

Understanding and Dealing With Our Anger

by Stephen Reynolds

WHY BE ANGRY?

Why not just strive to never be angry again? Such a goal is unrealistic and unproductive. Anger is a normal part of human existence, although hopefully an infrequent one. All anger is legitimate. It does not serve us to feel guilty about being angry. Guilt tends to lead to shame, and shame undermines self-esteem.

We are better served by focusing on **understanding** our anger, and finding effective ways of working through it. To reach this understanding, we need to determine both the object and the cause (source) of our anger. Differentiating between the object and the source is critical. Individuals often get confused between and/or combine the object and the source in their minds, paying a price in their emotions and in their relationships as a result. If we can find the source of our anger, we can often heal old wounds.

Anger is often tied to a situation where we believe another person or group is “wrong” in something they did or said. [In the absence of any apparent involvement of others, it will likely be tied to an event we believe “shouldn’t” have happened.] Whomever we accuse of being “wrong” [or the event that “shouldn’t” have happened] can be defined as the **OBJECT** of our anger. The object of our anger is most often **outside ourselves**; it is someone or something “out there”. To work through our anger, it is helpful to get clear and specific about the object of it.

Knowing the object of our anger can be very helpful in identifying the **SOURCE** of our anger. Again, it is important to not combine or confuse the two. **The source of our anger is always within us**; accepting this is a **critical** step in moving through and past our anger. The source is that part of us that we want to avoid seeing and owning. It is often difficult to identify, as our first reaction is typically to want to blame the **object** for our feelings. However, we generate our anger through our **reaction** to the object. This outer reaction masks the **inner reasons** for our feelings and behavior. Most often, these are based in **fear and/or sadness**. When having difficulty in moving from the object to the source, it may be helpful to ask the questions:

- What might I be scared about here? and/or
- What sadness might I have about this situation?

If we allow ourselves to attribute any portion of the source of our anger to another person or something outside ourselves, we are doomed to carrying that portion with us for the rest of our lives.

EXAMPLES OF OBJECT AND SOURCE

1. A friend cannot pay his rent on time and asks us to loan him the money for two weeks. Against our better judgment, we agree to their request. The friend does not pay us back on time, and we get angry. In this situation, the friend is the legitimate object of our anger. If we explore our fear of the consequences of not getting our money back, and/or our sadness in choosing to agree to their request, we may well find that the source is one of the following:
 - Our pattern of not paying enough attention to our instincts.
 - Our willingness to accept responsibility for solving problems created by others.
 - Our tendency to discount the patterns in others’ behaviors, expecting that “this time things will be different.”
 - “Soft boundaries” i.e., allowing ourselves to be persuaded to do things that are not in our own best interests.
2. Upon returning from a shopping trip, we discover a large dent in the passenger door of our new car. We are immediately enraged. In this situation, an unknown driver is the legitimate object of our anger. If we explore our fear of the cost and time involved in getting the door



repaired, and/or our sadness in seeing the condition of our new car, we may well find that the source is one of the following:

- Our need to “be perfect” (chastising ourselves, for not seeing the damage before we left the shopping center, and/or for picking the parking spot we did.)
- Our fear of being criticized by our spouse or partner.
- Our ego’s need to “look good.”
- Our fear of embarrassment (others thinking that we are not taking care of our new car.)

RESIDUAL ANGER

“While wine, cheese and art may age well, anger does not.” Anger that has not been worked through (“residual anger”) over time transforms into resentment. Resentment is unhealthy, both physically and emotionally, residing in our bodies and minds, much as excess calories are stored in our bodies as fat. Like fat, this resentment is unnecessary excess weight we carry around, poisoning our bodies. Residual anger also precludes intimacy with the person who is the object of our resentment.

CUTS AND UNWISE INVOLVEMENT

Anger is like a cut; it hurts. Properly treated, in time, a cut heals over and the pain goes away. Ignored or improperly treated, the cut becomes infected and pain increases. The area around the cut becomes very sensitive and easily irritated. Unchecked, the infection can spread to other parts of the body, making life miserable. In extreme cases of neglect, the infection can cause death. Residual anger impacts us much the same as an untreated cut, with potentially equally devastating results.

A cut is caused by **unwise involvement** with a sharp or pointed object. We must come **in contact** with the edge or point to get hurt. The object does not cause the cut --- our **unwise involvement** causes it. A knife or thorn does not cause pain. Our **unwise involvement** with the knife or thorn causes it. It is our **misuse** of the knife that causes the cut. The knife does not cause the cut; the knife is just being a knife. A thorn does not scratch or puncture; our **unwise involvement** with the thorn causes it. The thorn is just being a thorn.

