

## CHAPTER 11

# *Working with anger*

Anger is a powerful, yet little understood human emotion. Our inability to deal with it effectively is a frequent cause of problems in our relationships. A major factor that contributes to this difficulty is the common misconception that anger is somehow 'bad', destructive, or inappropriate. It is true that the way in which resentments are expressed can lead to a great deal of hurt in relationships and violence in the world. However, it would be a grave error to conclude that anger, in itself, is responsible for the destructiveness, and should therefore be avoided.

Rather than maintain a simplistic good/bad perception of anger, it is more useful to adopt a non-judgmental attitude toward it. If it is true that growth involves learning to love ourselves, then it follows that we must learn to fully accept ourselves, including our anger. The unfortunate alternative is to turn the anger inward against ourselves. In other words, unacknowledged and unexpressed anger gets held in the body, creating tension that may be experienced as frustration or anxiety. Or, when resentments have no healthy outlet, our bodily held anger may be felt as a chronic fatigue or depression – the anger turns against us, suppressing our energy and vitality. Internalized anger may also be partially responsible for those times when we feel confused – resentments fuse with other emotions and unproductive thoughts that then overwhelm us.

Bottled-up anger can also lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, ulcers, and an array of other illnesses whose causes we are only beginning to understand. In the years ahead, we may recognize that an accumulation of unacknowledged anger coupled with an inability to deal with it responsibly contributes significantly to the origin of many common diseases.

A key to our physical as well as emotional well-being involves allowing the experience of anger to simply be, without either judging it or trying to get rid of it due to our fear or aversion. Opening to our anger can then become a way to unlock suppressed energy and vitality. Dealing with it responsibly can enliven our relationships and rejuvenate those that have become stagnant or boringly comfortable.

Once we accept anger as a neutral energy, rather than morally judge it, we are in a position to differentiate between its responsible expression, and the impulse to vent it in destructive, hurtful ways. The need to communicate it in healthy ways becomes particularly obvious once we realize that we cannot *not* express our anger. There is some kind of inner intelligence within our organism that wants to express it. This healthy urge manifests in unhealthy, indirect ways when our belief system does not permit a direct experience of the anger.

It is the indirect expression of anger that has harmful, insidious effects upon relationships. Psychologists call this 'passive-aggressive' behavior because, instead of expressing the anger or communicating about it, we act it out in passive ways. For example, if we fear the consequences of sharing our resentment directly, we may express anger indirectly by missing appointments, arriving late, withholding affection, or acting in a variety of spiteful ways. One client, for instance, stated that she took great satisfaction in running up her husband's charge accounts. At the time, she was not even aware of her anger, but upon closer exploration of her motives, she realized what she was actually feeling. She had experienced some relief (a re-emergence of her sense of power) by 'getting back' at her husband for not giving her the caring and affection she wanted. But the relationship suffered because the anger did not have a chance to be expressed openly and explored in terms of its deeper meaning. Once the wisdom of the anger was understood, some resolution occurred as she became more willing to express her need for affection.

While some people disguise their anger through its passive expression, others vent it in an exaggerated fashion through unpredictable explosions. We sometimes read stories about the 'nice guy' on the block who kills his wife and children. While the neighbors are left puzzled, it is no wonder to those who

know that when resentments are repressed, they go underground and amass greater force for a future eruption. This pattern is familiar in relationships where one has a self-image of not being an angry person. For example, one individual who was deeply involved with spiritual practices had a strong conviction that it was wrong to get angry. One day, however, she exploded in a fierce rage. Being uncomfortable with her anger, she tried to cover it up by being sweet and forgiving. But, as inevitably occurs when anger is submerged, her fury erupted despite her best efforts to keep it under control.

Once we can acknowledge and feel our anger, we can begin to differentiate between its responsible expression and the impulse to vent it in destructive ways. It is not the anger that hurts others, but rather the blaming, judgmental ways in which it is often communicated. Gaining greater control over our anger does not mean suppressing it, but rather learning how to channel it in a way that can lead to greater intimacy and communication.

#### LEARNING TO EXPRESS 'CLEAN' ANGER

The expression of anger can be distinguished by whether it is 'clean' or 'destructive'. Destructive anger is very hurtful because it is tinged with personality attacks or judgmental criticisms. For example, through choice of words, tone of voice, or movements of the body, we may convey a message such as 'You're pretty stupid,' or 'you're really selfish,' or 'you're wrong, don't you know anything!?' These and similar invalidating communications constitute an attack on the other person. They say, in effect, 'You are not a worthwhile human being; you do not deserve love and respect.' Such messages are especially hurtful because they reinforce the bad feelings we may already have about ourselves.

