

# Dealing With Others' Anger

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Consumer Series | Family

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Having problems with others is normal. Whenever two or more people are together with different needs and wants, they can get angry and conflicts can arise. One of life's many important lessons is to learn how to handle these conflicts well, especially when someone is angry at us.

## Steps to Avoid Violence

Therapists and educators recommend a combination of communication, assertiveness and problem-solving strategies. There are significant differences in dealing with someone's frustration or mild anger compared to someone's anger that may become violent.

If you are around a person whose anger commonly escalates, it might be helpful to have a structured "time-out" procedure. When you notice the first signs of anger for you or the other person (e.g., raised voices, pacing, heart racing), then you can say "I need to take a time-out. Let's meet out on the front porch together in 15 minutes." During your time out it is important that both you do something calming (e.g., read a book, listen to soothing music, go for a walk) and then that you come back at the agreed time. If it still feels that the situation is escalated, you should call another time-out. When it feels safe (emotionally and physically) to resume the conversation, then you can mutually decide to (1) continue talking, (2) forget the issue or (3) table the issue for a time when you can have a neutral third-party person present (e.g., a therapist, spiritual leader, etc.).

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If you have a sense that the person you are interacting with may potentially become violent during an argument or other encounter, it is important that you have a plan to keep yourself and others safe in worse-case scenarios. If this is a person you know well (e.g., a partner or family member), then you are likely an expert on their anger. In other words, you know the signals and the risk factors that indicate violence could occur. Common risk factors for violence include a history of violence (against you or others), substance use, high levels of stress (e.g., unemployment) and/or other regulation difficulties (e.g., high levels of impulsivity). Many people find it helpful to consult a therapist or connect with a local organization that specializes in supporting individuals who are facing violence in their relationships (currently or in the past). These resources can provide additional help and strategies to keep you safe, and many have strict confidentiality practices.

Important aspects of a safety plan include the list below, taken from the National Coalition against Domestic Violence. Safety plans can be used for romantic or other types of relationships.

1. Determining where you can go during an argument. You want to avoid places that don't have an exit (bathroom) or rooms that have weapons (kitchen).
2. Keep a list of safe people you can call. Memorize their phone numbers.
3. Have a list of multiple safe places you could go. Give people a "code word" that indicates you need help if you call.
4. Always carry cash and have copies of important documents (e.g., birth certificates, passports, parenting plans).
5. Have an emergency cell-phone if possible.

When there is minimal risk of violence occurring, many people find it helpful to use the following five steps. (The first three steps are from Dr. David Burns's book, *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*.)



## Quick Facts

- Knowing how to "de-fuse" tense situations can improve your relationships.
- Knowing how to prepare for potentially dangerous situations can help save a life-years or a family member's.
- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile and being arrested for a violent crime in young adulthood.
- It is often helpful to seek support from trusted family members or friends, licensed therapists or other personal supports if you have concerns about anger in your own life and/or the lives of the people around you.

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**1. Ask**, “What is it you’re angry at me about?” and listen for the unmet expectation, need, want or demand.

Example:

“So, you want me to drive you both ways to your new job five days a week, right?”

“So, you want me to run the meeting like a club president would, right?”

If the unmet expectation is not clear to you, you can always ask, “What is it you want?”

**2. Be as empathic and understanding as possible.** Suspend all judgment.

Genuinely strive to look at the situation through the other’s eyes and point of view. “What did you hear me say? See me do? What do you expect of me?” Sometimes the urge to defend yourself is overwhelming, but don’t! Instead, ask, “What did that mean to you?” If appropriate, paraphrase the other person’s content and feeling.

Example:

“So, after you told me I’d just have to drive you to and from work because this is your first job and you worked really hard to get it and I said, ‘Let’s talk about it later,’ you felt like I was putting you off. Do you think that means I don’t care as much about you as I care about your brother?”

“I really want to see your viewpoint. Let me see if I’m getting it. It sounds like you’re saying I’ve been too rigid to push the group to establish and follow written by-laws. It also sounds like you want me to be more flexible with the agenda, right?”

Listen and paraphrase until the speaker indicates you’ve got the point.

**3. Agree** where you can honestly do so. No matter whether your critic is wrong or right, find some way to agree. Having a “we-can-solve-this-problem attitude” goes a long way in conflict management.

Example:

“I have to agree that I was irritated and in a rush when you announced your new job. You’re right -- it would have been better if I’d explained that I had to go to the office in five minutes for an important meeting, but that I really do care about you and your new job and would love to hear about it later.”

“You’re absolutely right, I did follow a rigid agenda and I wasn’t very flexible. Perhaps you want the group to have more input into the meeting’s agenda. I must admit, I’m still learning how to lead a group to accomplish its goals.”

**4. Ask**, “What do you want (of me) now?” By the time you take time to listen for the unmet expectation or demand, empathize with the other person’s feelings and viewpoint, and indicate where you agree, much of the intense anger often disappears. A clue that the time is ripe for asking this question is when you hear an audible sigh as the angry person takes a deep breath and the energy shifts. Once you and your critic calm down and lower the emotional ambience from rage or anger to frustration or irritation, you’ll be in a better mood to communicate. When you have decreased your anger to irritation, you can ask directly, “What is it you’d like (from me) now?”

