

Workplace Relationships

Temper, Temper: There Are Better Ways To Handle Anger

Ron and Sally tend to let mild annoyances build up until this is too much to bear. Then, they become irritable with co-workers. Occasionally, they lose their temper.

Donna bursts into tears when she is angry, so it is not surprising that she is afraid to express anger at work. Instead, Donna denies her anger and stores it up inside. Needless to say, Donna carries a lot of work-related stress with her.

Of course, there are other undesirable ways to handle anger. Some people displace their anger. Instead of expressing their feelings at work, they vent their anger on spouses, friends, and relatives who were not involved with the situation that caused the anger. And some of us turn our anger inward and blame ourselves for all the unpleasant situations in our lives.

"Holding anger in can be unhealthy," says EAP counsellor Beth Rust. "It creates stress and can be destructive emotionally and physically. Research suggests that, when people withhold anger, the effects can be negative."

Beth Rust also points out that how you express anger at work often differs from the way you express anger in a personal relationship. She says that you must be aware of what is acceptable in the specific workplace. Rust stresses the importance of keeping in mind that you want to accomplish positive results by expressing your anger.

If losing our tempers may lead to strains in work relationships, and holding our anger in can lead to health problems, how can we handle this powerful human emotion called anger? Simply by giving up these two options, we leave ourselves open to discovering some of the healthier alternatives open to us. But first we must try to understand and recognize anger.

What Causes Anger?

EAP counsellor, Gwyn Jones, explains anger this way: "Traditionally, we think of our feelings as belonging to a world of cause and effect, for example, 'He called me a name - I felt angry.' This is to say, he made me angry. And yet we know that this is not the way our feelings work. In between the stimulus (his name calling), and the response (anger), comes our mental filter - the way we think about the stimulus. In other words, it is our perception of the situation that causes our anger.

Further, people with a double load of stress in their lives - difficult situations at home as well as at work - are particularly susceptible to losing their cool."

Defusing Anger

"We have the power to short circuit our anger," says Jones. "First, recognize that anger is building. Physical expressions are as follows: muscles tensing, heart racing, speaking louder or going quiet, and/or feeling sensations of heat. We also hear anger in our thoughts - 'hot thoughts' like, 'I'm going to show him he can't walk over me,' or 'I know how to fix him.' These thoughts indicate that we are angry. What's more, when we continue to play these thoughts, our anger intensifies."

"Developing a 'time out' contract with ourselves is a useful strategy," says Jones, who suggests:

1. List the physical symptoms you have when anger builds.
2. List "hot thoughts" you usually have such as, "I can't let him get away with this."
3. Call time out with yourself.
4. Try deep breathing - breathe in through your nose for eight seconds, and out through your mouth for sixteen seconds. Repeat several times.
5. Change your thoughts. "I'll show him!" becomes "What will best help me right now?" "He always does this to me," becomes "I'm the only one who can make a fool out of me."

Jones points out that old habits die hard, and new behaviour takes some practice. "If it were that easy, we would be doing it already," he says. "A lot of people find it helpful to list 'cool thought' replacements. Rehearsing with a particular situation in mind can help break old habits."

Being Assertive

Although anger often has adverse consequences, Jones believes that anger can also be useful. There are times when "it energizes us, causes us to take more action, and leads us to our being more assertive." He says, "Being assertive means expressing feelings and beliefs in helpful and honest ways. Assertiveness and effectiveness go together." However, Jones cautions: "It is important to realize that there are some areas over which we have little control and some where we have a greater say."

If you decide to resolve a situation by talking it out, you will find the following guidelines from EAP counsellors Beth Rust and Gwyn Jones useful:

- Be prepared - rehearse what you are going to say.
- Choose a time for the discussion when you and the other person are feeling your best.
- Consider having a third person present.
- Describe your situation in a clear and objective way.
- Bear in mind that "I" statements tend to be heard better than "you" statements and accusations.

- Avoid judgmental words like "should" and "ought" and "must." These words only create barriers.
- Stick to the point and be brief.
- Avoid dumping all at once.
- Let the other person know you are listening.
- Use tact and humour - they are always helpful.
- Be realistic in your expectations of a solution.

Managing Anger

If it is not in your best interest to be assertive in a particular situation, we think that you will find these tips for managing anger helpful:

- Withdraw from a volatile situation, if you think you are going to lose your temper. Simply excuse yourself and ask if the discussion can be continued later. Take a break and go out for a walk or have a coffee. In other words, take time out to regain your composure.
- Deal with mild annoyances before they get out of hand. Unpleasant situations in the workplace are often caused by poor communication or misunderstanding. Ask for clarification to make sure that you have interpreted the person's remarks correctly. Remember that communication is a two-way process.
- Vent your anger. Get rid of those negative emotions through physical exercise. Rather than yelling at your spouse or children after an unpleasant day at work, try a game of tennis or handball or an activity or exercise that you enjoy and find helpful.
- Writing about the incident in a calm and cool manner will also help you to vent your anger. Moreover, it can help you to understand and evaluate the situation.

Remember the people in the scenarios at the beginning of this piece - that they had problems handling anger at work? We know now that Ron and Sally can deal with minor annoyances, before they become major ones. Donna can learn assertiveness techniques that will give her the confidence and skills necessary to talk things out. There are no stock solutions that can stop people from getting angry. The point is that they can learn to handle their anger constructively, and so can you.

If you had to list all the things that make you lose your temper, how many pages do you end up with? And how many of those things you have reacted badly to, that you wish you could have handled better (behaviour that you would rather not repeat)?

Anger is such a complex emotion that it really is very hard for anyone to deal with it alone. Sometimes just talking with someone can clear up a problem situation.

An EAP counsellor will listen, and if you want, work with you to create a personal "game plan," then practice it with you. Your new "game plan" can produce "pro-active," positive results to anger, instead of the "reactive," negative ones that so many of us are used to experiencing.

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