

Celebrating Anger

YWCA Building Sustainable Futures



Prepared by YWCA Muskoka as part of the curriculum of **Women Thriving**, which was the program documented for Phase Three of the YWCA Building Sustainable Futures project.

Goals for Today

- To explore what anger is, what causes anger, and to discover our triggers.
- To explore healthy ways to express and/or process our anger.

Why Learn About Anger?

- It is important to understand that anger is not bad and that it is a natural human emotion that we all experience.
- The problem is that we have been told it *is* bad.
- We haven't been given the resources to properly process and express this emotion.
- Anger can be a powerful indicator that something doesn't feel okay within. Therefore, if we learn to turn toward our anger, it can help us grow and learn to stand our ground in a positive way.

Warm-Up Exercise

- Think of a situation where you felt angry.
- What was your experience of anger in your body? What sensations, thoughts, breathing and behavior did you recognize?

Experiences with Anger

- I am very angry and it jumps out of me in inappropriate ways.
- I feel anger, but I suppress it.
- I am never angry.
- I have a good relationship with my anger, and I express it in healthy and supportive ways.

Things to Know About Anger..

- Anger is a powerful emotion. It can be used either in *productive* or *counter-productive* ways. It can lengthen or shorten our lives.
- It is a powerful survival tool.
- It is a response to pain (physical or psychological, or both).
- It is a source of energy.
- It is a *secondary* emotion.
- When we are angry, the brain downshifts to a *lower evolutionary level*.
- Prolonged anger is unhealthy.
- Repressed anger is also unhealthy.

Understanding Anger

- Nature has developed the emotional state we call “anger” to help keep us alive. Anger sends signals to all parts of our body to help us fight or flee. It energizes us for action. At other times in our history, we may have been threatened by wild animals who wanted to eat us. Now we more often feel threatened by other human beings, either psychologically or physically.
- When we feel energized by anger, we might ask ourselves how can we put this energy to its most productive use. As with the use of other forms of energy such as electricity or oil, we might want to use it efficiently, not wastefully.

Primary vs. Secondary Feelings

- Perhaps the most helpful thing to remember about anger is that it is a *secondary emotion*. A primary feeling is what is felt immediately before we feel angry. We always feel something else first before we get angry.
- We might first feel: afraid, shame, attacked, offended, disrespected, forced, trapped or pressured. If any of these feelings are intense enough, we think of the emotion as anger.
- Generally speaking, secondary feelings do not identify our unmet emotional needs (UEN). When all I can say is, “I feel angry,” neither I nor anyone else knows what would help me feel better. A helpful technique, then, is always to identify the primary emotion.

Example

- Assume someone wants us to do something we would prefer not to do. At first we feel a little pressure, but not enough to get angry. When they keep pushing us, we begin to get irritated. If they continue, we get “angry.” Such anger damages relationships.
- One suggestion for how to avoid getting angry in this case would be to express your initial feeling by saying, “I feel pressured,” before the feeling has escalated to the point of destructive anger. If the person respects your feelings and does not invalidate or ignore them, they may stop applying pressure. Even if they do not, it is helpful to know what the specific feeling is.

Knowing exactly how we feel with others, and why, helps us in several ways:

- It raises our self-awareness in general.
- It helps us communicate more precisely.
- It helps us to learn more quickly who respects our feelings and who we want to spend our time with.

A Quick Check-In

- Go back to the beginning, when we did our warm-up and brought to our awareness a situation in which we felt angry.
- Can you name what the primary emotion was in that moment?
- How might this help you in the future—if you were to pause and check in with yourself to understand which primary emotion is present?

Anger as a Response to FEAR

- One of the primitive functions of an animal's response to fear is to frighten away the attacker. But in modern-day human life, we often frighten away those who we need and care about the most. Besides this, prolonged anger has health consequences.

Responding to & Learning from Fear

Anger is an intense emotion. It is evidence that we feel strongly about something. As with every emotion, it has a lesson for us. It can teach us:

- what we need
- what we lack
- what we believe
- what our insecurities are
- what we feel strongly about
- which emotional needs are important to us.

An Example of Learning from Anger

Instead of saying:

“She never should have done that. I can’t believe how irresponsible, insensitive and inconsiderate she is. What a cold-hearted evil witch she is.”

A more productive response is:

“I am really upset by this. Why does it bother me so much? What specifically am I feeling? What are my primary feelings? What need do I have that is not being met? What principles of mine have been violated?”

Let's Pause Here and PRACTICE!

Again, let's go back to the example we brought up in the beginning and reframe how we were speaking about the time we felt anger.

- On the worksheet "Learning from Anger," write down how you originally felt.
- Reframe this by bringing it back to you. How you can look at this experience and learn from your anger.

Evaluation and Reflection

- What is the most important thing you have learned today about anger?

