Managing Your Anger

Costs of Anger

In addition to its cost to your relationships, anger can also be bad for your health. Think of a garden hose. Let’s say you have two of them, a ¼ inch and a ½ inch hose. If you hook the ½ inch up to the outside water faucet you get a stream of water. However, if you hook up the ¼ inch hose, you get a much stronger stream of water, because the pressure has been raised. When we get angry our blood vessels constrict and it’s just like we switched from a ½ inch to a ¼ inch hose.

It isn’t the anger that is the problem; it’s how we express our anger. If we let it out, and explode in anger, we run the risk of high blood pressure and a heart attack. If we hold our anger in, on the other hand, and don’t learn how to tell others what we are feeling, we are at risk for a stroke. Either way, we lose.

So we want to find other ways to deal with this emotion. At least in part, our anger is learned. We’ve learned how to cope with our frustrations and our hurts this way. And it has worked, at some level. There is usually some sort of pay-off for us: people do what we ask them to do, our tension is released and for a brief moment we feel better, we feel we’ve gotten revenge. One thing you should try to do is figure out what your pay-off is.

Anger Pay-Offs

Reduce stress

Anger does reduce stress. You don’t need this workshop to tell you about stress. However, there is a link between stress and anger. Stress creates physiological arousal or tension. Anger discharges that arousal—just for a minute. Right after a blow-up, people often feel like a weight has been lifted off their shoulders. They can breathe again. And even though that tension soon returns, that little sense of relief can be very reinforcing, because for just that brief period of time you get a break from all that frustrates and overwhelms you.

However, there is a downside to using anger to reduce your stress. The stress comes back with a vengeance!! Studies show that anger creates more anger. Blowing up makes it more likely that you will blow up again soon. And the next outburst will be that much easier and that much stronger…and harder to control.

Not only does your anger get worse, so does the anger of those around you. They get hurt and defensive. They counterattack. And they become less and less concerned with your needs and your feelings. You pay dearly for your anger in broken relationships.

Hide emotional pain

Anger does hide emotional pain. Anger is a good defence against fear, loss, guilt, shame, and feelings of rejection or failure. It puts a tight lid on painful emotions. We learn that we can cope with just about any pain if we get mad enough. (Dad is ashamed so he yells at the kids. Mom is depressed so she yells at the kids.)

But once again, short-term gain is long-term pain. First of all, when we get angry, we may not let ourselves experience emotions that may be important signals for us, telling us what we need to do, or to stop doing in our lives. Maybe there is a good reason for you to feel guilty and you should face it and do something about it. Maybe you need to deal with your depression, take some responsibility and make some changes in your life.

Using anger as a way of dealing with our feelings don’t make the feelings go away either. They come back stronger than ever. You have to crank up your anger to cope.

Finally, using anger to deal with your pain becomes a habit, and you “go off” about everything. After all, it is a lot easier to blow up at your wife/husband for spending money on something the family doesn’t need than it is to sit down and have a serious talk about your finances, for example.

Getting attention

Anger does get people’s attention. Sometimes it seems like nobody listens to you unless you yell. People may get alarmed and they may try to please you. But once again, the immediate pay-off may have long-term outcomes you don’t want, and that can hurt you. Some may indeed sit up and take notice when you yell. But eventually they will begin to tune you out. Others will run. They may start to avoid you or become very resentful.

Punish

You can punish and get revenge by becoming angry too. Someone lets you down, or seems careless, and this great wall of rage may rise up inside you. You want to punish them and teach them a lesson. You want them to feel as much pain as you do. This will to harm is so powerful that it’s all you care about. The trouble is, when you punish other people, they become your enemies, and your enemies then want to punish you. Sometimes these are the people you love and need the most.

Change the Behaviour of Others

Anger can help you change the behaviour of others, and get people to do what you want. We coerce people into doing what we want by threatening to blow up at them if they don’t. It is tempting to use anger as a club because it often will force people into giving you what you want, short-term. However, in the long-term they turn off and turn away from you. They resent being controlled by fear. But worst of all is what it does to you. Using your anger to change others leaves you feeling hopeless. The only way you know of to get others to do your bidding is to make them afraid of you.