Receiving hurtful communications from another, we instinctively protect ourselves by either attacking or withdrawing. We may withdraw in a number of ways, such as by watching television, compulsively eating, drinking, going to sleep, refusing to talk, or threatening to end the relationship. Or, rather than withdrawing, we may retaliate by blaming or verbally attacking the other – becoming self-righteous and mentally deciding that

the other person is wrong, bad, selfish, or immature. This leads to a spiraling escalation of tensions. Whether we withdraw or attack, the relationship suffers because one or both parties are left feeling hurt, defensive, or isolated. Surprisingly, this toxic pattern can continue indefinitely, leading to a painful negativity toward relationships and bitterness toward life.

Clean anger, on the other hand, does not focus on making the other person wrong for their behavior, feelings, or opinions. Instead of blaming or analyzing the other person ('you're too needy' or 'you're so depressed!'), or assuming to know their motives ('you're just trying to get back at me,' or 'you only care about yourself!'), a clean communication reveals one's own feelings and unmet needs, uncontaminated by blame or guilt-producing statements. For example, clean anger could be expressed in the following manner: 'I'm angry about these dishes in the sink!' Included in this communication may be an emotional intensity in one's voice, but it is clean because the individual is merely expressing his or her feeling without implying (through words, tone of voice, or gestures) that the other person is wrong or suspect in some way. In contrast, a destructive communication would involve saying something like, 'How many times do I have to tell you not to leave your dirty dishes in the sink!' At first, the distinction may appear to be a subtle one, but there is a crucial difference. Receiving the clean expression of anger, we hear, 'This person is angry about dishes in the sink.' Since we do not feel attacked, we may feel inclined to respond in an accommodating way. In the destructive communication, we feel nagged at and hear, 'I'm bad for doing something wrong.' As a result, we may withdraw in order to remove ourselves from a hurtful situation. Or we may give voice to our anger through an ineffectual, sarcastic remark such as, 'Yes, dear,' or 'There you go complaining again. . . .'

Feeling entitled to experience anger and express it in a clean, self-revealing way provides a direct, psychologically healthy outlet for it. As a result, there is less of a tendency for it to leap out later in irrational, hurtful ways (whether passively or actively). Our anger, plus other issues surrounding it, have a greater chance of being resolved through a simple, guiltless expression in the moment. Daniel Wile, a couples therapist, describes this clearly:

An angry feeling or impulse, experienced and expressed in a direct and straightforward manner, often has a clarifying and beneficial effect. . . when anger is warded off, it reappears in regressive forms, as sudden rage, sadistic fantasies, or chronic irritability. If fear or self-criticism (guilt) prevent people from being assertive, the impulse goes underground and re-emerges in sudden blatant expressions (aggression) or subdued, inhibited ones (nonassertion).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, by releasing anger, our genuine love for the other can continue to grow, rather than be smothered by ever-increasing layers of resentment.

A clean expression of anger reflects the understanding that others do not cause our feelings. The common statement, 'You make me so angry,' depicts how anger is often blamed on the one toward whom we feel it. While another's words or actions can certainly bring up our anger, the other person cannot be held fully responsible for it. Our present upset is often the result of many factors, such as our unmet need for love, a re-stimulation of unresolved past hurts, feelings of unworthiness, fears of rejection, as well as the present anger-provoking situation. Our present feeling cannot be reduced simply to past causes or only to the present circumstance. Rather, our feeling is usually created by both. Growth comes through honoring our emotion as it arises, expressing it cleanly, and exploring it further internally if it seems particularly charged or out of proportion to the current situation.

The expression of anger need not be seen as threatening when expressed responsibly. In effect, it states, 'I do not like this!' or 'I won't accept that!' Anger sends a big 'No!' message to the other: 'No! I won't stand for this!' Through our anger, we stand up for ourselves, recover our self-esteem, and express our unwillingness to be abused, ignored, or depreciated by another. Even if we feel powerless to change the actual circumstances, expressing our anger enables us to release bodily held frustrations and energies, which can lead to a welcome change of attitude toward the situation. And, perhaps surprisingly, the situation itself may change once we have dealt with our feelings about it.

While it is important to be mindful of our felt experience, we

are not suggesting that anger be expressed without regard for another's feelings or needs. As we grow more intimate with ourselves – becoming better acquainted with our true feelings and discovering patterns that no longer serve us – it becomes more possible to express ourselves while having an awareness of another's experience and a sensitivity to his or her feelings and well-being. Once the anger has subsided, we can demonstrate concern about the impact that our anger may have had by asking how the other person is feeling as a result of our communication. We can then be available to receive their response in a caring way.

