

Anger: Don't Let It Destroy Your Life

It has been said that 90 percent of all counseling situations about relationship difficulties involve the problem of anger. For some people, anger is a serious personal problem. Others have the challenge of living or working with people who don't control anger. Concerning such people we say, "It doesn't take much to set him off," or "You have to walk on eggshells around her."

I have known people who are always angry and others who store up their anger for periodic (often unpredictable) explosions. Even more frustrating are those who *publicly* hide their tyrannical ways behind a pleasant facade. How sad when strangers receive more kindness than our closest loved ones! Many relationships have been destroyed by anger.

What is anger? It has been described as a strong feeling of irritation or displeasure. It is an emotional readiness to retaliate. Anger can be directed toward people, things, or circumstances. It can be rational or irrational; beneficial or destructive. Anger is often related to our sense of right and wrong. The person who does not feel strong displeasure toward evil is greatly deficient in moral character. In this sense not all anger is wrong. Scripture clearly associates a righteous anger with God. Yet, unlike humans, God is only angry when it is proper to be angry.

"Sometimes," writes D.A. Carson, "we get involved in a legitimate issue and discern, perhaps with accuracy, the right and the wrong of the matter. However, in pushing the right side, our own egos get so bound up with the issue that in our view opponents are not only in the wrong but attacking us. When we react with anger, we may deceive ourselves into thinking we are defending the truth and the right, when deep down we are more concerned with defending ourselves.

In none of the cases in which Jesus became angry was his personal ego wrapped up in the issue. More telling yet, when he was unjustly arrested, unfairly tried, illegally beaten, contemptuously spit upon, crucified, mocked, when in fact he had every reason for his ego to be involved, then, as Peter says, 'he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats' (I Peter 2:23). From his parched lips came forth rather those gracious words, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Let us admit it - by and large, we are quick to be angry when we are personally affronted and offended, and slow to be angry when sin and injustice multiply in other areas."

The Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the need to control anger. In the Proverbs, the person who has no control over his spirit is compared with "a city that is broken into and without walls" (Proverbs 25:28). "The fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 29:11).

How do you handle anger? Some people internalize it. Instead of communicating, these people withdraw from conflict. They leave the room, hide behind work or other activities, even turn to substance abuse as a means of escape. Sadly, this response never resolves anything; it fails to deal with root causes of anger.

Internalizing anger often leads to more subtle forms of expression - manipulative mood swings, sarcastic verbal stabs, slander, and other less aggressive responses. Equally tragic is the person who internalizes anger at work, for example, and redirects it to undeserving family members. The scenario looks like this: The boss yells at an employee. The man takes it out on his wife. The wife yells at the children. The children kick the dog. The dog bites the cat ... It may sound humorous, but in real life it's misery.

Others externalize anger with direct aggression. When this person is aroused to anger, he lashes out with a vengeance. He turns to verbal and physical attack on the object of anger (or the most accessible object). This is the response that often leads to violence and abuse. It leaves a trail of broken people and damaged property - tending to multiply until a major crisis occurs.

Many marriages have ended because one party refused to handle anger properly. What is the proper way to handle anger? Scripture says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city" (Proverbs 16:32). The emphasis on the need to be slow to anger warns us to respect its power and control. It is wise to be aware of anger producing situations. Knowing the sources of anger can help us minimize it.

Many sources for anger could be identified. An unorganized life, over commitment to low priorities, unresolved guilt, hurtful experiences from our past, unfulfilled expectations, violation of legitimate or perceived rights, feeling misunderstood or unappreciated, imposed circumstances out of one's control - these are all potential sources of anger.

Learned patterns of anger are much deeper. Parents who do not handle anger properly pass their habits to their children. Scripture says, "Do not associate with one given to anger, and with a wrathful man do not keep company, *lest you learn his ways* and get yourself in a snare" (Proverbs 22:24-25). People with serious anger problems should also consider the possibility of deeper psychological or biological causes.

To handle anger constructively, we need to identify the sources without blaming our present behavior on others. To overcome destructive anger, we must take full responsibility for our actions. Rationalizing and justifying anger only leads to more destructive consequences. Acknowledge that you can control your anger with God's help. Admit your failure to properly value the objects of your anger. Avoid reading more into the actions of others than necessary. Refuse to allow anger to build up. Deal with it daily! Scripture says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26).

Communicate instead of exploding. "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression" (Proverbs 19:11). Replace anger with kindness and love - remembering the love God has shown to you. Life does not have to be destroyed by anger!

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