

# Chapter 4

## DEALING WITH ANGER



# INTRODUCTION

**P** RIMARY AND secondary feelings each have a range of intensity. Recognizing feelings when they are preventing the problems of having to deal with very- high intensity feelings. You've probably realized in going through the previous chapter how many of your feelings involve extremely intense secondary feelings such as anger, resentment, and jealousy. But notice, also the other, less intense feelings that exist side-by-side with anger: hurt, irritation, discomfort, excitement, fear. These feelings are less destructive than anger and are often overlooked. In the exercises you've just done, you 've had a chance to look at a greater range of the feelings you experience. Being aware of these feelings in a conflict situation can help you deal more constructively with anger. This is of critical importance because anger, if not handled effectively, can prevent you from acting in your best interest. The angrier you become, the harder it is to think beyond the moment, and the more likely you are to do or say something you'll regret later.

## GOAL

We want you to be able to deal with anger more constructively. In this chapter, we'll be presenting a strategy that can help you learn to do this. We'd like you to be able to use this strategy when you are angry to better control your own behavior of low intensity, and dealing with them then, can help you learn to do this. We'd like you to be able to use this strategy when you are angry to better control your own behavior.

## MAJOR POINTS

1. Learn to identify when you are becoming *angry*.
2. When you are *angry* try to identify and express your primary feelings.
3. Recognize that any feeling has a range of intensity, and it is better to express feelings before they get so intense as to be uncontrollable.
4. When a conflict situation gets out of control, take a break; get away from the situation in order to calm yourself, so more productive communication can occur later.

## ELABORATION

You may be saying to yourself, "Sure, it's easy to talk about what to do; but when I get *angry*, it's a lot harder to do." And you 're right -it is more difficult to act in your best interest when you are *angry*. That's why we think you will find it helpful to learn this strategy for dealing with *anger*. Hopefully, next time you get into a conflict, you 'll remember what you learned here and use it to help you deal more constructively with the situation. We'll go over each of the major points in more detail.

### Learn to identify when you are becoming angry

1. This is an extremely critical step. It is considerably easier to exercise self-responsibility when you are aware of your feelings. The sooner you discover feelings of irritation or anger; the sooner you can begin to deal with them effectively. The earliest indication is

usually that you feel uncomfortable. Here are some things you might notice about yourself that could serve to warn you that you are getting angry:

- You feel like trying to make your partner feel *guilty* or *inferior*.
- You feel like deliberately doing or saying something mean.
- You are beginning to lose sight of what the conflict was about.
- You feel quiet and withdrawn (like the calm before the storm).
- You feel there are fewer and fewer ways to back down gracefully.
- You care more about winning than being right.
- You feel like you need a drink.
- You notice yourself chain-smoking.
- You notice any of the following, fight-or-flight, sensorimotor sensations:
  - Your voice is getting louder.
  - Your fists are clenched.
  - Your face feels flushed.
  - Your heart is beating harder and faster.
  - You feel restless or tense.
  - Your stomach feels knotted.
  - You begin to perspire.

Each person has his or her own warning signals, and you may discover several of your own in the list above. Try to identify others.

2. When you are *angry*, try to identify and express primary feelings. You remember from Chapter Three that your primary feelings are those that occur first. There are three simple reasons for trying to express your primary feelings. One is that it will make you feel better to talk about your feelings not just the anger, but the hurt or fear behind the anger. Another reason is that recognizing and expressing primary feelings can cause your secondary feelings to lessen or to go away altogether. You can save yourself the discomfort of being angry while still expressing your feelings and confronting the issues involved. The third reason is that expressing your primary feelings has a far more constructive impact on your loved ones than expressing anger. They are more likely to be open to what you say and to understand how you feel.

We are not suggesting that you never express your *anger* when you feel it. It is how you choose to express it that counts. Say you're *angry* if it will make you feel better. But go beyond that and express your primary feelings as well.

