

## Healthy, Open Communication and Expression of Anger Versus Suppression/Projection of Feelings

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When your child gets angry, how does he or she react? How do you handle it? Anger in itself does not equal disrespect or sin. Almost every child that we have seen in a clinical setting has difficulty in understanding, processing and expressing his or her anger. Typically, when asked what he or she is feeling, the response usually comes down to a sense of confusion. So then, much of the responsibility lies on us as the parents. What example do we set for our children when we are angry? Do we shut our children down when they are hurt, frustrated, sad or angry? How do we teach our children to define, perceive and express anger?

When we make our children feel that they are wrong to be angry, or refuse to validate its importance, we are teaching them that they can't trust their instincts, boundaries and feelings. As children suppress these feelings, the negativities accumulate and they lose their ability to differentiate one hurt from another (like the strands in a clump of cold spaghetti). By nature, kids in their naiveté understand right and wrong much better than we adults. Life's experiences brought us several shades of gray, while they see black and white, fair and unfair, right and wrong, justice and injustice in its simplicity.

*What is Anger?* Anger is a perceived attack against one's sense of self-worth, needs, or convictions; or a strong emotional reaction that results from a sense of being wronged, threatened or hurt.

*Is Anger Good or Bad?* Anger in itself is neither good nor bad. It is what we choose to do with our anger that makes it good or bad, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy. Anger is a natural, physiological, God-given emotion which needs to be managed, not denied or suppressed; so that God will be honored by our responses (*Mark 3:1-5; Romans 5:6-11; Ephesians 4:14, 15, 29, 31, 32*).

Ephesians 4:26-27 states: "Be Angry (*command*), and yet (*choice*) do not sin (*implying anger is not necessarily sin*); do not let the sun go down on your anger (*implying to deal with the anger quickly; or do not bury the anger*), and do not give the devil an opportunity (*implying that the devil seeks to use the anger we hold onto against us*)."

Ps. 4:4 states: "Tremble (*with anger or fear*) but do not sin; meditate (*pray, speak*) in your heart upon your bed, and be still. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness (*Ps. 51:17- a "broken and contrite heart"*), and trust in the Lord (*Ps. 62:8- "Trust in the Lord at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us."*)"

So then, being angry is not the problem; but how we handle and express our anger might be. These verses from the Bible tell us a few other things:

- **Resolve your anger quickly**, or Satan will find an opportunity to work in it. Some of the things Satan does with our anger can be found in Eph. 4:31: Bitterness- "Holding a grudge"; Wrath- "To punish out of anger"; Anger- "To anger with little provocation (*loose cannon*)"; Clamor- "To cry out loud (*whine, complain*)"; Slander- "To speak lies about another person"; Malice- "Unashamed wickedness".
- **Pray about it.** Allow God into the problem or situation. When we go before the Lord in humility and trust Him with our hearts, He will be a refuge for us. God is pleased when we turn to Him and His resources, instead of relying on our own.

Also, when we take the time to stop and pray before we *react*, we give our minds time to disengage from our own feelings and hurt long enough to break the anger cycle. This often gives us more objectivity as we instead *respond* to our offender, in addition to tapping into all of the spiritual resources that God avails us through His Spirit.

- **Choose to be like Christ.** Ephesians 4:32 further states what God will do when we trust Him with our anger, "*And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*" We cannot be "*imitators of God*", "*walk in love*", and be "*tender-hearted*" if we are carrying the oppressive weight of anger on our backs at the same time. We ultimately choose which set of values will define us.

**What Causes Anger?** When we are under pressure; faced with many challenges and overwhelmed; have to deal with interruptions, annoyances or criticisms; in addition to other feelings, we may feel the emotion of anger. But many factors will play into whether or not we actually experience anger, the degree to which we do, and how we express it including:

Perception- Perception, or how a person views a given situation, is a complex dynamic that involves several variables including: temperament/personality; past experiences (*trauma, neglect, etc.*); faulty negative schemes. Some people seem to always perceive situations as offensive, no matter how hard we try to be sensitive and kind. Conversely, this tells us we can also choose to perceive our distressing situations in a Christ-like manner too.

Assumptions/Expectations- Expectations regarding yourself (*critical, egocentric, perfectionistic*) or others (*controlling, trust issues, etc.*), especially when they are unrealistic or negative, can easily trigger an anger response from the other person because of the added pressure put onto them; or it can trigger an anger response in

you if the person does not live up to the standards you placed onto him or her (*expectations*).

