



# There's More to Anger Than Getting Mad

by Sue von Fange

## Who Is the Mightiest?

There was a tiger who woke up one morning and felt just great (yes, just like Tony the Tiger). He felt so good that he went out and cornered a small monkey and roared at him, "WHO IS THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?" The poor, quaking little monkey replied, "You are, of course. No one is mightier than you."

A little while later, the tiger confronted a wildebeest and bellowed, "WHO IS THE GREATEST AND STRONGEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?" The wildebeest shook so hard it could barely speak, but managed to stammer, "O great tiger, you are by far the mightiest animal in the jungle."

Seeing he was on a roll, the tiger swaggered up to an elephant who was quietly munching on some weeds. The tiger roared at the top of his voice, "WHO IS THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL THE JUNGLE ANIMALS?"

The elephant grabbed the tiger with his trunk, picked him up, slammed him down, picked him up again, and shook him until the tiger was just a blur of orange and black. The elephant then threw him violently into a nearby tree. The tiger staggered to his feet, looked at the elephant, and said, "Man, just because you don't know the answer, you don't have to get so mad."

We can laugh at the expression of anger in this joke, but consider the following excerpt from the November 1999 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

"After Ms. Foster cut off Ms. Henson (in traffic), the two women played a cat-and-mouse game of tailgating, lane changing, and slamming on brakes until they got off at the same exit.

"Ms. Foster, the mother of three, was racing to pick up her 4-year-old daughter at an after-school program for children with cerebral palsy. Ms. Henson, a former Cub Scout den mother, was headed to her home in a quiet cul-de-sac. When the two cars came to a stop at a traffic light at the exit ramp, Ms. Foster jumped out and started toward Ms. Henson's vehicle. As Ms. Foster approached, Ms. Henson lowered the window about halfway and reached for a .38-caliber revolver she kept in the console. She had permission to carry the weapon under Alabama's conceal-carry law. Ms. Henson fired a single shot, striking Ms. Foster in the left cheek. Ms. Foster crumpled to the pavement and died.

"As Ms. Henson realized what she'd done, she said, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe I shot her.'"

Anger's reality is evident! You only need to look at a few news headlines to see that anger is a major issue in our society. In fact, my own web search on anger identified thousands of websites dealing with the subject, and one online bookseller listed hundreds of titles on anger. What about you? When was the last time you felt angry?

Poorly managed anger is the root of many serious physical, social, and emotional problems, including poor physical health, chronic disease, depression, unhappy relationships, violence, and crime. By contrast, the benefits of managing anger in constructive ways are

- lower heart rate and blood pressure;
- better sleep;
- better digestion;
- better relationships;
- improved problem-solving ability;

- more constructive communication;
- increased self-discipline and self-confidence.

## **Angry Feelings: Friend or Foe?**

Some people are taught that it's wrong to get angry. Others are taught it's their right to get angry! The truth is that everyone gets angry. It's what we do with our anger that matters.

In our world we see much that isn't right: homelessness, hunger, war, verbal and physical abuse, and the list goes on. These are situations of unfairness and injustice about which *we should* be angry. Many times, though, anger isn't so clearly justified. It may arise out of a threat to your security, identity, or control. Your anger is an indication that something is out of order. Common causes of anger include the following items:

- **Frustration:** You feel misunderstood or that no one cares what you think.
- **Mistreatment:** You're misjudged, and people spread rumors or publicly cut you down.
- **Injustice:** You're doing an excellent job at work, but barely make enough money to get by.
- **External irritants:** You live near a construction zone where there is constant noise from sunrise to sunset.
- **Pride, embarrassment:** Someone makes fun of you or shames you.
- **Disappointment:** You volunteer for a community event hoping to meet some new friends, but everyone else comes with a group and doesn't talk to you.
- **Betrayal:** A friend you trusted tells others about a personal conversation.
- **Loss, grief:** A loved one dies or you lose your job.
- **Need to be right:** You know exactly what to do, but other people insist on disagreeing with you!
- **Stress:** You're constantly on a tight schedule and overloaded.
- **Impatience:** Your pace and production are slowed by someone or circumstances beyond your control.
- **Conflicting values:** Your conscience tells you one thing, but you're pressed to do something else.
- **Boundary crossing:** Other people tell you what to do, or they behave in ways that make you uncomfortable.
- **Fatigue:** You never get enough sleep and are often on edge.

Think back over the last day, week, or month. Did any of these issues stir up anger in you? There was a time in my life when I was chronically angry. My abilities weren't being used, and I felt diminished as a person. I lived with a lot of anger for a while. Then I came to see my attitude centered on frustration, hurt, pride, and disappointment. Self-awareness is a first step in learning how to deal with anger constructively.

## **What's Your M.O.? (Method of Operation)**

There is more to anger than simply what causes it. What you do with anger can make a big difference in the results you see. Here are some ways people handle anger:

- **Ignore it:** You ignore the situation, thinking it will go away. You may rationalize that it's not as bad as it seems, or you conclude there's nothing you can do about it anyway.
- **Stuff it:** Your motto is "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." No matter how angry you are, you hold it in and say things are all right. You keep peace at any price, which may mean stomachaches, headaches, depression, a feeling of helplessness, or seeing your anger leak out in sarcastic and hurtful comments. The "peace" is just a thin veneer that covers a relationship that's decaying because of anger.