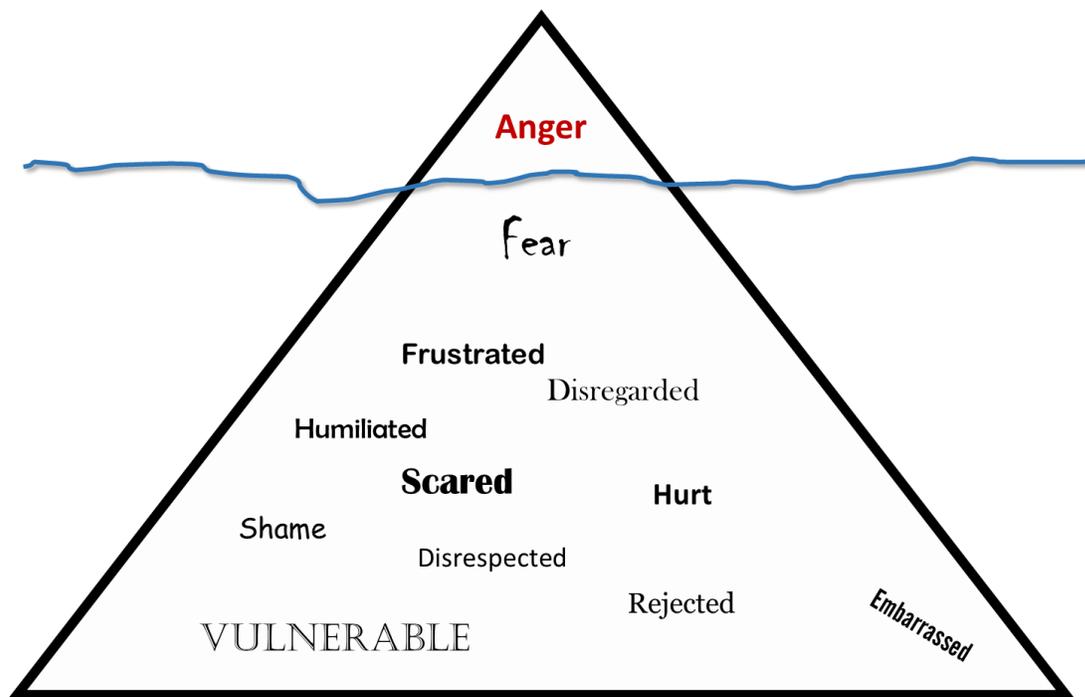


Figure 1- Secondary emotion is often what is expressed outwardly. One or more primary emotions may be present underneath.

3. Recognize that any feeling has a range of intensity and that it is better to express feelings before they become so intense as to be uncontrollable. We've talked several times now about how difficult it is to exercise self-responsibility when you are experiencing powerful secondary feelings like *anger*. As we've said before, the angrier you become, the harder it is to think beyond the moment and the more likely you are to do something you'll regret later. Your alternatives get fewer and less desirable as the situation gets worse.

In most conflict situations, the feelings early on are of relatively low intensity. At low intensity, *annoyance*, *impatience*, and *frustration* feel uncomfortable, but they are not destructive. *Anger* and *rage*, on the other hand, are very intense feelings. They feel very uncomfortable to the person experiencing them and can be extremely destructive to all involved. Certainly venting *anger* and *resentment* may make you feel better for the moment, but if you've created a situation that you later regret, you have not acted in your best interest.

Keeping yourself aware of the scope and intensity of your feelings will help you notice the warning signals that tell you you're losing control. There is no single point at which you should stop yourself, it's a matter of degree, but the earlier the better. The sooner you can register and identify an uncomfortable feeling, the less effort it takes to remedy the situation. What you want to avoid is reaching the extreme and doing or saying something you'll really regret later. Again, this is something only you can know about yourself. Sometimes you may allow yourself to say hurtful things you know you don't mean just to vent your anger. You may feel that your relationship is strong enough to handle this. At the other extreme, physical violence is something no relationship can

adjust to constructively. Once you've hit someone you care about, you have done something you cannot undo later. Anger can scar and disfigure relationships emotionally and physically when it is vented irresponsibly.

We recognize that most of you have probably been conditioned not to express feelings of minor annoyance or frustration. You've probably been taught not to make a big deal over "little things." "Wait till it becomes a real issue," you've been told. The problem with this is if you wait until your annoyance gets so out of hand that you can't ignore it any longer, you've missed out on a lot of calmer, more pleasant solutions to the problem. Now you have to deal with the situation while angry and least able to act in your best interest. This conditioning will be hard to overcome but you can see how important it is to try.

4. When a conflict situation gets out of control, take a break. One of the most destructive things that can happen in a conflict situation is that you will argue the problem to a point of no return. Many people think that once they get into a conflict, they should stick with it till they iron it out. There are times when this strategy works well, but when one or both individuals are angry and out of control, this approach can be terribly destructive. Nothing can be resolved in such a situation. It is far more constructive to learn how to be comfortable leaving loose ends for a while. You can come back to the problem later and start over when you feel calmer.

How do you know when you are out of control? It's actually pretty obvious if you stop long enough to observe your behavior. That's why staying aware of your feelings is so important. Once you are aware that you are either losing control or are out of control already, stop and take your leave.

This is hard to do because it is difficult to express yourself constructively when you are angry. Try practicing what you will say next time you want to get out of a situation, and then use that line when you need it. Discuss with your partner some signals to help him or her recognize that you are saying you would like to stop for now.

