Managing Anger

Flying off the handle sometimes causes hammers and humans to lose their heads...as well as their effectiveness. ~ William Arthur Ward

Everyone gets angry.

We are all familiar with anger; we see it demonstrated frequently. We see angry people in TV shows and movies; we hear angry politicians and radio hosts. Sometimes we experience anger with others around us, and we also experience anger in ourselves.

People sometimes try to use anger to solve problems or to relieve stress...but that often creates more problems, more stress and even more anger.

We can't eliminate anger, but we can manage it. We can make it a useful tool instead of one that demolishes relationships and other things.

Anger is often glorified as a key to unlock hidden strength and passion. Anger *feels* powerful.

Power alone is not good or bad. We need to feel powerful to feel capable. Feeling powerful is an important element of our American cultural self-image. But power alone...without caring emotions such as reflection, kindness, and humility...can cloud our perception of situations, others, and ourselves.

When we feel painful emotions such as sorrow, or hurt, because we've been rejected, disrespected, offended, forgotten, etc., we can find ourselves feeling like we have a loss of power. To try to reduce our discomfort, sometimes we respond with a powerful emotion like anger.

It's hard for us to feel pain! We are 'wired' to go toward pleasure and away from pain. Anger feels like it stops pain - at least momentarily.

The process of dealing with painful emotions is very hard and requires a great deal of strength and self-control. We become more powerful, capable and intuitive as we develop deeper problem-solving skills and tools for life's constantly challenging situations. Used positively, anger can help us realize deeper feelings about things so we can construct ways to avoid anger in the future.

Processing anger-energy through 'venting' (to ourselves; not others!) can be beneficial for focusing on and clarifying a problem. If we can be critical and clear about what is going wrong, we can then drive ourselves to go deeper to get the picture of what it would look like to go 'right', and then we can make changes to turn the situation around. Once we deeply reflect on the situation, other people's points of view (if applicable), and our deeper feelings, then we can see what we can do to make things better. We can then show others how we'd like to be treated!

Many of us experience a great deal of discomfort when we disagree with others. Many of us were not taught the value of listening or engaging in friendly arguments or debates. We say we believe that another person's opinion can be as valid and 'right' as our own, but do we mean it? For *every* person? Believe it or not, it's possible for people with opposing view points to work together to create the best possible solutions!

Anger needs to be expressed, yet aggressive displays of anger can result in violent eruptions that further hurt us socially, mentally, and physically. We need to find ways to process our emotions effectively. An out-of-control outburst could cost us a job. Or worse.

A hammer is a great symbol for anger because hammers can demolish….and they can build!

When we feel our anger building we need to stop and recognize triggers that can seize control of our power.

When you feel anger building, try to remember to:

- Take a breath (or many!)
- Identify
  - your TRIGGER (what upset you? And then look again…was it something deeper?)
  - your FEELING (how do you feel about what is upsetting you?)
  - your REASON (why does it bother you and what is the best way to resolve this?)

Then ask yourself some questions about how and when you get angry. Questions like:

- Do I always get angry about this issue?
- Could I have seen this coming?
- Could I have avoided feeling angry by taking a different approach to this situation?
- What is my goal here? What do I hope to achieve?

Blaming others for our anger or frustration seems like an easy way to solve our problem: we want to say that someone or something "did this to me". But blaming leaves us powerless and ineffective! How can we expect a situation to improve - in the way we would like to see it improve - if we put the task on someone else?

Did you know that no one else can *make* us feel angry? We choose to respond with blame and/or anger…and we can choose a different response. We are FREE to improve our relationships and live without rage when we decide to deal with our feelings in effective and purposeful ways.

Consider deeply what makes you angry and why. DIG for the answer that will transform anger!
Here are a few examples:

Why do I feel angry when others try to tell me what to do?
- Do I feel disrespected? As if they think I haven't thought about something carefully?

Why do I feel angry when it feels like others don't listen to or acknowledge me?
- Do I believe they think that my opinion is not valid or important?

Why do I feel angry when others are not respectful of an agreement we made?
- Do I feel like they think I am less important than they are?

Why do I feel angry when I stub my toe?
- Am I embarrassed because I missed something right in front of me?

Why do I feel angry when other drivers make travel difficult?
- Do I feel they are selfish, dangerous, disrespectful, and not paying attention?

Can your find the solutions you are looking for in your answers?