Example:

“You’re my parent and I want you to show you care about my life, too, by driving me to and from work four days a week.”

“Well, what I want is for you to not be so rigid with the way you run our meetings.”

**5. Negotiate to a win-win position.**

At this point you can explain your viewpoint tactfully and assertively and negotiate differences.

Example:

“I tell you what, since your job is not that far from school and 3:30 is a busy time for me, why don’t you walk to your work from school and I’ll pick you up at 6:30 every day? Can we try this for a couple of weeks and see if it works?”

“OK, so you want me to run our meetings more flexibly, right? What if I use enough structure from Roberts Rules to keep meetings from turning into shouting matches, but make sure they end at a reasonable hour? I’m also willing to ask for old and new business and bring up a few of the most important issues. I can then open it up to the group for discussion. I’d also like to ask the group members to decide when they want to end that meeting and negotiate the amount of time for each agenda item. This way you will get the flexibility you want and I will have enough structure to keep our meetings running smoothly. What do you think? Shall we try it for a couple of months?”

## Unresolved Conflicts

A warning: Not everyone wants to work out a “win-win” solution to a problem. If you use some of these steps and find yourself feeling more angry for what the person is saying or doing to you, stop

and ask, “What’s going on here? Am I feeling like I’m losing and the other person is winning?”

If so, you might say: “I started this conversation with an ‘I-win-you-win attitude’. Now I feel like we’re into a ‘You-win-I-lose’ situation. Is that what you want? If it is, then are you willing to shift with me to an ‘I-win-you-win’ attitude?” If so, proceed. If not, it may be time to seek the help of a neutral third party who is skilled at mediating or negotiating.

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations where we get a lot of criticism from someone. If we do not protect ourselves from heavy doses of negative criticism, we can become depressed. In these situations, ask the other person what he or she is angry about and what they want. After listening well and using the steps described above, you can say: “I know you’re angry at me and I’m sorry I didn’t give you what you needed. I hope someday you can see I did the best I could.”

Instead of focusing on the guilt and shame the criticizer wants to give you, keep your thoughts focused on how you did your best. Learn how to stand up for yourself or get out of a conflicted relationship. John Gottman’s book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, has some good insights into these issues as well.

These concepts and strategies will likely help people of good faith and those convinced of the viability of handling anger. For those who are willing to feel hostile and still stop themselves from expressing hostility in hurtful ways, these steps can help. However, if you have a situation where someone has trouble keeping a lid on their hostile feelings and you are in danger of being abused, then it is important to have a safety plan (as previously discussed). Professional services such as your local crisis center, victim assistance, child abuse hot line, mental health, licensed marriage and family therapists, counselors, etc. often have tools that can help you and your family stay safe.

## Dealing Well With Others’ Anger: Can We Make a Difference?

It is in everyone’s best self-interest to develop skills in anger and conflict management. The better we reduce the intensity of an angry family or work situation, the better our chances are of preventing violence. When we take a broad

view of the causes of anger and violence in our communities, it appears that many juveniles and young adults arrested for violent crimes were abused and neglected as children. When they were small, they learned they could not trust those close to them. According to a 2000 review on long-term effects of child maltreatment, youth who have experienced abuse or neglect are more likely to be arrested as juveniles, involved in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and to be arrested for violent crimes compared to those who did not experience abuse or neglect. These findings mirror the 1992 National Institute for Justice Study which indicated that

- Being abused as a child increases the odds of being involved in future delinquency and young adult crime by 40%.
- Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53 percent and being arrested for a violent crime in young adulthood by 38%.
- Sixty-three percent of boys and young men, 11 to 20, arrested for homicide, killed men who were abusing their mothers.

Where there is violence today, often there was a past of abuse and neglect. Regardless of the cause, the consequences of anger are worth averting early.

Much of the fear of violence between people is that it appears to be random, unprovoked and unexplainable. However, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, less than half (38%) of non-fatal violent acts, and between 21% and 27% of homicides were committed by strangers between 1992 and 2008. Between 73% and 79% of homicides during this time were committed by people who knew the victim.

For these reasons, effective caring and communication can have some effects: first by helping us feel less helpless in responding to others when they are angry, and second by assertively guiding the angry person into more constructive action. In these tense, angry situations with family members and co-workers, there are opportunities for us to intervene in ways that rebuild trust at home and work and help diffuse anger to a lower level.

Substantial evidence also suggests that chronic anger, hostility and depression affect a person's physical health and recovery from illness. According to psychologists, Howard S. Friedman and Gary R. VandenBos (1992), "When we add in [to the substantial evidence] the

influences of these emotions on homicides, suicides, smoking, drunken driving, and failure to take prophylactic measures (from condoms to seat belts), we have enumerated most of the causes of premature death in developed countries." So, if we can help other people manage their anger (when it is safe), we can help them lead healthier and happier lives as well.

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