

# Dealing With Others' Anger

Fact Sheet No. 10.237

Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson\*

Having problems with others is normal. Whenever two or more people are together with different needs and wants, they can get angry and conflicts can arise. One of life's many important lessons is to learn how to handle these conflicts well, especially when someone is angry at us. Every week there are stories of emotions gone awry. Knowing how to "de-fuse" a tense situation might save a life – yours or a family member's.

## Steps to Avoid Violence

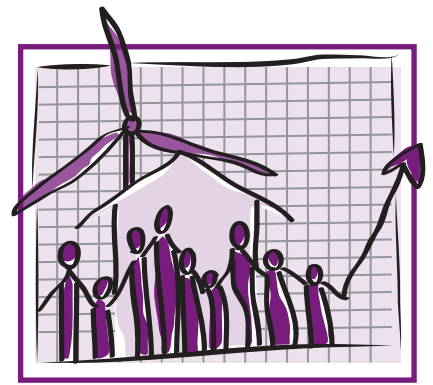
Therapists and educators recommend a combination of communication, assertiveness and problem-solving strategies. When someone is angry at you, first take steps to protect yourself from any potential violence (leave, go to a safe house, wait until your partner is sober, etc.). Often a "time-out period" reduces the hostility level. Experiment with the following five steps. (The first three steps are from Dr. David Burns's book, *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*.)

1. Ask, "What is it you're angry at me about?" and listen for the unmet expectation, need, want or demand.  
Example:
  - "So, you want me to drive you both ways to your new job five days a week, right?"
  - "So, you want me to run the meeting like a club president would, right?"If the unmet expectation is not clear to you, you can always ask, "What is it you want now?"
2. Be as empathic and understanding as possible. Suspend all judgment. Genuinely strive to look at the situation through the other's eyes and point of view. "What did you hear me say? See me do? What do you expect of me?" Sometimes the

urge to defend yourself is overwhelming, but don't! Instead, ask, "What did that mean to you?" If appropriate, paraphrase the other person's content and feeling.

Example:

- "So, after you told me I'd just have to drive you to and from work because this is your first job and you worked really hard to get it and I said, 'Let's talk about it later,' you felt like I was putting you off. Do you think that means I don't care as much about you as I care about your brother?"
  - "I really want to see your viewpoint. Let me see if I'm getting it. It sounds like you're saying I've been too rigid to push the group to establish and follow written by-laws. It also sounds like you want me to be more flexible with the agenda, right?"  
Listen and paraphrase until the speaker indicates you've got the point.
3. Agree where you can honestly do so. No matter whether your critic is wrong or right, find some way to agree. Having a "we-can-solve-this-problem attitude" goes a long way in conflict management.  
Example:
    - "I have to agree that I was irritated and in a rush when you announced your new job. You're right – it would have been better if I'd explained that I had to go to the office in five minutes for an important meeting, but that I really do care about you and your new job and would love to hear about it later."
    - "You're absolutely right, I did follow a rigid agenda and I wasn't very flexible. Perhaps you want the group to have more input into the meeting's agenda. I must admit, I'm still learning how to lead a group to accomplish its goals."
  4. Ask, "What do you want (of me) now?"  
By the time you take time to listen for the unmet expectation or demand, empathize with the other person's feelings and viewpoint, and indicate



## Quick Facts

- Knowing how to "de-fuse" a tense situation might save a life — yours or a family member's.
- Being an abused child increases the odds of being involved in future delinquency and young adult crime by 40 percent.
- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent and being arrested for a violent crime in young adulthood by 38 percent.
- Sixty-three percent of boys and young men, 11 to 20, arrested for homicide, killed men who were abusing their mothers.

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where you agree, much of the intense anger often disappears. A clue that the time is ripe for asking this question is when you hear an audible sigh as the angry person takes a deep breath, and the energy shifts. Once you and your critic calm down and lower the emotional ambience from rage or anger to frustration or irritation, you'll be in a better mood to communicate.