So it is with anger. Another person cannot cause us to be angry; however, our **unwise involvement** (or **expectation of involvement**) with others is often the cause of our anger. Whatever suspicions we may have of others, who may legitimately be the **object** of our anger, it is important that we do not accuse them of being the **source** of our anger. We as individuals are responsible for our (wise or unwise) involvement with (or expectation of involvement with) the object of our anger. The other person is responsible for their **behavior**; we are responsible for the **results of our involvement** with them.

“YOU MAKE ME SO ANGRY!”

From time to time, most of us use (or at least contemplate using) this phrase. Generally this happens when we are overstressed; i.e., when the magnitude of the challenges we are facing is greater than our coping abilities. If you find yourself saying this or having similar thoughts, it can be helpful to realize the following:

- The person we are saying this to is someone significant to us; someone we care about. (This is not a phrase used with people we hardly know.)
- In attempting to blame another for how we feel, we are actually giving our power away to this person. We are telling them, “You have power over me; you are stronger than I am.”
- We are portraying ourselves as victims.
- We are making an accusation (“You did this!”), in addition to communicating our anger.



- Our striking out at the other person in this way is usually an indicator that we are feeling scared and/or vulnerable. It is a way of telling the other person, “Back off!”

Instead of saying, “You make me so angry,” try the following alternatives:

- **“I am very upset at what you did.”** This conveys our feelings without making the other person responsible for them. It focuses on the other person’s **behavior** (not the person themselves), thus reducing the likelihood of a defensive reaction.
- **“I am really angry about what happened.”** This conveys our strong feelings about the **result**. It completely removes any reference to the other person, further reducing the likelihood of them getting defensive.
- **“I’m pissed!”** Yes, a bit off-color and not politically correct in all situations. On the other hand, it is succinct and unambiguous. It speaks only to our **feelings**; therefore, there is no portion about which the other can contend, “That’s not true.”

GETTING OTHERS TO LISTEN TO OUR ANGER

If we feel motivated or compelled to tell another about our anger, we will better serve ourselves if we first get clear about our reason(s) for expressing to this person. Our reasons might include:

- Needing a sounding board to sort out our feelings.
- Wanting feedback.
- Wanting advice on what to do.
- Telling them they are the object of our anger.
- Asking them to make up for something they did.
- Asking them to do something differently in the future.

Any or all of the above are legitimate and productive reasons for talking with others about our anger. However, if our motivation is to a) cause another to feel pain and/or guilt, and/or b) to attempt to demonstrate that we have been “wronged,” this will **not** lead to an effective resolution of our anger.

Once we are clear on our (legitimate) motivation(s), it is wise to ask permission/seek agreement for what we want from the conversation. Examples might include:

- “I’m really upset about something that happened at work today and I would like some help in sorting it out. Do you have some time we could talk?”
- “I’m upset about **something that happened between us*** and I would like to discuss it with you. Would this be a good or bad time for us to talk about it?” [*Note: “Something that happened between us” is much less likely to put the other person on the defensive than “something you did.”]

After discussing the matter, take a moment to evaluate how things went. For example, ask the other person:

- “How did this work for you?”
- “Is this a good way for me to bring things up when I am upset?”
- “What can we do differently in the future to have this kind of conversation go smoothly?”

Before departing, or moving on to another topic, be sure to acknowledge the other person for their participation in the discussion.

EXPRESSING ANGER

Expressing anger in a timely manner and **without judgment** is often an important component of maintaining a healthy emotional state. By expressing our anger in a productive (as opposed to defensive or punitive) way, at appropriate times, we can flush it from our system and get on with enjoying life. For some people, expressing their anger is always a necessary part of flushing it from

their system; they are unable to move past their anger without venting to the object or another person. For others, expressing it may not always be necessary.

Expressing without judgment means not blaming the object, or making that person wrong. Blaming someone else (making them responsible) for our anger means giving up our power to that person. In addition to letting them determine when we get angry, we may also make ourselves dependent on their apology in order to move through our anger.

The easiest way to avoid judgment when expressing is to avoid any second or third person reference (you, they, it, etc.), or naming another person. For example:

Expressing **with** judgment

- I am really upset that you are late in repaying the money you owe me.
- I'm angry with Jane for being so careless with my luggage.
- You were so inconsiderate last night. With all the noise you made, I didn't get to sleep until after 3:00 am.
- That salesman was very condescending toward me; I'm going to another store to purchase this item.

