

BONUS #3: SPECIAL REPORT ON ANGER AND RELATIONSHIPS

by Richard E. Hamon II

A special report on anger, and what you can do to deal with anger in a constructive and helpful way. How you can be part of the solution in your relationships.

WE LIVE IN AN ANGRY WORLD

We live in a world of opportunity where almost anything is possible. Many of us live in an advanced, industrialized nation, where we lead economically privileged lives. We are well educated and prosperous. Happiness knocks on our door.

And yet . . .

we are often angry and miserable.

Some participate in road rage and spousal, child and elderly abuse. Acts of violent crime are becoming more commonplace in areas where once they were never heard of or reported.

Even children seem angrier than ever. Incidents of bullying and in-school aggression are on the rise.

RELATIONSHIPS

Anger has always been a problem in relationships. Only now we seem to have an increasingly angry and irritable culture.

Anger is not just a byproduct of other problems, as many people assume, but a cause of problems.

In relationships, often people who are closest to us treat us the worst. Relationship problems lead to anger and anger leads to relationship problems.

A LEARNED BEHAVIOR

For the most part, problematic anger is a learned behavior. We learn to have temper tantrums from our parents, friends, coaches, teachers, siblings and other persons of influence.

In my practice, I have noticed that angry kids take their cues from other angry persons in the family system.

Recently the local school system referred a child client to me who was being dangerously

aggressive in the classroom. The teachers were tired of dealing with him. Everyone was afraid of him. They assumed he was “bad blood.”

As I assessed the family system (the nuclear and extended families), I came to a different realization. **This child was surrounded by angry people.** A few of the adults in his life were in prison for angry crimes they had committed. My client had grown up around angry people.

And the angry, vengeful way he handled problems was consistent with the way the adults in his life handled their problems.

I did not see him as a bad or flawed child, but as a victim of his circumstances who had no healthy models for the expression of anger in his life. He certainly was not going to find a healthy model in the video games he played, or in the cartoons and movies he watched.

Or in the behavior of adults who cussed him out if he made a mistake, rather than patiently teaching him how to do a task in an effective manner.

INTOLERANCE AND LACK OF RESILIENCY

This pre-adolescent, like so many of his peers, had no idea how to handle his emotions. He had never been taught to deal with frustration. He had never had the opportunity to learn tolerance. Even many of his teachers were of no help because they tried to teach him tolerance by following a zero tolerance policy.

More and more kids throw punches when someone criticizes them or says something hurtful. People today have little tolerance for words. Teenage boys and girls literally “go off” when a peer calls them, their mother or father, a bad name. It rarely occurs to them that there might be a better way of handling it.

They have not been taught how to deal with verbal violence. They do not know how to let comments go. They get pushed, and they push back.

What else can you do? They ask.

It must be old fashioned to teach children that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me.”

Today’s children and adults believe that words can and will harm them, and they ***react*** accordingly.

In reality, words cannot hurt you unless you allow them to hurt you. Words are never a reason to fight, but many people don’t get it. And if they’ve heard someone say it, they don’t believe it.

Some of the kids I work with **want** to fight. They want to settle things, and they think fighting

will resolve conflict and finish it.

Yet, it rarely works that way.

Fighting just leads to more fighting.

As they find out in time, fighting only carries the problem further, perpetuating the anger, frustration and stress that come along with the territory.

TEACHING ANGER CONTROL

What doesn't work is often what we teach. Psychologists used to teach their clients to hit pillows or stuffed dolls to dissipate their clients' rage. Modern research shows that the hitting carries over to other situations, and this just teaches people to hit when they get angry.

Time outs, holding your breath, and counting to ten are techniques which make sense, but it is often difficult to get people to follow that advice. Besides, these responses often merely **prolong the conflict**.

There are many methods for handling anger, but few that get to the root of the problem.

WHAT WORKS

Teaching children and adults to be stronger and more resilient is a beginning.

Helping people to be responsible for their own behavior works. It does no good to rescue a child from his problems. Children need to solve their own problems, so they can develop problem solving skills. They need knowledge and skill. They can't always have a teacher or parent there to protect them.

When children are bullied on the playground they need to know how to handle it. You can't always tell the teacher and expect him or her to help you.

We must teach adults and children that words cannot hurt them, and it is wise not to respond to hurtful or intimidating speech by being hurtful and intimidating. That doesn't work and it only makes the individual a victim because it escalates the conflict.

We must help people to stop being victims.

