

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Understanding Anger

By Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

When is the last time you felt angry? I think we all can admit that we have experienced anger at various times in our lives. Anger is a natural human emotion and a normal response to some things that may happen to us. It can take the form of mild irritation, such as with a slow driver, or, if uncontrolled, can become destructive and lead to rage or violence. Anger can be to the point and direct- you know where you stand, and so does the other person. This provides an opportunity to resolve both the anger and the primary feelings behind it. Anger can also be a useful part of assertive behavior if we are aware of what causes the anger and are able to express our feelings in a non-threatening and respectful way.

Although anger is a normal reaction to certain situations, it becomes a problem when the anger negatively affects our behavior. The first step in preventing the negative consequences of anger is to develop awareness that we are angry. We cannot manage anger until we are first aware of it and the consequences it has on ourselves and others. Fortunately, our bodies can provide us with physical, behavioral, emotional, and psychological clues to help us recognize signs of anger.

- Physiological: clenched fists, rapid breathing, rapid heartbeat, and muscle tension.
- Behavioral: language that frequently changes and becomes louder, pacing, and finger pointing.
- Emotional: feelings of abandonment, fear, or being unfairly criticized.
- Psychological: anger provoking self-thoughts such as “I need to prove myself in this situation” or “I need to make that person understand me.”

Once we are able to recognize these outward signs of anger, then we can begin to identify the primary source of the anger. When I do anger management groups, I always ask the veteran what is the first feeling they would experience if someone hit them in their nose very hard. The usual response is anger. However, anger is actually the secondary feeling generated in response to more primary feeling or feelings. These primary feelings turn into anger in a split-second. The individual, whose nose was hit, probably first experiences hurt, surprise, and/or embarrassment; but these feelings quickly morph into anger often beyond the individual’s awareness.

Recognizing the primary feelings can help us focus on the true source of our anger and identify strategies to deal with the underlying issues. For example, a married couple is talking in the living room. The wife would like to talk about the family finances, but the husband has other plans and turns up the television. The wife might state in anger “You never listen to me!” and an argument ensues. Alternatively, the wife could say “I feel like you don’t listen to me when I’m trying to talk about our finances.” This communication identifies the primary feeling, which the couple can then discuss in a mature way.

Anger management is a process of learning how to recognize when we are becoming angry, the source of the anger, and how to express anger appropriately and assertively. What are some strategies that we can use to facilitate our management of anger? Exercise, relaxation skills, and humor. (Please note that humor must be used WITHOUT sarcasm in order to diffuse anger and relieve tension.) Another strategy is recognizing our “self-talk” or silent conversation to ourselves. I believe in the theory that “We are what we think.” Epictetus in the first century A.D

said “people are disturbed not by things, but by the views, which they take of them.” If we think we are out of control, then the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ may cause that to be true. Instead, say things like “As long as I keep my cool, I am controlling myself;” or “I don’t need to prove myself in this situation - I can stay calm.” When we feel that we are on the verge of physically losing control, take a “timeout.” Although it may seem cliché, physically removing ourselves from the situation can prevent unwanted and negative consequences. Think carefully before you say anything or respond negatively. Do not assume that everything that happens to you is a personal affront. In other words, put your brain on fast-forward. Visualize what would happen if you say something in a disrespectful way, for once you speak or act, you are no longer in control of the consequences.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “No one can insult you without your permission.” This is an important principle, for to believe that someone or something can *make* us feel offended, angry, hurt, or bitter diminishes our sense of power and transforms us into objects to be *acted upon*. Instead, we can choose to respond by *acting*- taking control by choosing how we will respond to an offensive or hurtful situation. Anger, a natural human emotion which is a normal response to some things that may happen to us- may never be eliminated. However, it *can* be managed. And, while you won’t be able to change overnight, every time you react more thoughtfully, you will gain more strength to deal with the next situation more appropriately.