
DEFUSING ANGER: WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS ANGRY

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Anger is a common and natural experience, occurring for most people several times each day. It can have the positive and adaptive value of energizing us to solve the problems that generated the anger.

However, when other people are angry, they can present a risk to anyone around them. Their problem solving may be primitive and reactive, and they may not fully consider the consequences of their behavior. Since angry people cannot always be trusted to act with good judgment, they may present a risk of violence to themselves or to others. Even if we are not the focus of the person's anger, we still feel tense and wary when we are near them because the angry person may still lash out in some impulsive way.

Basic Strategies to Defuse Anger

It might seem that the best thing to do is to keep a distance from the angry person. However, in some situations you care for and feel an obligation to the person who is angry or to another person that is the target of the anger. It may be your child or another family member, a friend, or a student in your class who is the target. It may be a situation where the angry person is directing his or her anger at you, and you cannot escape. Or, it may be a situation where you just feel obligated to help if you can. But, what *will* help and not make the situation worse? Here are some ideas:

- *Manage your own tension:* When you are around others who are angry, your tension level should naturally increase because you cannot trust the angered person to behave rationally. Use relaxation breathing or other techniques to lower your level of tension.
- *Do not escalate with the angered person:* Monitor the volume and pitch of your voice. Speak slowly and keep your volume and pitch low. When you do not escalate with the angry person, it encourages the person to de-escalate.
- *Limit direct eye contact:* This may seem contrary to what you have heard about the importance of eye contact in direct communication. However, when someone is very angry, direct eye contact may be interpreted as a challenge. The eyes communicate feeling, and it will not help if your eyes are communicating defensiveness, or assertiveness, or if the angry person is communicating aggression. Wait to increase eye contact until the situation cools down and when your eyes can communicate compassion and understanding.
- *Respect the angry person's physical space, and yours:* Unless you need to intervene to protect the angry person or others from harm, maintain a distance outside of hitting or kicking range until the threat of physical aggression has passed. Keep your body turned slightly from the other person's body. Squaring off to them might be seen as an aggressive battle stance. When the threat of physical aggression seems to have subsided, stand, sit, or crouch next to the person, facing the same direction. This gives the physical impression that you are on his or her side and will encourage the person to trust you.
- *Encourage, support, and validate the angry person's tension release:* It is crucial for the angry person(s) to reduce the tension before you try to help him or her problem solve and determine what to do about the problem. Listen and reflect the anger while deflecting the push to jump to an impulsive solution. An example of reflecting/deflecting may be: "I should go punch him in the nose!" gets the response of, "You're really feeling angry with him right now."
- *Suspend your judgment during the tension reduction stage:* As much as you can, overlook any inappropriate expressions unless there is a violation of values or family rules, such as using profanity. Offer suggestions for reducing tension, especially if some techniques have been discussed

and deemed acceptable in the household or classroom beforehand. Because angry people are often resistant to direction, make your suggestions as non-directive as possible. ("I wonder if one of those ideas that we talked about for blowing off steam might help right now. What would you choose?").

- *Lead the angry person through problem solving:* Help the angry person identify the primary feelings. Prompt the person to consider both what he or she wants to occur and what he or she wants to avoid. Anger can be a response to other emotions such as fear or sadness, so realizing the initial/primary emotion that triggered the anger can help prepare for the next time anger is experienced.
- *Help the angry person evaluate the process:* Acknowledge the successful management of the anger, no matter how long it takes. You want the angry person to focus on what was effective to increase the probability that he or she will repeat those proactive steps next time, it is hoped sooner. In guiding the angry person through the dysfunctional aspects of the behavior, focus on what he or she would like to change next time, rather than what was done wrong.

Relaxation Breathing

This is the most useful and readily available technique for reducing tension. It not only works in anger management, but any time you are feeling tense or anxious. Actors, singers, athletes, and public speakers use it all the time. It is also great to use when taking tests if you are feeling worried. This technique will not make you feel totally relaxed in a tense situation, but can take the edge off your tension so that you can function more effectively. Here is the technique:

- Square your body so that your torso is not twisted. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair if you are sitting. Position your hands by your sides if you are standing or lying down.
- Breathe in deeply and *sloooowly* through your nose. Fill your lungs.
- Breathe out *sloooowly* through your mouth. Do not push the air out. Just open your mouth and let the air flow out gently by itself. Our bodies relax as we exhale, so the longer you can prolong this breathing out the more relaxed you will feel. Do not hold your breath before starting to exhale. Holding your breath increases your tension instead of decreasing it.
- Repeat this at least four times, but as often as you need to take the edge off your tension. Repeat whenever you start to feel the tension build again.

Summary

Anger is a natural and functional response to perceived threats. When we can help angry people to effectively manage their anger, we support a secure environment for everyone and help the angry person find safe and effective solutions to the problems that generated the anger.

Resources

- Bloch, D., & Merritt, J. (2003). *The power of positive talk*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575421275.
This book teaches communication skills to help parents and children deal with challenging situations at home and school.
- Kaufman, G., et al. (1999). *Stick up for yourself!* Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420686.
An excellent book on assertiveness and self-esteem for children aged 8–12. Includes chapters that address managing feelings.
- Payne, L. M. (1997). *We can get along*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420139.
Intended for preschoolers through primary students. Teaches behaviors to manage conflict.
- Verdick, E., & Lisovskis, M. (2003). *How to take the grrrr out of anger*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575421178.
This well-written book is appealing to all ages. Covers anger management as well as dealing with other children and adults who are angry.

Websites

- Childswork—www.Childswork.com
Childswork/Childsplay produces a number of games that offer ideas and opportunities to practice conflict resolution, including *Pack Up Your Troubles* and *The Conflict Resolution Game*. Telephone: 800-962-1141.
- Creative Therapy Store (Western Psychological Services)—www.creativetherapystore.com
Produces an array of books and games that help children and adolescents to cope effectively with anger, in themselves, and in others. These games include *Furious Fred* for elementary-aged children, *Peacetown* for elementary and middle school aged children, and *Sticks and Stones* for the middle and high school audience. Telephone: 800-648-8857.

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