Did you know that most violent crimes are committed by those who have a victim mind set? *Those who feel they have been injured in some way and wish to strike back.* Terrorism has similar psychological roots.

In any relationship, we must all learn to refrain from using inappropriate and harmful language. There is no place for verbal abuse. Verbal abuse can be just as violent as physical aggression.

If not more.

We must teach people not to tolerate it. The psychologically healthy individual learns not to have relationships with verbally violent people. He or she sets limits and demands that others meet them.

Children must learn that they don't need those kinds of relationships. Despite their need for social acceptance, kids have to learn that not every group or clique is worth joining.

Anger is really about gaining or keeping control in relationships. Often used as a weapon to get what people want, anger is a struggle for control.

There is always conflict in a relationship. And where there is conflict people try to win. This idea was promoted by Jay Haley, a pioneer of the family therapy movement of the last century.

All of us have to practice not getting angry and not allowing others to push our buttons. Parents and teachers must show their kids this behavior. They should model it for them.

To solve a bullying problem, for instance, the person who is bullied must take responsibility for solving the problem. We must learn that to respond with anger will be counterproductive. And not to do it.

For example, a revolutionary fellow who lived approximately 2,000 years ago gave people a wonderful non-violent prescription for handling anger. Turn the other cheek.

But hardly anyone listened.

His words were misunderstood, too. Actually, he was advocating an ingenious approach to problem solving and dealing with conflict.

STAYING CALM

Taking charge of a potentially violent situation is a matter of staying calm.

All of us must work on dealing with strong emotion and staying calm. Otherwise we will not be able to handle difficult situations. If you're busy exploding in response to a stressful event, you aren't going to be able to think clearly. And you'll need to think clearly to get out of the situation.

Couples must learn this. If they don't learn to control their feelings, they will end up in chronic struggles, arguments and debates.

Children must learn how to stay calm and be assertive when others pick on them. Just as anyone does who goes out into the world to make a living.

In society, quick anger will get you thrown in jail. In relationships, quick anger will attack and corrode the relationship itself.

WE MAKE OURSELVES ANGRY

We make ourselves angry, although it seems like someone else is responsible. Getting this core idea across to people is sometimes all that is needed to help them to get control over their anger and to be responsible for their own actions.

Someone can mistreat, threaten or accuse you of something. But only you can decide how you want to respond. If you respond **in kind**, we know what will happen. The problem will grow, and there will be lots of trouble.

On the other hand, if you stay cool, calm and collected, you may be able to make a response that will diffuse the situation and resolve the conflict.

Without anyone getting hurt!

That may be what the great master meant when he taught that we should turn the other cheek.

Refusing to hit back doesn't mean you are going to lay down and die. **But it keeps you from becoming as emotionally handicapped as your attacker.** This allows you to gain the upper hand. Because you are keeping your wits about you. You are using your head.

Whereas your attacker's head is just taking up space, as his emotions take control of him.

Carlos Castenada, the author of a number of popular allegorical books published in the 1960's and 1970's, wrote, "No one is important enough to make me angry."

That is powerful.

All of us should strive to live by that idea.

EXAMINE YOUR ANGER

If you examine the last few times you've allowed someone to make you angry, and ask yourself what was really going on in those situations, ***you may come to the conclusion that you have allowed some fairly unimportant matters to make you angry.***

Recently, I made a list of the last five anger-provoking situations in my life. Situations which I allowed to push me into a response of anger or great frustration.

The five situations were all different. And they involved different people. Yet, in all five cases, one thing was clear: the reasons for my anger were petty, although they didn't seem like it at the time.

And those whom I had allowed to anger me were petty in their behavior.

That reminds me, in one of Castenada's books a character used the term, "petty tyrant," to describe a similar type of person. How true of most trouble makers, bullies and tyrants. How petty they are!

As long as we can stop and think, when a petty tyrant messes with us, we're okay. If we can remind ourselves that this angry person who is trying to pick some kind of fight with me is but a "petty tyrant," we'll be able to respond more effectively.

MARRIAGES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

A typical relationship anger pattern involves one spouse irritating the other spouse in some way, and the spouse responds angrily, which only makes the other spouse do the behavior more. Neither spouse can give in, so the cycle continues.

Many have lousy marriages because they've watched their parents fail at love relationships. And they have learned to be the same way. Many have witnessed unhappy marriages consisting of each parent complaining about the other, behind their backs.