Expressing **without** judgment

- I am really upset that I do not have my money.
- I'm angry that my suitcase got ripped.
- With all the noise there was last night, I didn't get to sleep until after 3:00 am. I'm tired and I'm upset.
- I did not like the way I was treated here; I'm going to another store to purchase this item.

By making statements like those in the second column, we avoid giving our power away. We also avoid getting a defensive reaction from the object, which in turn:

- Decreases the likelihood that the conflict continues (along with our anger), and
- Increases the likelihood that the object will change their behavior in the future.

RESPONDING TO EXPRESSIONS OF ANGER FROM OTHERS

The most productive thing we can do when we are in the presence of someone expressing their anger is to listen and encourage them to vent. (**See NOTE below). We can do this by:

- Thanking them for being so candid.
- Listening for understanding (not for rebuttal).
- Making it clear we are okay with them being upset; giving them "space."
- Giving them positive reinforcement.

Before responding to the person who is angry,

- Let what they have said sink in; allow them plenty of space to say more.
- Test your understanding of ***their point of view***, without any comments or inflections about what you think.
- Ask them what ***they would like from you*** (feedback, suggestions, advice, etc.)

After the other person has finished venting, and confirmed that you have a good understanding of how they think and feel about the situation,

- Tell them how you ***feel*** about what they said (e.g., sad, scared, disappointed, angry, defensive).
- Give them what they ***asked for*** from you (e.g., feedback, suggestions, advice, etc.)
- If you are the object of the other person's anger, ask them:

- What they would like you to do now.
- What they preferred you would have done in the first place.
- [if appropriate], “Would it make any difference if I were to tell you...”:
 - “I didn’t know what else to do” and/or
 - “I didn’t realize that.....” and/or
 - “I am so sorry to hear that.....”

****NOTE:** In responding to the anger of others, it is wise not to say or infer, “Don’t be angry.” If you find yourself getting defensive in this or other ways, acknowledge this by saying something like: “I want to hear what you have to say, and yet I can tell that I am getting defensive,” without making the other person wrong.

WHY/WHEN DO WE REACT IN ANGER?

We react in anger when and where we feel vulnerable. The same event at two different times and/or involving two different objects may result in us feeling angry in one case and not in the other. For example:

- 1) We are driving in the left lane of a freeway going 5 mph under the speed limit. Another driver passes us on the right and pulls into the space between our car and the car in front of ours, which is about four car-lengths long.
 - a) If we have had an already stressful day, and are late to an appointment, it is not unlikely that we will get angry at the driver who pulled in front of us (the object). Whether or not we get angry in this situation, and the extent to which we get angry, will be a function of how grounded we are feeling. If we are feeling very secure within ourselves and in our life, we may have only a brief flash of anger that quickly passes, with at most a minor experience of our anger. On the other hand, if we are feeling insecure about various aspects of our life, we may get quite angry in response to this event. The more insecure we feel, the more likely we will feel compelled to express our anger. We might utter an obscenity, honk our horn, and/or “flip off” the other driver. In an extreme case of insecurity, we might even pass the object driver on the right and try to squeeze into the space directly in front of them.
 - b) On the other hand, if we are having a wonderful day, have more than adequate time to get to our destination, and are feeling very secure and grounded, we might very well not react at all to this event, other than to back off a few car lengths.

In (a) above, our anger is a direct result of our feelings of vulnerability. The source of our anger could easily be one or more of the following:

- Our fear of the consequences of further lateness to our appointment.
 - Our ego’s need to be right.
 - Our regret (sadness) at not departing sooner for this appointment.
- 2) We ask our spouse/partner to stop and pick up three items at the grocery store on their way home, which they agree to do. When our partner gets home, we ask them about the groceries, and they respond, “Oh, I forgot.”
 - a) If this incident follows many similar previous ones, it is entirely possible that we will get upset. The likelihood and degree of our anger will be greater if our partner has made a commitment to discontinue this pattern. If we needed the grocery items to complete a dish we are in the middle of preparing for a dinner party starting in a few minutes, the magnitude of our anger and our compulsion to express it to the object (our partner) will be even greater. If this situation is further compounded by us having numerous other serious relationship issues with our partner, we may well “tip over” in response to this incident.



- b) If this incident of forgetfulness is a rarity with our partner, if our need for the grocery items is not urgent or significant, and/or if we are aware that our partner has had a particularly stressful day (and we have not), we may very well not react at all to this incident. If we are feeling particularly good about the state of our relationship with our partner, the likelihood of us getting angry is further reduced.