When you have decreased your anger to irritation, you can ask directly, "What is it you'd like (from me) now?" Example:

- "You're my parent and I want you to show you care about my life, too, by driving me to and from work four days a week."
  - "Well, what I want is for you to not be so rigid with the way you run our meetings."
5. Negotiate to a win-win position. At this point you can explain your viewpoint tactfully and assertively and negotiate differences. Example:
- "I tell you what, since your job is not that far from school and 3:30 is a busy time for me, why don't you walk to your work from school and I'll pick you up at 6:30 every day? Can we try this for a couple of weeks and see if it works?"
  - "OK, so you want me to run our meetings more flexibly, right? What if I use enough structure from Roberts Rules to keep meetings from turning into shouting matches, but make sure they end at a reasonable hour? I'm also willing to ask for old and new business and bring up a few of the most important issues. I can then open it up to the group for discussion. I'd also like to ask the group members to decide when they want to end that meeting and negotiate the amount of time for each agenda item. This way you will get the flexibility you want, and I will have enough structure to keep our meetings running smoothly. What do you think? Shall we try it for a couple of months?"

## Unresolved Conflicts

A warning: Not everyone wants to work out a "win-win" solution to a problem. If you use some of these steps and find yourself feeling more angry for what the person is saying or doing to you, stop and ask, "What's going on here? Am I feeling

like I'm losing and the other person is winning?"

If so, you might say: "I started this conversation with an I-win-you-win attitude. Now I feel like we're into a 'You-win-I-lose' situation. Is that what you want? If it is, then are you willing to shift with me to an 'I-win-you-win' attitude?" If so, proceed. If not, it may be time to seek the help of a neutral third party who is skilled at mediating or negotiating.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we get a lot of criticism from someone. If we don't protect ourselves from heavy doses of negative criticism, we can make ourselves depressed. In these situations, ask the other person what he or she is angry about and what they want. After listening well and using the steps described above, you can say: "I know you're angry at me and I'm sorry I didn't give you what you needed. I hope someday you can see I did the best I could."

Then let it go. Instead of focusing on the guilt and shame the criticizer wants to give you, keep your thoughts focused on how you did your best.

These concepts and strategies will likely help people of good faith and those convinced of the viability of handling anger. For those who are willing to feel hostile and still stop themselves from expressing hostility in hurtful ways, these steps can help. However, if you have a situation where someone has trouble keeping a lid on their hostile feelings and you are in danger of being abused, then leave, go to a safe house, or seek professional counseling (from your local crisis center, victim assistance, child abuse hot line, mental health, licensed marriage and family therapists, counselors, etc.).

Learn how to stand up for yourself or get out of a conflicted relationship. Read John Gottman's book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*.

## Dealing Well With Others' Anger: Can We Make a Difference?

It is in everyone's best self-interest to develop skills in anger and conflict management. The better we reduce the intensity of an angry family or work situation, the better our chances are of preventing violence. When we take a broad view of the causes of anger and violence in our communities, it appears that many juveniles and young adults arrested for

Despite my determination, I keep running into a serious obstacle, called "other people."

– Ashleigh Brilliant

violent crimes were abused and neglected as children. When they were small, they learned they could not trust those close to them. According to a 1992 National Institute for Justice Study:

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Where there is violence today, often there was a past of abuse and neglect. Is it possible, in some cases of mass murders in the work place, that this same experience of being disappointed by trusted employers and friends may contribute to a person taking violent action?

Regardless of the cause, the consequences of anger are worth averting early.

Much of the fear of violence between people is that it appears to be random, unprovoked and unexplainable. However, according to Uniform Crime Reports (U.S. Department of Justice, 1992), 46 percent of the murders in 1991 were committed by someone known to the victim (a spouse, family member, friend or acquaintance) compared to 15 percent by a stranger. In 39 percent of the cases the relationship between assailant and victim was not reported.

According to a more recent Justice Department study (Mills 1994: U.S. Department of Justice, 1994), husbands and wives were the family members most likely to be involved in family murders (41 percent). When other assailants known to the victim were added, 64 percent of victims were murdered by someone they knew. Only 20 percent were killed by strangers. (The relationship was not reported in the remaining 36 percent.)

For these reasons, effective caring and communication can have some effects: first by helping us feel less helpless

in responding to others when they are angry, and second by assertively guiding the angry person into more constructive action. In these tense, angry situations with family members and co-workers, there are opportunities for us to intervene in ways that rebuild trust at home and work and help diffuse anger to a lower level.

Substantial evidence suggests that chronic anger, hostility and depression affect a person's physical health and recovery from illness. According to psychologists, Howard S. Friedman and Gary R. VandenBos (1992), "When we add in [to the substantial evidence] the influences of these emotions on homicides, suicides, smoking, drunken driving, and failure to take prophylactic measures (from condoms to seat belts), we have enumerated most of the causes of premature death in developed countries."

So, if you know how to manage someone else's anger, you may save not only your own life but the life of an angry family member.

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