

Our world is getting angrier, our political discussions, our driving, our recreation for us and our children, our families – it seems like anger is becoming more the norm rather than the exception.

All of us get angry. It is a normal human emotion. Anger tells us something is wrong, and we need to fix it. Anger can give us energy and motivation to right a wrong, solve a problem and find a solution. Anger can also be a destructive force that hurts relationships, ruins health and shatters peace of mind. When anger is habitual or uncontrolled, it can destroy the love in our homes.

Anger is everywhere. Its in the movies – in 1990 Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer starred in the movie “The Story of Us” which portrayed the destructive force that anger can have in a marriage. It’s in the Bible – the very first murder in the Bible when Cain killed Abel shows us what anger can do. It’s in you and me.

WHAT IS ANGER?

Definition: Anger is a strong passion or emotion of displeasure or antagonism excited by a real or supposed injury or insult to one's self or others. (Websters 1928 Edition).

1. Anger is expressed in many ways and because of that we can be deceived into thinking we aren't angry when we really are. We may think we are in control because we don't yell and scream and curse, but instead we give our husband, child or co-worker the cold treatment or write them off from future relationship or even hold their sins over them like a guillotine.
2. Anger can impact our thinking, our actions, or our speech. So often in an argument when it is over we will feel guilty or embarrassed because we have said things out of anger that shock even us.
3. Anger can stir us to do things that wound relationships and hurt others we love.

Misconceptions about anger

4. Many think that anger is a thing, a substance, like an emotional fluid that builds up pressure inside and must be released. We see this in phrases like "I have anger pent up," "I need to blow off steam," "I'm boiling mad," "I need to vent." We see it in solutions like: "I've got to go running to blow off steam; "Hit a pillow to get it out of your system," or "I'm sorry I hurt you, but I had to get it off my chest."

This thinking tends to justify us in hurting other people with our anger.

Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back. Proverbs 29:11

5. Some think anger is a force that we have no control over. We hear "It just takes over and I can't help myself," "You push my buttons," or "He makes me so mad." We are saying "Hey I have no control over this."

The problem with this thinking is that it makes us a victim. With this thinking we will never gain control of our anger. We won't even fight the battle because we don't think it's a winnable battle. We are subject to an uncontrollable force.

6. You may think "That's just the way I am. My family is that way. I'm a redhead so I have a fiery temper. I'm Irish – all Irish have tempers. We can't help that we were born with it." It is clear that your family of origin has a great deal to do with your emotional make-up. But again, to use this as an excuse is to take the power to change right out of your hands.

WHY DO WE GET ANGRY?

- We can get angry because we experience or perceive unfairness, injustice or injury – “What you did is unfair, wrong.” “You hurt me.”
 - A co-worker gets a promotion and you don’t. You think you deserve it – you have a sense of entitlement. When you don’t get it you feel cheated.
 - Someone who you thought was a friend turns on you. It hurts. You get angry.
 - Your husband embarrasses you in front of your family by ridiculing your meal. You are wounded by his humiliation, and that turns to anger.
- Anger can grow from a sense of disappointment that someone or something has gotten in the way of something we want or think we deserve. Our thinking is, “*Something we deserve has been taken from us.*”
 - A young mother gets angry when her children get her up one more time in the middle of the night. She feels her right to a decent night’s sleep has been violated.
 - A couple with adult children becomes angry when their children let them know they will be going to the **other** in-laws for Christmas. Their *right* to have the entire family together has been thwarted.
 - I get angry when Steve forgets his phone and I want to get a hold of him. My *right* to be able to reach him has been taken from me.
 - On a larger scale, we grow disappointed because our lives haven’t turned out as we hoped and that disappointment can turn to resentment and anger. Often this kind of anger is accompanied by a sense of desperation or despair. *I don’t like the man I married, I’m frustrated with how my kids are doing, or I’m overweight and I can’t seem to do anything about it.*
- Anger can grow from disappointment with God
 - We think God has let us down
 - We think God should have prevented the tragedy in my life
 - *I think God is not giving me the baby I want so badly*
 - *I’m angry because God is not taking the pain away*
- Anger can grow from disappointment with ourselves
 - We think we could have stopped something and didn’t (our parents’ divorce, financial ruin, another’s drinking)
 - We blame ourselves for bad choices – a bad marriage

The important point is that often what ignites anger is not what is causing the anger and we need to be able to distinguish between the underlying causes of our anger and the immediate circumstance that triggers our anger.

