

Anger management

Chandanie G Hewage

Senior Lecturer in Psychiatry, Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna, Galle.

Our day-to-day life is full of work related responsibilities as well as family responsibilities causing stress. It is not uncommon for us to get angry every now and then. We encounter colleagues, superiors, patients, family members including children and others we associate with who are angry. It has become part of our daily life.

Anger is a completely normal human emotion. It is, at times, a secondary emotion because some people express sensitive inner feelings as anger. It is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Anger is occasional in most people and does not interfere with day-to-day work and relationships. But if and when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it leads to problems. As anger is a common emotion we all experience, it is useful to learn of ways of dealing with anger. It is very important for parents to learn how to express anger appropriately because children learn to express anger from watching their parents.

What happens when a person somebody is angry? Anger is accompanied by physiological changes. The heart rate and blood pressure increase; levels of “energy hormones” - mainly adrenaline and noradrenalin - increase. These spontaneous changes prepare the body ready to fight or to flight.

Anger can be a reaction to an external event or an internal event. External event that could lead to anger include traffic jam, power failure, muddy road or a leaking tap. Internal events that may lead to anger include worrying and brooding about your personal and family problems and difficulties encountered achieving your targets. When events do not happen the way we want, we tend to get angry. It may be precipitated by somebody who interacts such as a co-worker, family member, another driver when on the road, a child, the spouse, a subordinate or your supervisor. People handle anger in different ways; the expression of anger, suppression of angry thoughts and calming one's self when angry.

People express anger in different ways. The instinctive, natural way of expressing anger is to respond aggressively. How aggressive one gets in expressing anger depends on laws, social norms, and common sense. It also depends on practice and ability of sets control. Other expression of anger is a learned behaviour. Expressing anger in an aggressive manner include verbal aggression, physical aggression and becoming destructive. Some persons on occasion shout at, hit or push somebody when angry. In very intense anger, one may physically injure or even kill another. Others slam doors, kick chairs or push objects in anger. Some smash household goods, doors and windows in anger. Very often expression of anger in an aggressive manner is directed towards the person or the object which made you angry. But this is not possible at all times. Sometimes people express aggression towards a person or object other than the one who made them angry. This is called displaced aggression. Some doctors shout at a subordinates or a patient for very trivial reasons or chase away medical students. The doctor may have been angry with the spouse who made an unreasonable comment in the morning or with the child who took a long time to have breakfast making you late to work. In addition, on the way to work another driver might have irritated the doctor by cutting across his path or someone might have parked a car in your usual parking slot in the office premises. In those instances where the doctor cannot directly express his anger towards the person who made him angry, he may vent his anger on somebody else “displacing the aggression”.

Sometimes people suppress anger instead of expressing it. Non-expression of anger can create problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger leading to “passive-aggressive behaviour”. Persons who always suppress anger may appear to have personalities that seem perpetually cynical and hostile.

The healthy way of dealing with anger is converting or redirecting it to some other purpose or activity. The person may stop thinking about it and divert it purposeful by thing. When one is angry there is energy generated in preparation for fight or to flight. This energy can be channeled to achieve a useful purpose by focusing on something positive. When angry, individuals should engage themselves in some useful physical activity or directing it into going for a walk or riding a bicycle.

Anger can turn inward if not expressed or redirected. A chronic state of hyper-arousal may lead to physical illnesses such as ischaemic heart disease or hypertension. A chronically angry and unhappy person may end up having mental illnesses such as depression.

To calm anger much practice is needed. Controlling internal response to external events is the starting point of calming anger. Expressing anger in an assertive, non-aggressive manner is the healthiest way to express anger. A person has to learn to be clear about his needs and how to fulfill them without getting angry and hurting others. For a person who gets angry often and would wish to avoid it, the following procedure can be recommended. (I) At the end of each day recalling instances of getting angry during the day. (II) Writing down in detail. (III) Thinking of what one wanted to have happened instead of what happened. (IV) How could one have achieved what one wanted without getting angry. Analyzing deep seated emotions and desires that erupt at the time of getting angry is a good way to find alternative ways to get things done without getting angry.

In the context of hospitals, anger and expressing anger aggressively is commonly seen among doctors. There are various contributory reasons for this. Most of the time the role models fail to set good examples. The experience that most work gets done only when those responsible are shouted at becomes a learned behaviour. Tolerance of and lack of negative consequences for aggressive behaviours in hospital settings also contribute to continuation of it. Hierarchical mentality seen among medical professionals also is a contributory factor.

Anger Management

There are few key elements in anger management. One needs to learn to understand emotions associated with anger and try to reduce physiological arousal and to control your reactions. Strategies include relaxation, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, better communication, using humour and changing the environment when appropriate and possible.

Relaxation methods include deep breathing and relaxing imagery. It is important to practise these techniques regularly so that they can be used in tense situations. It is well known that, unless you have been practising, it is very difficult to relax during a bout of anger.

Cognitive restructuring means changing the way you think. This is a skill that individuals need to develop. People react in one of four ways when confronted with a situation not to their liking; (I) react by blaming oneself, or (II) by blaming others, (III) sense one's needs and feelings or (IV) sense other person's needs and feelings. It is how one reacts, which causes anger. Individuals do not get angry because of somebody or something else. It is the feeling associated with the reaction which makes a person angry. People blame others because they judge others. This is the root for the angry reaction. There are four steps in practising cognitive restructuring. Stop, breath, identify one's judgmental thoughts, and then connect with one's needs. This needs analyzing the judgmental feelings and concentrating on one's needs and feelings. This requires much practice. Then unmet needs and feelings can be expressed in assertive non-aggressive ways.

A humourous response in place of an anger reaction or imaginative humour such as a 'funny face' on the person responsible for causing the anger reaction can alter the state of anger and calm a person.