

ANGER ~ Friend or Foe?

Myra is as lovely as she is depressed. In spite of her many merits, she suffers from low self-esteem. With all her heart, she's trying to do what it takes to pull herself up. Yet a powerful, inner anchor is holding her down. The invisible but very real anchor that weighs Myra down is the anger she will not own. And because she doesn't own it, it owns her.

Myra suffered through a painful divorce several years ago. Her husband left her for a much younger woman. Her hurt-and eventually, rage-knew no bounds. Then, like a volcano, it slowly stopped erupting. Myra decided to "put it out of her mind." Yet it never went out. Not completely.

Today Myra is dating a wonderful man who loves her. Everything looks promising-except for that invisible anchor. Myra is often down, uneasy, and fearful, even though her new relationship is going well. The new man in her life doesn't understand it, and neither does she. Yet it's really no mystery. Depression, and the anger beneath it, simply can't be dismissed. It must be faced and reckoned with if self-esteem is ever to rise.

From: Believing In Myself by Earnie Larsen & Carol Hegarty

ANGER, it is said, often wears two faces-outwardly, it can be loud and erupt "like a volcano" leaving devastation and ruin in its wake, or inwardly, where it can mask itself as depression and fear. Some individuals bottle up their anger, resulting in a sort of violence to themselves-headaches, insomnia, gastro-intestinal problems, arthritis, high blood pressure, and so on. Others, however, may lash out at others in a manner that is inappropriate and disproportionate to the event, for example-the person who dares to cut us off in traffic becomes the target of verbal insults or perhaps incidents of road rage. Many individuals report that they waffle back and forth between two positions, sometimes being kind and thoughtful and then exploding for what seems to be no apparent reason.

Some people let other people pull their strings-just like someone pulling the strings of a puppet. We may say that another knows exactly what to say or do to make us angry and we may call this "having our buttons pushed." In reality, no one can make us angry-we allow it! By placing our "buttons" in a location where others can "push them", we are allowing others to control us, to determine our reactions and, often, to determine the kind of day (or days) we will have.

Still for many of us, we have been taught that anger is a bad feeling with messages such as: "Nobody likes angry people." "Good girls/boys don't get angry." "No one will love/like me if I show anger." So, we learn to believe that anger is bad, we learn to stuff our feelings and we come to believe that if we want love and approval, we must lie and deny when we are feeling anger.

But we all need our anger. Like other emotions, it is part of the human condition, neither good nor bad. The secret, of course, is to harness our anger and use it as a positive force in our lives. Anger's good side is that it gives us energy to change a dangerous or unacceptable situation. It can also give us information about ourselves to prevent tension build-up, or it can give us the energy and insight to take charge of our own lives.

As noted by Harriet Lerner in *The Dance of Anger*: "Anger is a signal, and one well worth listening to! Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs and or wants are not being

adequately met, or simply that something is not right in our lives, or that too much of our self-beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions-is being compromised in a relationship. Our anger may be a signal that we are doing more than we can comfortably do or give, or our anger may warn us that others are doing too much for us, at the expense of our own competence and growth. Just as physical pain tells us to take our hand off the hot stove, the pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our Self. Our anger can motivate us to say 'no' to the ways in which we are defined by others and 'yes' to the dictates of our inner self.

So then, how can we tell when anger, ours or another's, is causing problems? I like to think of anger as fire. On the one hand, if fire is contained or controlled in a stove or fireplace, it gives warmth and light. On the other hand, if it is burning out-of-control (rage) and the house is on fire, we have got a problem. Generally, anger is a problem when:

- ~ it (anger) lasts too long
- ~ it is too intense (rage)
- ~ it comes out inappropriately or disproportionately to an event
- ~ we abuse others-physically, verbally, emotionally
- ~ we abuse ourselves or threaten to harm ourselves
- ~ we take our anger out on someone other than whom we are angry at.

What can you do if you recognize a problem with your anger? The following suggestions can be quite helpful:

- Communicate using the "I" statement, for example: "I feel angry when..."
- Stay focused on current issues and don't dredge up the past when discussing issues with a friend, partner, child.
- Avoid generalizations, such as: "That's just a man/woman for you...All men/women are..."
- Determine who owns the problem by asking: "Whose problem is this?"
- Use time outs.
- Avoid blaming, shaming, name calling or comparisons.
- Determine to resolve issues, not bury them alive.
- Affirm yourself and your partner/child/friend for having courage to work through difficult issues.
- Make sure the issue is the issue.

Other suggestions may include talking things over with a friend, a minister or priest or your family doctor. Still for others, the intensity and severity of the depression and/or anger episodes may require medication, professional counselling and/or attending an anger management program. If anger is controlling your life, there is help available, but it requires your willingness to change.

Gentle Path offers both individual and group counselling for anger management, with separate groups for both men and women.

Call today for more information or a confidential appointment:

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