Be aware of your temper: your 'anger energy'.
Here are some ideas to help you keep your temper under control:

- **Try the Thermometer Technique -** Imagine your temper is red mercury in a large thermometer. When you're HOT, don't react! Wait until you are 'cool' to respond.
- **Count to 10, or 100! –** Count…and think of a time when you were calm and relaxed….to take your mind out of the immediate situation. Counting is an anger management tip that has worked for centuries! The Roman poet Horace (65 - 8 BCE) said, "When angry, count ten before you speak; if very angry, one hundred."
- **Inhale deeply -** Can you breathe so deeply that you get clean air deep down into your belly? Walk outdoors if possible! Your brain and your body work better with fresh air and plenty of water. Be sure to communicate with anyone you might be in a confrontation with that you are not leaving the problem; you're just clearing your head.
- **Exercise! -** Daily exercise allows you to work out stress. When you have less stress, you will feel angry less often. Regular exercise, including yoga and meditation, help you stay centered and keep things in perspective.
- **Vent -** Finding a safe spot to articulate your feelings…and maybe even yell (I find this particularly effective when I hammer my finger) can relieve enough stress to see the problem - and the solution - more clearly. Do not 'blow off steam' when anyone is nearby. Instead, go to the basement alone, or ride your bike and talk to the wind, or even stomp on a few aluminum cans to relieve frustration.

Our best way of dealing with anger is to find ways to make it useful. A powerful example is when someone uses the energy from anger to find the courage they need to protect someone who is being harmed!

Be Careful - When anger turns into poison: Sometimes we think that being angry and bitter all the time means we are smart, savvy and aware of the ways in which people and the media want to persuade us; as if it shows we are 'on to them'. Soon we are cynical, crabby people and, although people may think we are smart, they also think we are 'haters' and don't want to hang out with us. It's hard to have fun with angry people.

Sue's Anger Story

I live in a small town. We see our neighbors out and about and everyone knows I frequently ride my bike on the nearby bike trail. My dentist has an office just across the street from our bike trail and sees me on it all the time. He also likes to exercise outdoors; he runs.

One day I went to see my dentist for a routine check up. I enjoy talking with the staff when I'm there. When he checks my teeth we often 'catch up' for a minute, too.

After one of these friendly little chats, my dentist stood up and told me that his white coat identifies him as a health authority and said: "in the interest of health I have to tell you that I think you should wear a helmet".

I told him that I consider wearing a helmet sometimes, but most of the time I am comfortable - and prefer riding – without one.

I wish our discussion would have stopped right there.

Instead, he continued by saying "It's not like you're going to find a date out there." *WHAT?* I sat there, stunned, and thought: *Did you just say that? To a paying customer??? Is that sexist, or just stupid?*

Apparently he did not think that was enough because he went on to say: "My wife just broke her pelvis riding her bike. Of course, the helmet did not protect her, but if she would have hit her head it would have." *REALLY???* Well, now I was outraged!!! I yelled at him in my mind: Y*our wife's injury has NOTHING to do with wearing a helmet! You don't even know what kind of a rider I am! You don't know that I have fallen a lot and I know HOW to fall!*

Out loud I said "I know that you think you are showing me that you care…" but in my mind I thought: *but I will never sacrifice my ability, confidence or strength to pander to your controlling and unjustified fears.*

Even though I was piping mad, I held my tongue and went out for a bike ride. I talked sternly to myself - out loud - in to the wind. I may have cussed. I talked and talked …to him…to me…to really work through my frustrations to understand WHY I was so angry and upset.

It all came flooding in: I was disrespected! I was treated like I was stupid! Like somehow being a dentist makes him a 'health authority' over me? Like I've never considered wearing a helmet before. Looking for a date? Really? He did not ask what I thought, he just told what he thought and expected to comply.

So…what did I do? Well, it took me until my next appointment to decide.

I considered going in and talking with him. I also considered sending a letter stating that I was so offended that I will no longer be a patient. I considered making a point to have a talk with him the next time I go in for a check up. And then I considered saying nothing and just letting it go.

But wait! That answer was clearly *not* an option. I realized I needed tell him that I want to be respected.

I mean, if I really want to resolve my anger - to eliminate this frustration of disrespect - well, then I must talk with him; to help him realize how to understand how 'caring' can feel an awful lot like 'controlling'. How could he know if he didn't hear my point of view? I realized he needed to hear how thin and lame his arguments were so he could see things differently, *and* respect that I am also a health authority…of me! I have been healthy for nearly all of my 50 years. So I resolved to discuss this with him during my next appointment.

I have also realized that the *KA-BAM* burst of 'anger energy' from my frustration would be best reserved for bike rides, walks and other forms of physical release.

I've been working on using my "angry energy" appropriately for most of my life. Every year my new year's goals are 'be kinder and more patient'. I will not need another resolution; I still have a long way to go. This is big, tough, complicated work!

The first step to managing your anger is to decide that your anger will no longer be used for demolition; that your feelings of anger will only be used to construct new, better alternatives to challenges! Then you're ready to fully utilize the many great anger management resources available to you.