- Children watch their parents live in miserable relationships.
- They observe a high degree of anger in their parents' marriage.
- They witness the fights and silent periods when neither spouse would speak to the other.
- They watch as their parents act like children, breaking up and getting back together again.
- They observe the silly fights where chairs are knocked over and glasses are thrown across the room, or objects of value are intentionally smashed.

Many relationship partners in our culture don't know how to keep anger from calling the shots. They can't stop reacting angrily!

So how is it going to be any different for the children when they grow up?

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO DEFEAT ANGER AND IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

- Learn not to go bizerk over someone else's behavior. Cultivate the skill of not reacting to anger with anger. Be responsible for your own behavior. Stay in control of your emotions, no matter what your partner does. When you are able to do this, you help the relationship.

- Laugh at yourself more often. This is true for individuals and couples. You won't take things too seriously, and you'll stay happier and healthier. If you find yourself behaving childishly, admit it and have a good laugh – and change your behavior.
- Use a sense of humor to help you deal with problems. Some couples need a lot of practice in this area. Humor can assist you in getting through crises and hard times. Each spouse must be able to laugh at the other without getting an angry response in return. Healthy couples can and do laugh at each other and themselves.
- Realize your relationship doesn't have to be perfect. Perfect relationships do not exist, and they would be no fun! Relax and have a little fun, which you can't afford to do if you must act perfect all the time.

Accept your flaws. Being a little flawed is not only okay, it's the only way you can be. Accept your humanity and you'll be more real to others.

- Be on your best behavior throughout the course of your relationship or marriage. Don't be like most people, who are on their best behavior for only the beginning. After a couple of years, they revert back to their old way of being before they got into the relationship. Your marriage vows should include **a promise on the part of each spouse to put the best foot forward for always!**
- Maintain high standards of basic respect and courtesy for each other, even when you are feuding. Simply do not allow yourselves to become disrespectful, spiteful and degrading to each other.
- Don't fight. It doesn't work. When there is conflict or one spouse is angry, the other must learn that being angry back will not get him what he wants in the end. It will only ensure the continuation of the problem. Of course, if you have an occasional fight it won't be the end of the world. But it isn't necessary.
- Don't attack or defend. Stop and debrief. Then talk about it – once both spouses are no longer in the throws of anger.
- Even when you get hurt by someone's words or actions, learn not to go off and pout or react aggressively. Counterattacks are just as foolish as the original attack. Neither works. When you are ready to talk about it, hold a conversation with your partner. Talk about the way you feel. Discuss what happened. Logically and reasonably. Without getting angry. Tell your partner what you would like him/her to do differently next time.

A MIGHTY POOR SOLUTION

You know, we all get angry . . . quite often. Such is life. But we don't all handle it the same way.

Let's take a look at the anatomy of a typical episode of anger:

Something goes wrong > We get angry > If things don't get better, we get angrier > Other people get angry at us for being angry at them > Or for blowing up in their presence > Soon we're both out of control > All parties get even angrier

If we want to interrupt this pattern, we must stop over-reacting. We must stop viewing anger as a solution.

A good solution anger is not, and will never be!

Why do we keep thinking of anger as a solution? It never solves anything. Oh, it seems to, all right, but anger really isn't an answer. As I said, it simply sets up more problems.

All of us should learn not to use anger as a control device on others, both the people we know and love, as well as strangers.

Only then can we free ourselves from the vice-like grip of ANGER!

TEN STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO PROTECT YOUR RELATIONSHIPS FROM ANGER

1. Stop criticizing, judging and condemning your partner
2. Learn to see your partner for his/her strengths and assets (rather than weaknesses)
3. Avoid giving in to resentments – it's a choice you make
4. Learn to give more, not less to the relationship, despite feeling hurt or miffed
5. Hone the remarkable skill of forgiveness and use it often
6. Say you are sorry when you should. Contrary to popular opinion, love means you have to say you're sorry when you need to, and to say it often and with conviction
7. Apologize! Now and not later (or as soon as you can) and apologize unconditionally
8. Develop courage. Without courage you have no business trying to conduct a relationship. You will need a lion's courage for many, many situations
9. Agree with criticism when it is leveled at you (it's no skin off your back)
10. Avoid blaming. If you're unhappy or feeling down, you probably have something to do with it, even if your partner has mistreated you. Accept responsibility for your own situation

Remember, don't allow your spouse's angry or hurtful words to be your undoing. Suck it up and refuse the temptation to punish them!

Take these positive steps toward handling anger problems and your relationship will be much happier.

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