, a rise in heart rate, the clenching of fists and the clenching of the jaw or grinding of teeth. An person who is angry may have feelings of guilt, resentment, anxiety, or irritability (Mills).

While anger has positives and negatives within its emotion, anger deserves respect and attention (Lerner 4). It serves as a radar detector to alert a person that something is wrong and needs to be dealt with. Anger can tell a person that his beliefs, values, and desires are being compromised in one or more of his relationships. It can be a signal of hurt and anger can also tell a person if and when her needs are not being met (1). If anger not dealt with there will be physical and emotional ramifications. These include a lowered sense of self-worth, hypertension, and depression (Smalley 27; American Psychological Association). Dr. Gary Smalley says that anger left unresolved is like a prison cell. It has the ability to make the angry person and others around him miserable (30). Dr. Harriet Lerner supports Dr. Smalley's claim in

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describing anger as a store house of unconscious anger and rage that is continually built up the more a person chooses to bottle up his anger. Anger is a serious emotion worth learning to handle with caution.

Men and women are socialized to handle anger differently in American society. Society lies to men and women regarding the way to handle anger. Men are more welcome to express their anger while women to suppress anger and allow it to linger while they talk about it with their girlfriends. While these are not healthy ways to deal with anger, they are very common methods people use to handle this fragile emotion. Because society is taught to hide their anger, people rarely learn to handle it in a healthy way.

There are a couple different ways people choose to handle their anger. Some people believe verbally expressing their anger is a helpful method. This may come in the form of physical or verbal aggression (Cunningham 39). While verbally expressing anger can be effective, most people choose to use this method ineffectively. This method is commonly known as “venting”. Unfortunately, venting does not provide long term relief. While it may feel good to “get it off your chest”, venting often escalates the situation (PsychologyToday). Research shows that expressing anger makes a person more angry than she was before she discussed the situation making her upset. Expressing anger can destroy relationships because this method creates a domino effect. In the book “Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion” author Carol Tavris says, “Verbal aggression usually fails because it riles up the other person and makes him or her inclined to strike back...”...When a person vents his anger he practices his anger. Another common believed myth regarding anger management is that it is healthy to suppress and bury feelings of anger. People who handle anger this way are sometimes called stuffers (Cunningham 34). Stuffers never want to talk about the situation at hand. They deal with the situation by not dealing with it, hoping the situation will disappear. While it may feel better to not feel the emotions associated with the situation, suppressing anger is the perfect recipe to nurture and grow thoughts regarding anger and the original offense (36). Suppressing anger

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leads to unresolved anger which can paralyze emotional maturity (Smalley 29). It can also lead to passive-aggressive behavior where the offended person puts up a front. The offender acts like everything is fine when he is actually still flustered with the situation at hand. It is a way to “get even” with the other person. In a marriage relationship, the offended person may decide to use this behavior by withholding sex from the offender in retaliation to something he did to upset the other spouse earlier. This behavior shuts down the conversation and hurts not only the target but the person who shot the target. If passive-aggressive behavior continues signs of mistrust, dissatisfaction, and distance arise in all types of relationships including marriage (Slupesky). Finally, buried anger neutralizes the positive attributes of relationships. Marriage counselor Dr. Gary Oliver counseled a married couple who were on the brink of divorce. In attempt to help save the marriage Dr. Oliver challenged the husband to praise his wife for seven days three times a day. In addition, the husband was to write down all the statements he said to his wife over the next week. The husband complied to this request until the next meeting. The following week Dr. Oliver asked about the couple’s week. The wife said that the week was nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing, in her mind, had changed. The husband disagreed reporting he praised his wife 21 times during the week. Ironically, the wife did not hear even one of the 21 praises because she stuffed her anger so deep inside her that she was numb to the positive things that took place in the relationship (Smalley 25). Unresolved anger blocks a person’s ability to let another get close. When a person tries to get close the person retreats to its safe haven. This form of anger darkens a person’s ability to be loving and sensitive toward others. This is a gift God gives Christians. When someone is not able to demonstrate these characteristics he is not able to extend the love and example Jesus showed and asked his people to follow (Smalley 27). Unresolved anger has the potential to rip marriages to shreds. Refusing to solve issues existing in a marriage relationship encourages one to hoard the offense made and manifest pieces of bitterness in one’s heart (Cunningham 90).