The other insight about anger is that anger can cause us to take things personally that weren't intended as personal assaults. For example: If a young woman is struggling with fertility and hears a friend going on and on about her baby, she might tend to think that her friend is rubbing it in.

WHAT CAN IGNITE ANGER? ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING!

What triggers anger? Anything and everything. People (strangers & friends), circumstances, inanimate objects, animals, politics, cancelled TV shows; all these things can trigger anger. The interesting thing about triggers is depending on what's going on in your life, the same event could trigger anger or no response at all.

We can be angry at a door that closes on our finger, or a driver who takes our parking place, or a woman who is taking too long to write a check at the grocery store when we're in a hurry. We can be angry at a storm that destroys our plans for the day. We can get angry at God because we don't think He has given us the things we think we deserve.

- Anger is more likely when our reserves are down, and when the demands on us are greater than we are able to bear in our own strength. It comes at times of weakness when we are fatigued, hormonal, drained, or financially strapped.
 - Normally it doesn't bother me too much when Steve leaves his socks on the floor. I might think, "That's just Steve, too busy to pick up after himself." *Love covers a multitude of sins*. But, when I am pressed for time, trying to get things picked up for company, or if I am angry at him about something else, or exhausted, those same socks become a trigger for my anger.
- Circumstances can stir anger. You're late to the airport to go on vacation, and your car breaks down. You're angry that Christmas is coming and you're broke.
- Things can trigger anger. *I've slammed the dishwasher door shut when I ran into the open door and bruised my shin. I can't figure out this dumb universal remote that my husband spent \$200 for.*
- Reliving past hurts can trigger anger. Things are moving forward in your life, and a *thought bomb* comes into your mind about something your husband did to you and you relive the experience and the anger comes flooding back in.

HOW IS ANGER EXPRESSED?

There are two ways we express anger – I like to call them volcanic anger and crock-pot anger.

1. Volcanic anger. This is the hot-tempered, explosive, spewing kind of anger. People who have volcanic anger think they can't control it so they let it rip.
 - a. Verbally – Volcanoes allow their anger to erupt in hurtful, destructive words -raise their voice, verbally blast, curse, yell, name-call. Perhaps you've heard the children's rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Forget it, it's not true. Words wound and do great damage. Often, they are never forgotten.

It's like a gunshot wound. Let's say a friend gets angry at you and shoots you in the leg. She is immediately sorry and asks your forgiveness. You forgive her. How's your leg? It will still take time to heal. Sometimes, it's harder for us to see emotional wounds, that words can cause, but they can be just as deep.
 - b. Physically – Volcanoes allow their anger to result in destructive actions. This is where child abuse, spousal abuse, fights from road rage, etc. comes in.

Often people with the explosive kind of anger get over it as quickly as it came. They think a simple *I'm sorry* should make it better, and often get angry because the person can't move on and get over it.

The Bible views this kind of person as incredibly weak – Proverbs 25:28 says, "*A person without self-control is like a city that has been broken into and left without walls.*"

Problems

When you lose control of your anger things can spin so out of control, escalate, and destroy people, relationships, and things. I don't know if you remember the story back in 2000 of the two women in Alabama who got caught up in road rage? One mother actually wound up killing another mother. The destiny of two families was changed forever because of a 20 minute encounter.

Volcanic anger is learned behavior. People have learned they can intimidate people and control situations with this kind of behavior.

We normally associate this kind of anger with men, but I've seen many, many women who express their anger in this destructive, volcanic manner.

2. Crock pot anger – lower heat but it still gets the job done.

Crock-pots indirectly express themselves and leave the interpretation open to the recipient of the anger. It is often hard to see the connection between what the person is doing and the fact that they are angry. This kind of anger is more socially acceptable but it can be just as destructive. It can create distance in a relationship, and the other partner doesn't know why. They are left to guess. This kind of anger can go on, and when it is not resolved it can turn to bitterness. Bitterness can poison your life and the lives of people around you.

- a. Rather than attacking, crock-pots tend to withdraw emotionally from the situation or the person.
- b. Crock-pots tend to punish people in more subtle and unrelated ways. Some people call this passive-aggressive behavior. We don't deal with the thing that made me angry, we make it known with other methods. We are sarcastic, critical, argumentative, or snippy. We may withhold doing things for others, being kind, loving, or having sexual relations.