One of the most difficult and challenging aspects of skillful communication is to integrate a sense of personal power with compassion – developing an ability to assert our own feelings and needs while maintaining a genuine caring for others. If we attend only to our own feelings, we become narcissistic. Preoccupied with ourselves, out of touch with the world around us, we feel disconnected from intimacy and therefore undernourished in our very being. It is one of the great paradoxes of life that when we are focused only upon our own needs, they cannot possibly be fully met. On the other hand, if we pay exclusive attention to other people's feelings and reactions, we abandon our own genuine needs. This pattern may be reinforced by becoming identified with the self-image of being a compassionate or loving person. Seeing ourselves as more 'evolved' than others and obliged to care for them regardless of personal needs, we will again be left undernourished and disconnected from the interdependence that is natural to human existence. Eventually we may experience an angry outrage resulting from an accumulated sense of deprivation and self-neglect.

We grow up in a society that teaches us to conceal our anger. As a result, we hold it back, and may justify this through statements such as, 'I don't want to hurt him,' or 'I don't want her to feel badly.' What seems like a noble concern for protecting others is frequently a hidden fear of being disliked. The fear of rejection, and subsequent fear of feeling isolated and alone, is a major reason for withholding our anger and failing to be completely honest with one another. However, taking the risk

to be authentic in this way can often lead to the growth of trust when we are relating to a person who appreciates such honesty.

Taking care of ourselves by expressing clean anger can be done in a variety of ways. 'Getting angry' without blame is the most intense way, as in shouting, 'I want to have a say in what movie we see tonight!' This vocal anger may be especially appropriate in situations where we have stifled resentments and felt unheard for a long time.

As we work with our anger and release some of the charge that may have been accumulating, we can eventually learn to stand up for ourselves without becoming irate. Becoming comfortable with our right to say 'no,' or to stand up for what we want, we can begin to embody an assertiveness that appropriately matches the situation. Doing so, we learn to simply state how we feel, what is bothering us, or what we want, untinged by leftover anger that we may still be carrying from the past.

Experiencing anger and learning to express it cleanly can lead to other important insights about ourselves. For instance, we may discover a sense of hurt or fear beneath a more obvious layer of resentment. For example, we may realize that just below the surface of our anger about the dishes not being washed, lies a deeper concern about whether we are really loved. In this case, our reactive anger is precariously sitting atop a storehouse of hurt of which we may only be vaguely aware. If we fail to uncover such underlying feelings, we might remain attached to anger when something deeper is stirring. Repeated anger can generate hurt and confusion for others when we fail to uncover the more meaningful feelings or needs that may be quietly fueling anger or aggression. However, if we avoid the anger entirely (such as by thinking we should just forgive and forget), then we may miss an opportunity to follow the wisdom of our felt process as it unfolds.

Expressing anger cleanly and non-defensively can place us in a vulnerable position in relation to the person with whom we are angry. In order to help us feel safer in beginning new patterns of behavior in a relationship, we may wish to agree to the basic ground rule that each person has permission to cleanly express anger. This implies a willingness to make clearer discrimination between clean and destructive anger. Perceiving this distinction is not always easy. Individuals with a commitment to their own growth and to one another's well-being can sensitively explore

how to communicate their anger in ways that lead to a resolution of conflicts.

Another factor that can support productive communication concerns how we relate to others' anger. Can we simply receive it? Can we hear how they are feeling without counter-attacking or defending ourselves? We certainly have a right to respond, but can we first hear their feelings and point of view? Responding differs from reacting. Reactions tend to be automatic and habitual, and are often triggered by underlying fears, such as feeling unloved. Responding occurs after we have received their communication, allowed it to touch us in some way, and taken time to notice the fresh feelings and meanings that then arise within us. Can we hear them without assuming that it means something negative about ourselves, or that the person no longer loves us simply because they are feeling angry? The simple act of hearing others' resentments can go a long way toward resolving it. People feel better when they sense that their anger is heard rather than avoided, received rather than judged as being wrong or inappropriate. The process of receiving others' anger and opening to the meaning it holds for them can lead to a precious moment of interpersonal contact.

A relationship that has love and trust as its context can become stronger through its ability to accommodate a wide range of human emotions. If trust is tenuous or uncertain, a wave of anger can jeopardize it. However, as trust grows, then, instead of being a threat, anger can be seen as conveying a crucial message that is calling for attention. If we really care about another, then we want to hear his or her anger and understand what it is really all about. Perhaps, for example, we gradually discover that they are feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, hurt or afraid.

Learning to acknowledge our anger and hold a healthy respect for the wisdom it contains is an important step toward the development of meaningful intimacy. The mutual sharing of anger in clean, self-revealing ways can lead to a process of communication that can help two individuals feel closer to one another. As normally suppressed energies are released and we more intimately touch one another, our relationships can flourish in unexpected ways.