In situation (a) of this example, our angry response is again a direct result and function of our feeling of vulnerability. The source of our anger could easily be one or more of the following.

- Our fear of not having dinner ready when guests arrive.
- Our ego's need to "look good" to our friends, or need to perfect.
- Our inner critic chastising us for believing that our partner's pattern would change.
- Our heart's sadness at seeing an example of further deterioration in our relationship with our partner

SO WHAT?!

After reading all of the above, you may be saying, "OK, I understand and agree with all of the above," and then find yourself asking, "So now what can I do with all this?" One option is to adopt the following strategy:

- 1) Track your anger. Use the [attached chart](#) to keep track of the times when you get angry. Without judging yourself, observe the patterns you see.
- 2) When you find yourself getting upset or angry, ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. Who or what is the **object** of my anger here?
 - b. What am I feeling vulnerable about?
 - c. What fears does this incident bring up inside of me?
 - d. What sadness might I associate with this incident?
- 3) If you feel compelled to express your anger, first ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. What are my motivations for expressing it? Are they legitimate, or am I wanting to cause pain, guilt, and/or shame?
 - b. What **serves me best** in expressing my anger? Am I better served by expressing it to the object or to someone else? By expressing it now, or by waiting?
 - c. What outcomes do I want from my expression?
- 4) Once you have several examples on your Anger Tracking Chart, sit down with a trusted friend, and review your findings. See what patterns emerge. Discuss options for changes you can make in your life in order to achieve more of the results you want.
- 5) Share this article and discuss it with the most important people in your life. If you feel comfortable, share your Anger Tracking Chart and/or any resulting plans you have for yourself. Ask for their support in implementing your plans and achieving your goals.
- 6) Let us know how this process works for you. Send comments to: Feedback@CGMediation.com

FINAL THOUGHT

Remember, unresolved anger can be like a boomerang. We may think we have tossed it away, only to have it come back and slice right through us.

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Guide For Filling Out ANGER TRACKING CHART

Facts of Incident: As Jack Webb used to say on Dragnet, “Just the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” List only what happened. Avoid opinions and judgment(s). Example:

- Driving down highway 101 in left lane.
- Traffic going 60 mph in 65 zone.
- Car passed me on right and pulled into space (four car-lengths long) between my car and car in front of mine.

My Story About The Incident: My view of the object’s motivation. My opinions about why the incident happened. My judgments of the object. Examples:

- The other driver was crazy.
- He didn’t care how small the space was in front of me; he was going to squeeze in.
- It’s illegal to pass on the right like that.

Object Of My Anger (External) : The person/group I think is “wrong.” Who/what I think caused the incident. Who/what I react to; want to vent at. The person/thing I blame. [If they hadn’t done this, I would not be angry.] Example:

- Driver of the other car.

Conditions I Brought To The Incident: What was going on with me at the time; feelings, stresses, desires, expectations, etc. of mine prior to the incident. The pre-existing state of my mind and body. How I got myself into this position. Examples:

- Stress.
- Giving myself too little time to get to my appointment.
- Prior history of being late to meetings with this person.
- Unrealistic expectation of time required to drive to appointment in heavy traffic.

My Response To The Incident: Actions I took as a result of the incident. My behavior immediately after the incident. How I gave my power away. Examples:

- Honked my horn and turned on my (bright) headlights.
- Tailgated for the next mile.
- Further down the road, passed him on the right and forced myself between his car and car in front.

Source Of My Anger (Internal) : The part of me that I want to avoid seeing and owning. The *inner reasons* for my feelings and behavior. Examples:

- My fear of the consequences of further lateness to my appointment.
- My ego’s need to be right.
- My regret (sadness) at not departing sooner for this appointment.

What Else I Can Do To Resolve My Anger: Unilateral action I can take to flush my anger. Examples:

- Scream loudly inside my car.
- Call my appointment and tell them I will be late; give a late enough arrival time so that I can easily get there, even if traffic gets worse.
- Laugh at myself.
- Forgive the other driver; imagine how bad off their life must be to be compelled to drive this way.

What I Can Do Differently In The Future To Serve Me Better: Steps I can take to remove the conditions I brought to the incident. Examples:

- Leave earlier for appointments.
- Stay in the right lane
- Change my expectation for time required to drive to appointment.
- Relax and enjoy the ride at whatever speed it turns out to be