This is my personal struggle. My husband will say or do something that "gets my goat." (Funny saying, but I don't even admit that I am angry.) For example, he says, "We need to tighten our belts and stick to our budget." My thinking is "Excuse me but you are the one who needs to stick to a budget." I hold anger in my heart because I am feeling unfairly judged AND I am feeling that my personal rights to spend money how I want is being thwarted. I go on with life, but I do not feel love towards Steve, nor do I express affection or want to have sexual relations. I get critical and don't agree with him on anything. It affects the whole of our relationship, and he has no idea what the problem is.

This anger can also punish people who did not cause the anger. In psychology this is called displacement. Your boss angers you, but you are afraid to express your anger on him, so you come home and take it out on your husband and kids.

- c. Crock-pots make you guess what's going on by their body language – they give the cold shoulder or the look. Crock-pots like to act like they are under control but want you to know you will have to pay the price for making them angry.

EXPRESSING AND DEALING WITH ANGER IN A HEALTHY WAY

We can't eliminate anger from our lives. It is a normal human emotion. Contrary to what you may have been taught, the Bible teaches that we can deal with our anger in a positive healthy manner.

One of the most important principles is to learn to put a gap between your anger and your expression of anger. We often talk about counting to 10 or taking a walk when we're angry.

The Bible in James 1:19 counsels us to *"be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger."* The quicker you respond after becoming angry, the more likely your response will be destructive or unhelpful. Your knee-jerk response is rarely the best response

What do you do in the gap?

Be aware of your anger – It helps to acknowledge the fact that you're angry.

Try to understand why you are angry – What brought it about, how did you contribute to the situation?

Begin to think through the best response to the situation or person. Use this time to think about the situation from the other's perspective. You may find that your initial anger was unwarranted. You may decide that kindness, sympathy, and understanding will be more productive than unleashing your fury.

If someone cut you off, the best response is to let it go and not try to punish the person

If your husband turned off "so you think you can dance" to watch the Lakers, charging him to grab the remote may not be the best response. It may be that your best response is to wait and let him know that his insensitivity hurt you, or get TIVO. If you wait, you will most likely have better understanding and control so that your communication will be clear and have a greater chance of making a positive difference in your relationship.

If you decide to confront another person about the situation, plan a time to do it when the person will have the best chance of accepting what you need to say. Use timing, tact, and wisdom with the goal of strengthening the relationship, not simply venting your anger.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR UNDERLYING ANGER?

So we've talked about how to deal with specific situations, but what about the underlying causes for anger in your life? Sometimes, we can get used to resentment and anger so that we carry it with us all the time under the surface. Triggers can bring it to the surface, but the problem is that we never really deal with the truth of what is going on in our hearts. So what do we do?

1. Gain understanding into your anger. Ask yourself:
 - a. "Why do I get angry?"

Seek to understand the reasons for your anger. Find out what is at the heart of the problem. Dealing with anger producing situations becomes easier when you know what you are really angry about. This is not something you can do when you are angry. Wait until you are calm.

- b. When do I get angry?

Look for patterns / look for early warning signs – Keep an anger journal. Record what makes you angry throughout the day. Anger can become such a habit that we aren't even aware of what we are thinking, saying and doing. Do I get angry during my menstrual cycle? Do I get angry when I'm tired? Hungry?

- c. How do you express your anger? What do you say and do? Are you a volcano or a crock pot? Do you accuse, get sarcastic, critical?

It is very helpful to have a close friend to help you with this. It is difficult if not impossible to see ourselves objectively.

Journaling is very effective in helping you see patterns. As you journal, take the three questions as guidelines as to what to journal during an angry time in your life.

If you find that you are angry a lot, and small things make you angry, that may reveal a self-focus, a lack of thankfulness, a sense of entitlement, or a victim mentality. Those attitudes produce angry people. If you attack the underlying attitude, you will begin

When you let people make you angry, you are actually giving them control over your emotions.

2. Start dealing directly with the underlying causes

This is something that is very difficult to do alone. David in the Old Testament sought the help of God. In Psalm 139:23-24 He prayed:

Psalm 139:23-24 (NASB95)

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴ And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

I have found that I can deceive myself. In fact Jeremiah 17:9 says that our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick.

As we've said before, it is helpful to have a friend help you.