Stress- Stress includes any external influence that disturbs the natural functioning and internal equilibrium of the mind and body. Stress is also a normal, natural, God-given emotional response. Without stress, change, growth and productivity would not happen. Stress gets us going and helps us to perform. But stress can turn into distress (*negative stress*) when stressors persist for long periods of time (*high-pressure job, abusive relationship, overextended with responsibilities*), or the nature of the stressor is extreme or intense (*tragic loss, traumatic incident*). Chronic or extreme distress can easily cause ones natural stress management system to become overwhelmed; and anger might be one of the ways that distress vents itself. These anger-based reactions are typically unproductive, or even destructive.

Fatigue and Hunger- When tired or hungry, ones ability to manage his or her feelings becomes increasingly difficult to control. Again, several physiological factors play into why including: blood sugar levels, hormonal levels, neurotransmitters, etc. From infancy throughout adulthood, different people have different levels of sensitivity in how each responds to these changes emotionally; but children, for the most part, will tend to be more emotional the younger they are.

Biological/neurological Factors- Most research finds the limbic system primarily responsible for mediating the experience of anger, and in how we often choose to express those feelings. The limbic system is considered one of the most primitive, basic components of the brain and includes: the amygdala, hippocampus and uncus. These components, in addition to many others, work together to regulate emotion. Studies have not yet been able to determine each area's responsibility, and how each works with the others, but research has proven certainty that the limbic system is the "*emotional brain*."

It is important to understand that infants are all emotional brain. As children grow, the other areas of their brains that allow critical thinking skills, logic, cause and effect, etc. develop. This process continues until your child is about 25 years old! Be patient! Your 16-year-old son might not be intentionally disrespectful; he might be too immature to handle the situation at hand.

### **Positive and Negative Aspects of Anger:**

#### Positive Aspects of Anger:

- Anger can give us strength and determination as it energizes our behavior in response to challenges or threats (*fight or flight reaction*).
- Anger tells us that there is something wrong (*someone crossed over the boundary line*) that needs to be resolved.
- Anger can be a helpful catalyst to express tension and to communicate negative feelings we might have towards a person or situation.

### Negative Aspects of Anger:

- Anger may interfere with our ability to think clearly, and predisposes us to act on impulse without using good judgment; the results are often regretful and consequential.
- Because anger is an antagonist, those actions can potentially escalate and harm others (*physically, emotionally, spiritually*).
- Anger is unproductive in solving complex problems; in fact, it is usually counterproductive. Anger can be a self-imposed handicap.
- Anger is physically upsetting. It involves a strong physiological arousal that, when prolonged, can have detrimental effects on our health (*hypertension, heart disease, immune system suppression, colitis, etc.*).
- Others usually react negatively to anger. It increases frustration level, which usually leads to more misunderstanding and anger.

So then, with these new insights and understanding of anger, you might find it easier to disengage from nonproductive arguments, and not take someone else's anger personally. A person's most *natural* reaction toward an angry individual is to get hooked into their emotion, allowing that projection of emotion under your skin, and allowing that anger to influence how you respond to your offender, usually in turn, fighting fire with fire. Yet, if you take a moment to think before you respond, you will give yourself the opportunity to consider the other options that are available.

Within the familial context, when you, as a parent, take the time to listen to what your child is saying first, and deal with his or attitude afterwards, you will ameliorate the situation far sooner and eliminate many of the peripheral issues that might come about from how your child expresses his or her emotion. This is a common theme between parents and children.

The cycle often goes something like this:

The child is frustrated and attempts to express a legitimate need → the parent perceives the child's frustration as disrespectful → the parent now turns the focus toward the perceived disrespect and chastises the child → the child suppresses his frustration, which is now anger → the parent now feels justified because of the child's response → there is a barrier in communication between parent and child, and the initial need of the child goes unmet. Now there is an additional frustration for the child to bear.

Consider a simple adjustment to the dynamic, which will significantly change its outcome.

The child is frustrated and attempts to express a legitimate need → the parent perceives the child's frustration as disrespectful → the parent pauses for a moment so that the situation can be viewed more objectively, then engages with the child by actively listening → the child expresses his frustration and needs to the parent → the parent is able to validate the child with empathy and love, and meet his needs → the child feels understood and valuable → the parent now has the opportunity to discuss different options to correct how the child *expresses* his needs that would be more productive → the child is more receptive to the parents correction and implement the recommended changes, as modeled by the parent.

When, as the parent, you set the standard of prioritizing your child's personhood over his conduct, he will be more apt to respond to you and to others the same way. When you choose to put all of the distractions to the side and patiently listen to your child attentively and with love, your child will know that he is your priority and important to you. That validation helps to establish a healthy foundation where the child perceives himself as valuable.

Again, as parents we do not intentionally disregard our children's needs. But, if we are more mindful of these subtle dynamics, we will help to instill a healthy sense of self into our children, model effective communication, and ensure a relational connection with them that is free from the contaminants often found in misinterpretation and misunderstanding.