## EXAMPLES

**F**OLLOWING ARE three examples that show what happens when feelings become very intense and anger is not dealt with constructively. For each example, a scenario is presented describing an individual progressing from low to high intensity feelings and losing control. The commentary explains how each situation could have been improved had the individual used the strategy presented in this chapter.

### EXAMPLE 1

#### Scenario

Phoebe has just spent a busy day cleaning house in preparation for a party she and Roy are hosting. Roy has been home all day doing some chores around the house. Phoebe feels irritated that, even though he's doing things that need to be done, he had to pick today to do them. She wishes he would offer to help her or watch the children. She let this feeling go, though, thinking it too insignificant to bring up. However, the irritation persists. At one point, she comments

sarcastically about Roy's choice of chores. He detects that Phoebe is annoyed and questions her about it. She makes a lot of accusations. He becomes *defensive*, and before long they are having a heated argument. Things get worse and worse until Phoebe's feelings become so intense that she throws her Swedish meat balls into the sink, tells Roy to call off the party, and locks herself in her room.

#### COMMENTARY

This situation may not have turned out so destructively had Phoebe been better able to deal with her anger. Her irritation at Roy's choice of chores was the first indication that she was becoming angry. At that point she could have averted her anger by expressing her irritation and the other primary feelings she was experiencing at the time (i.e., frustration over too much work and too little time; hurt that Roy didn't notice this and offer to help).

## EXAMPLE 2

### Scenario

Lew and Joan are at a party one night with some friends from college. Lew notices that Joan is talking with her former fiancé. He watches for a while and becomes *alarmed* that they seem to be enjoying themselves so much. He's convinced that other people at the party have noticed too. He feels *jealous* and *resentful* that Joan would put him in such an awkward position. Not wanting to make a scene, he says nothing but goes in to the other room for a drink. For the next hour he stays away from her and drinks heavily. When he finally returns, he sees that Joan and her ex-fiancé are still talking intensely. Lew approaches Joan and announces that he might as well go home since he isn't having any fun and that she can do whatever she pleases. She becomes concerned and follows him outside, where they get into an argument about whether she was flirting or not. The dispute goes on loudly for over 30 minutes and results in neighbors calling the police about the noise.

### COMMENTARY

Lew could have dealt with his *anger* more constructively had he used the strategy presented in this chapter. First of all, he tried to ignore the early indications that he was becoming *angry*. He might have been able to avert his *anger* by calling Joan away for a moment to let her know how he was feeling. While he was still calm and sober, his primary feelings were probably a mixture of *hurt* and *fear* (*alarmed*). Dealing with those feelings at that point would probably have prevented them from becoming so intense. Even later, during the argument outside, Lew or Joan could have averted trouble with the police had they realized they were both out of control. The best time to stop and take a break is as early as possible in the argument.

## EXAMPLE 3

### Scenario

Rita and Cliff have been together for about five years. Cliff is 15 years older than Rita. She is in her late twenties now and is becoming bored with their sex life. She hasn't discussed her boredom and dissatisfaction with Cliff, and she is a little resentful that he hasn't noticed. She knows that she loves Cliff and she tries a number of things to enhance their sexual encounters. Finally, she gets up enough courage to show him a book demonstrating a variety of sexual positions. She suggests they try some of them. He laughs at the book and tells her she's got too much imagination for her own good. She gets *furious* and tells him that since he's so sexually uninteresting, somebody's got to make up for his lack of imagination. She adds that if he finds that whole subject so funny, he can just do without sex. As a final insult, she says that he is so boring he might as well be impotent.

### COMMENTARY

Rita could have avoided her explosive reaction at the end of the scenario had she dealt with her *anger* more constructively. Her first warnings that she was becoming *angry* were her feelings of *boredom*, *dissatisfaction*, and *resentment*. Had she expressed these and her primary feelings to Cliff, the situation would probably have turned out quite differently. Rita's resentment could have been handled more constructively by both of them and wouldn't have turned into such destructive hostility.

# PRACTICE

**F**OLLOWING ARE several practice exercises. As in the previous chapter, we'd like you to do all of them. Be sure to write out your answers. Exercises 2 through 4 can be especially valuable to you if you spend some time thinking about your responses and are as thorough as possible. Hopefully, the next time you're in a conflict situation, you will remember and use what you've written here.

1. Write down, in your own words, the four major points of the strategy for dealing with anger.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Go over the list of common indicators for becoming *angry*, and write down the ones that apply to you. Then think carefully and add any other personal indicators that tell you you're becoming *angry*.

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