Here are some areas to explore

- a. Is there something that happened to you in your past that you've never resolved? Perhaps someone hurt you and you've never forgiven them. It could be a situation you suffered as a child and you still hold it against yourself or against God.
- b. Are you overly obsessed with yourself? This sounds harsh, but so often, we have a sense of entitlement that we aren't even aware of.
- c. Do you have unreasonable or unexpressed expectations of others where they are constantly letting you down and stirring anger in your heart? It may be that you need to drop those expectations, or if you believe they are legitimate, discuss them with the other person involved so that you are working from the same page.

BITTERNESS; WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T DEAL WITH ANGER

What happens if I refuse to deal honestly with my anger?

Bitterness sets in.

Hebrews 12:15

¹⁵See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled;

What is bitterness?

When anger becomes a way of life, it settles in your soul, spoils and becomes bitterness. Bitterness is that poison of the soul that happens when you are angry so much that it defines you as a person.

Dealing with bitterness?

The writer of Hebrews describes bitterness as a root. When we deal with bitterness, we cannot deal with the surface situation, we must go to the root.

One thing I learned from my mom when pulling weeds—you have to get the whole thing, root and all, if you don't want it to grow back. The same is true about bitterness. You have to dig it out, root and all. It won't help to say, "I just won't let him bother me anymore," or "I just won't have anything to do with her," or "She's out of my life. I'm done with her." Cutting the person off, or ignoring the situation won't make it better, and it won't make it go away.

The solution is forgiveness (Eph 4:32, Col 3:12-14). Who has hurt you? Who has offended you? Who has harmed you?

FORGIVENESS THE PATH TO FREEDOM

What is forgiveness? The simplest definition of forgiveness is to drop the charges and give up the right to bring up that offense again. You cannot *forget* what someone did to you, in fact, our brains are imprinted with everything that has ever happened to us. But as God does with us, you can determine to “stop remembering” their offense. What this means is that you surrender the right to relive the offense in your mind which rekindles the anger in your heart.

Why is forgiveness so hard? When we’ve been hurt, it is our native response to want to make the one who hurt us pay. You see it in children all the time. Two kids are playing and one, either accidentally or on purpose, hurts the other. What’s the response of the wounded party? Often it is to retaliate with an even greater blow. Guess where everything goes from there?

Forgiveness is also hard because we lose leverage in the relationship. When someone sins against you, they *owe* you. Forgiveness is cancelling the debt and putting the relationship on a level playing field again. Often, it is hard to surrender that newly found power.

In an ongoing relationship, forgiveness is often for the same sin repeated over and over again. My husband, Steve, is not a very creative sinner. He doesn’t surprise me with new failings. He just repeats the old ones over and over and over and over and over again. It’s interesting that Peter asked Jesus how many times should we forgive our brother. He brought up 7 times thinking he was doing great with that number. Jesus responded, *not 7 times, but 70 times 7*. We think that if those we love do the same sin over and over again, it’s because they weren’t sorry the first time. The reality is that all of us have weak areas of our lives and when we fail, it will most likely be in that area of weakness.

Forgiveness is an act of the will. For the Christian, forgiveness is also an act of obedience to the Lord because we are commanded to forgive as we have been forgiven. (Luke 17:3-10, Eph 4:32, Col 3:13)

It’s important to understand that you will almost never feel like forgiving a person who has wronged you. The feelings heal after forgiveness, not before.

Forgiveness is not minimizing nor excusing the offense. Forgiveness begins with the clear understanding that you have been wronged. If you are angry without cause, the challenge is not to forgive, but to deal with your own hurtful reaction.

Forgiveness is not based on merit (Col 3:13). Forgiveness is essentially an act of grace. If your husband *worked his way out of the doghouse by doing the dishes for a week, don't say I forgive you because he has paid his debt.*

Forgiveness is the beginning of the battle. The next step is to begin the process of letting go of your anger. The deeper the hurt, the more difficult this battle is. Our tendency is to want to *replay the tapes* and relive the experience. All that does is rekindle our anger and begin our internal battle all over again. A great alternative to replaying the other person's failure is to begin a thanksgiving list of the things that the other person has done for you. It will help to give your mind something to work on as you are allowing the anger to dissipate from a lack of fresh fuel.

How do you deal with forgiving someone who has contributed nothing to your life (perhaps a drunk driver who injured someone you love)? What is important is to understand that your lack of forgiveness will tie you to that person. Forgiveness is actually what sets you free from being tied to the actions of the person who hurt you.

“Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.” William Arthur Ward (dedicated scholar, pastor, teacher)