

Together Notes: managing anger

Feeling angry, resentful, irritated or frustrated are a normal part of life. Negative feelings in themselves are not 'wrong'; it's how we express them that can cause problems. The Bible tells us 'in your anger do not sin'.¹

Most of us learn how to handle feelings whilst growing up, usually without perfect role models. Sometimes we learn negative behaviour traits that become ingrained patterns for our adult lives. Some of those traits may be rooted in the idea that anger is sinful and that Christians should not express any unpleasant feelings. This can lead to suppressed feelings which may come out in more harmful ways, such as passive-aggressive behaviour. Different ways of handling anger, both positive and negative, are shown below.² When we understand how people tend to express anger, we will be in a better position to take positive steps to manage it well.

Positive behaviour

- Seeking to resolve the issue and to restore the relationship
- Expressing primary emotion and handling feelings well
- Thinking rationally about the issue

Positive & negative behaviour

- Working to resolve the issue
- Thinking rationally about the issue
- Focusing anger on the source and trying to handle emotions well
- Being loud with some unpleasant verbal abuse
- Blaming anger on other people or circumstances

Mostly negative behaviour

- Focusing anger on the source
- Being loud, unpleasant verbal abuse
- Blaming anger on other people or circumstances. Not taking responsibility for own feelings
- Hurting others feelings
- Expressing unrelated complaints: '*and another thing...*'
- Swearing and verbal abuse
- Throwing things and physical rage

Negative behaviour

- Blaming anger on other people or circumstances. Not taking responsibility for own feelings
- Hurting others, physical abuse
- Breaking things
- Being loud, unpleasant verbal abuse
- Hurting others feelings
- Expressing unrelated complaints: '*and another thing...*'
- Swearing and verbal abuse
- Throwing things and physical rage
- Passive aggressive behaviour

NOTE: Passive aggressive behaviour

- feelings are expressed indirectly, such as negative attitudes and resentments, intentional inefficiency or lateness, obstructive behaviour, stubbornness, sullenness and complaining. The behaviour is usually subconscious and people will deny their true feelings. The intention of the passive aggressive person is to UPSET OTHERS and make them angry!

Questions to consider prayerfully

1. None of us is perfect in the way we manage our feelings of anger, frustration, irritation and so on. How do I handle negative emotions well? In what ways are my expressions of anger unhealthy? Would my partner agree with my assessment?
2. What one area of negative behaviour could I change? What positive step could I take towards this?
3. As I think about the way I deal with the anger of my partner, is there a way I could encourage him / her?
4. Am I confident that my personal boundaries are healthy? In other words, do I know how to set loving limits on the anger of my partner? Do I tend to blame myself for any anger in the relationship? What could I do to help myself in these areas, if needed? (Do some further reading; seek help from a trusted friend or counsellor.)

Positive steps to manage our anger

We can **decide** to handle anger in a more positive way and **then take small steps to change our behaviour**. For example, Alan normally shouts verbal abuse when angry, blaming others. Alan decides to take a first step, to try not to shout abuse. He still raises his voice but he manages to control what he says. Some time later he decides to take a second step: he admits that he feels angry, instead of blaming his wife. Alan still raises his voice but he has taken two positive steps: he no longer shouts abuse and he admits his own feelings. A next step could be to focus on the source of the anger, to try and discover what triggered it.

The point is to accept that we cannot change all aspects of our behaviour in one go. We also need to remember that we can only change ourselves, not others. Efforts to change can be slow and difficult, even painful - but they are worth it for the sake of the relationship.

If our feelings are out of control we should take practical steps to calm down: take time and space to settle down; write down our thoughts and feelings; meet with a third party present to support us; seek help from a professional counsellor.

We can handle our own anger better by asking God to help us (as outlined in Session 5, page 85 of the workbook)

*'Now, having pinpointed the source of your anger, choose to respond to it through the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can make you angry. You make yourself angry. This is a crucial principle to realize. You can control your emotions because you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the supernatural presence of God who gives you his power of self-control. There is no excuse for out-of-control anger when the God who controls heaven and earth lives within you to make you like himself.'*³

It is very important that we deal with our anger in an honest and genuine way. Suppressed anger can lead to all kinds of health problems such as high blood pressure, skin complaints, ulcers and depression.

Managing the anger of others

If we are on the receiving end of anger expressed by our partner, we can ask God to help us (as outlined in session 5, page 85). **We can encourage our partner** by telling them we can see the effort they are making; we can affirm the specific steps they are taking. However, **it is extremely important that we have personal limits for what is and**

isn't acceptable behaviour. Limits are all about establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries which respect the freedom of an individual. In simple terms, boundaries are about being able to say 'no' to things we do not like. If we don't have boundaries we might be letting an angry, out of control spouse get away with bad behaviour. For further reading: 'Boundaries in Marriage'⁴.

For whatever reason, some may find themselves in an abusive relationship. People abuse others to dominate or control, or to prevent others from making free choices. **There are several forms of abuse: emotional; physical and sexual. No one should have to suffer an abusive relationship and a crucial first step will be to acknowledge and understand the abuse occurring in the marriage.** The next is to take steps toward breaking the cycle of abuse.

7 steps toward breaking a cycle of abuse ⁵

1. Recognise the need for change.
2. Understand that healthy relationships have boundaries.
3. Seek outside help and guidance.
4. Determine the level of danger and develop a safety plan.
5. Move towards personal recovery by establishing a strong relationship with God.
6. Encourage your partner to get help.
7. Move towards reconciliation (if appropriate).

Helplines

For Emergency services (police, ambulance and fire service) dial 999

Women's Aid Domestic Violence Helpline +44(0)845 7023468

Samaritans +44(0)845 3030900

Relate +44(0)845 4561310 or visit www.relate.org.uk

Association of Christian Counsellors +44(0)1189 662207 or visit www.acc-uk.org

Alcoholics Anonymous +44(0)845 7697555

¹ Ephesians 4:26

² Based on the 'Anger Ladder' outlined in Chapter 7, '*How to really love your teenager*', Ross Campbell, M.D. Permission being sought.

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http://www.intouch.org/myintouch/exploring/studies/pressures/lesson2/index_345895.html

⁴ '*Boundaries in Marriage*' Dr Henry Cloud and Dr John Townsend, Zondervan, ISBN 0-310-24314-9

⁵ Adapted from FamilyLife USA '*Weekend to Remember*' conference manual, Appendix B, revised 01/04. Used with permission.