

HOW TO HANDLE ANGER, YOURS AND OTHERS

by Anne E. McTavish

Anger is the emotion that tells us something is wrong and energizes us to take action to fix that wrong.

There are two main areas in our brains where emotions are processed: the subcortical areas of the limbic cortex and the ventromedial and orbitofrontal cortices in the frontal lobes. The limbic cortex is found around the centre of the brain, and the “instinctive”, built-in, basic emotional reactions come from these areas. While we can’t do too much to change the fact that we react, we can learn to take control of what we do once we have those reactions.

And we can learn to do this because that initial emotional reaction is further processed in the frontal lobes where we think, where we analyze what’s going on. The main areas where this happens are the ventromedial and orbitofrontal cortices, located behind the middle of our forehead above our eyes. These are the areas that analyze what’s going on. This appraisal process tells us what it means for us — our personal emotions — and what it means for those around us — empathy.

The following approaches use these underlying processes to take control of our responses.

WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY¹

RECOGNIZE

1. Consciously acknowledge to yourself that you are angry. This might not be as easy as it sounds because we often don’t **RECOGNIZE** that we’re angry because it’s not socially acceptable to be angry in most circumstances. When you get that sudden rush of energy and your eyes start glaring, **RECOGNIZE** that you’re angry.
2. Restrain your immediate response.
3. Locate the focus of your anger.

Look for what triggered your anger. Is your anger proportional to the trigger?

REFLECT

4. Analyze your options.

If your anger is proportional, think of what options you have to deal with the trigger and the situation.

If your anger is way out of proportion to what the trigger is, then the trigger has actually triggered a deeper wrong that you haven’t dealt with. If you can, take a bit of a break so you can recover your balance and focus on the trigger, not the old wrong, so you can think about options.

RESPOND

5. Take constructive action.

What you do needs to be proportional to the trigger, appropriate, and, if possible, peace-promoting. Your goal is to stop the attack, to remedy the situation. Attacking back doesn’t accomplish this because you’re usually left with a worse mess than you started with. There are very few wrongs that rise to the level where attacking back in kind is warranted. One of the few exceptions is where you need to attack back and use force to stop one person from killing someone.

If the person responsible for that old wrong is dead or no longer around, take constructive symbolic action. Write a letter to that person saying what you would say to them if they were in front of you. If you like, pretend they are sitting down in front of you and read that letter out

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loud to them. Then declare that the matter is now at an end, shred the letter into small pieces and dispose of the pieces. For more serious wrongs, counselling can help you deal with that old wrong so it stops popping up at inappropriate times and places and interfering with your present life.

When you've done what you can, release the wrong because you've done what the anger was spurring you to do, to take action and deal with the trigger.

WHEN SOMEONE ELSE IS ANGRY

RECOGNIZE

When someone else is angry, you both need to **RECOGNIZE** the anger.

The other person needs to know that you've **RECOGNIZED** that they're angry. Until they know that you know they're angry, they'll keep escalating their behaviour until they **RECOGNIZE** that you know that they're angry.

REFLECT

Before you can **REFLECT** on what your options are, you need to understand why they're angry.

Once they've **RECOGNIZED** that you know they're angry, the other person will start telling you why they're angry. It's that impulse to right that wrong, to get it fixed. If they don't immediately start telling you what's wrong, ask them, "What happened?"

Then, actively listen to what they say. Ask open questions, and ask them to clarify points you don't understand. Do not go into cross-examination mode. Your goal is to find out what triggered their anger.

RESPOND

Once you know what's triggered their anger, you **RESPOND** by discussing what options they have to deal with the situation. You can help them work out a **RESPONSE** that is proportional, appropriate and peace-producing.

If you or your company have been responsible, in part or in whole, for the wrong they suffered, you can be active in working out the solution.

If you haven't, your role is to help them develop a workable solution or proposal for a solution.

You will have noticed that the first step in dealing with anger is to **RECOGNIZE** that you're dealing with anger. As you go through these steps, you will become quicker at **RECOGNIZING** that anger is playing a role in what's going on. How many times have you been discussing something with someone, or even having a friendly debate with them, when suddenly you find yourself in the middle of a verbal brawl, and each of you is defending your position as if your life depended on it? Somewhere in that discussion or debate, something was said that triggered anger in the other person, and it may have nothing to do with what you were talking about. And even when it is related to what you're talking about, it may not even be something that either of you did or can do something about.

RECOGNIZING that anger has triggered the reaction will trigger the **3Rs**, and you will **RECOGNIZE**, **REFLECT**, and **RESPOND** in a positive and constructive way.

1 The five steps are Gary Chapman's five steps in dealing with anger. Please read his book, *The Other Side of Love: Handling Anger in a Godly Way* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999). I highly recommend it.

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