Evidently, anger is a sensitive emotion. While it has some positive effects, anger can also do a ton of damage in relationships and has a special effect on marriage. "When two people live under the same roof differences inevitably arise, which requires compromise, negotiation, give and take (Lerner 20)." Anger in marriage is caused by a gap between the what the spouse gives to his mate and mate needs from its spouse. Close contact with another person, as in marriage, feeds the desire for anger. This does not mean that one person in the marriage intentionally finds a reason to be angry, but rather living in close proximity with another person breeds a motivation to change the spouse's ways (Tavris 221). The issue with trying to change a spouse's behavior is that it is impossible task. While it is impossible for the either spouse to change the other, it is possible to take ownership of the anger harbored inside each individual. When one spouse chooses to change his behavior or his response to situations, the other spouse is no longer able to use her old tactics respond to his statements (Lerner 9,25; Cunningham 108). It puts a halt to the spiral couples encounter when anger arises in the relationship (Lerner 14). This change in behavior and response does not refer to forms of abuse but asserting ones thoughts. The risk in asserting feelings and thoughts is that it promotes change. The boat begins to tip, but the only way for change in marriage to occur is venturing through the fire instead of around it. This is vital to dealing with anger appropriately in marriage relationships. With change comes anxiety, even if the end result is good. Change, however, moves married couples closer to being in harmony with each other, the ultimate goal of marriage (44). If a couple decides to go around the issue the marriage remains comfortable but discontent. It is up to the individuals in the marriage to have a happy and satisfied life.

Just as most individuals handle anger by concealing it, expressing it, and placing blame on another, married couples do the same. The same consequences of unresolved anger also apply to married couples. It can be concluded from the research shown thus far that these methods of handing anger are ineffective. How, then, can couples effectively use anger to strengthen their marriage? Recall anger in marriage is caused by a gap between the what the

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husband gives to his wife and what the wife needs from him. When anger arises in a marital relationship both individuals need to find healthy ways to calm down and clearly understand the situation. Developing skills to manage anger effectively help couples to have clearer understanding of each other and the whole marriage. Second, each spouse must take responsibility for their own actions and feelings. If one or both partners focus on trying to adjust the others life to find happiness, they will fail to use the only power they have to enrich their own life, the power to choose which direction the relationship will take based on their own actions (Smalley 8). The catch, however, is that both must be flexible to meet each others needs and be in congruence with what direction the marriage should go next. Otherwise it falls apart. Inflexibility is one component of marriage that plays a role in making marriages crumble. Third, couples must learn to communicate. Anger is a form of communication. Expressing anger assertively means making individual needs known while respecting themselves and others. Using an assertive form of communication to express anger is a way to express anger that does not blame the spouse (Lerner 90). As individuals it is their job to state their thoughts clearly and make their decisions congruent with their values and beliefs. The goal should not be to pursue (fix it for me!!!! I can't figure it out and spell check is being stupid) the other person to change or get him or her to agree with the individual (39). Using "I feel..." statements instead of "you are..." statements retain the person's attention longer and make him or her more receptive to the issue at hand. They maximize the constructiveness of the conversation. Also, when one person is assertive, it propels the other person to be assertive as well. Third, recognize the offender in the relationship did not mean to offend person who is hurt (Cunningham 109) and make an effort to understand the offender. Avoid revenge at all costs and make a point to forgive. Forgiveness means to untie and release the offender and this is what forgiveness does (Smalley 46). The offended mate no longer carries bitterness, resentment and anger. The offender's guilt is release from him or her (Cunningham 90). Without forgiveness the offender is still bound to the other person. Fourthly, learn to value the differences of the opposite sex. Men and women are

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wired differently and it is healthy to be educated about those differences and learn to appreciate them (72). Sometimes marriages may not function the best as an equalitarian marriage but as a complimentary marriage. The latter form of marriage is a form where each spouse compliments the other spouse. They use each others differences to maximize the strength of the marriage. Sometimes marriage relationships reveal issues that make an individual in the relationship angry. This is an opportunity to take care of the anger appropriately in order to grow as a person (109). Life's small irritations left unchecked can grow into major frustrations later and affect ones health, as it was covered previously. There is good that can come from bad situations. Never replay arguments. It is considered to be the equivalent of gossip, which is not healthy and has the ability to do the same amount of damage (100).

In the long run, it is important to balance the amount of time spent together and the amount of time spent apart. When too much time is spent together each spouse sacrifices their own identity for the other person. When too much time is spent apart from each other feelings of isolation arise and personal feelings and experiences are not shares. Finally, recognize what pushes the buttons of each spouse. When those "buttons" are identified, the argument is diffused (109). The important issue over time is to use anger as an incentive to gain self-clarity and discover new healthy ways to navigate relationships. Dr. Gary Smalley says "Love's best kept secret is not to change your spouse or change your job or changer your address. Its change your own course" when anger arises. Changing ones own actions influences the actions of the other person involved in the relationship and can lead to a happier and healthier marriage relationship. We can learn to deal with the fragility of anger and maximize the positive effects of this powerful emotion then reduce its negative effects inside. The result is a happier, healthier self and a happier, healthier marriage. There is almost nothing more satisfying.

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