- **Withdraw:** You walk away from relationships in which you experience anger. You hold a grudge and give people the cold shoulder of silence, hoping they'll feel guilty and do what you want. But no one can read your mind, and others quickly tire of trying to figure out what's wrong.
- **Blame:** If there's a problem, it's always someone else's fault, not yours! If the other person has a strong sense of self-esteem and the blame honestly isn't theirs, they may simply walk away from the relationship. If they have low self-esteem, they may accept the blame but fear doing something that will set you off. Eventually, they too may recognize this relationship isn't what they want.
- **Triangle:** Talking about your anger with friends, family, colleagues, the repairman—anyone but the person with whom you're angry—resolves nothing. At worst, it alienates everyone as they tire of your anger, as they wonder when you might get angry with them and tell everyone else about it.
- **Explode:** Punching a hole in the wall, breaking dishes, or hitting people may make you feel better, but abuse and destruction are not acceptable in any situation.
- **Control:** You demand that other people do what you tell them to do—or else! This is another form of abuse and exercising power over others. It doesn't create mutually satisfying relationships, and it doesn't resolve anger. In fact, it can escalate to physical abuse when people repeatedly don't live up to your demands.
- **Escape:** You depend on drugs, alcohol, or other substances to make you feel better and soothe the pain. Your frustration may be relieved temporarily, but like a scab that doesn't heal, your anger stays just below the surface, waiting to break out.
- **Foul language:** Cussing until you've blown off enough steam to calm down benefits no one, and it's a sure-fire way to hurt someone's feelings.

Which approach do you typically use? What are the results? At times I have stuffed my anger down inside because I couldn't confront people in authority. The result was depression. At other times, I have been guilty of creating a triangle, talking with one or two trusted friends about my frustration rather than going directly to the person with whom I felt angry. In either case, the issues creating my anger were left unresolved, and those relationships were a no-win situation for me.

## Express Yourself?

As common as all these ways of handling anger are, using an **assertive approach** is the only one that deals with the underlying causes of anger. And as we've seen, the other approaches tend to alienate others by trampling on the relationship or by humiliating or hurting the other person(s). Those methods also ignore your role in the situation by not considering how you may need to change.

Learning to express your anger in appropriate, non-destructive ways is challenging because it requires you accept your anger, learn to understand it, and deal with it. It won't go away on its own. Anger is an opportunity to understand yourself better and to learn to resolve conflict. Think back to when you've been angry recently. What does the anger tell you about yourself? How does it show what you value and what is going on in your life? Paying attention to your anger will help you deal with it constructively. Once you recognize its source, you can decide what to do with it.

Here are some questions to help you decide how to deal with your anger:

1. What made you angry? What did you want that you weren't getting?
2. How did you respond?
3. Did you get the result you wanted? If not, how could you have responded differently to get that result?

Consider Serena. She is running late to the office and gets stuck in a slow lane of traffic. She's stressed, frustrated, and angry because she's not in control. She recklessly pulls into the next lane, cutting off another car and yelling, "Get off the road! Who taught you how to drive? Idiot!"

What's going on here? Using the questions on the previous page, this is what happened:

1. Serena was angry because the other drivers did not respect her need to go faster.
2. She responded by fighting back, cutting other people off, and yelling at them.
3. The result is that when Serena got to the office a few minutes late, she was angry and tense. What she wanted was to arrive on time and be ready for work.

The next time she's in this situation, she could

- stay relaxed and use the time to think about what she'll do when she gets to the office;
- leave a little earlier, so she doesn't feel anxious about getting to work on time;
- find another, less-busy route to the office.

Take time to evaluate angry moments. Consider what's behind them and what options are available. Sometimes, you'll discover what you were angry about isn't worth the emotional energy you devoted to it. You may decide to change your thinking and behavior to rid yourself of inappropriate anger. The important thing is to remember that you do have choices and can control your response to frustrating situations.

Kenny Rogers' song "The Gambler" says, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run." You can learn to recognize anger and choose to drop it. That's not the same as pretending it isn't there and pushing it away. Dropping it means consciously choosing not to act negatively on it.

Being angry at someone you don't know requires a different response than feeling angry with someone you love. For example, last week I was awakened before five o'clock one morning by the blasting noise of a concrete pad being broken apart in preparation for my patio to be poured. It was irritating to wake up so early after a restless night, but the work needed to be done. Certainly, chewing out the workman wasn't an appropriate solution. It might even have delayed the project if he got angry at me.

I could have continued to be angry and say nothing, but it wasn't worth the emotional energy. I decided to let it go and actually gave thanks he was committed to getting the project done by getting up early. I later found out he worked overtime on another job the night before, and simply had no other time to do the work. How easy it is to jump to conclusions without knowing the whole story. It is wise to heed the advice that "*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry*" (James 1:19b).

Anger is a different story when it involves someone you're in a relationship with, but it is still wise to consider if the issue is worth the emotional energy of anger. I remember once my brother weeded the garden, pulling up all the small plants he thought were weeds. In fact, they were actually the beginning of the garden flowers. The damage was done innocently. He thought he was being helpful and was mad at himself for doing the wrong thing. It wouldn't have served any purpose for my parents to get angry with him. Instead, they showed him the difference between weeds and seedlings and enlisted his help to plant new seeds.

Jesus spoke the words which we know as the Golden Rule, "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you*" (Matthew 7:12a). In all these instances—slow traffic, construction noise, unintentional damage—how would you want to be treated? I hope people would help me see what happened, forgive me, continue to accept and love me, and even laugh about it with me.

## What to Say

Once you've accepted your anger and understand where it's coming from, you need to know how to express anger in appropriate ways.

The Bible offers some practical guidelines for how to express anger:

- "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*" (Proverbs 15:1). This is at the heart of the assertive response to anger. You have probably seen a harsh response feed anger and can appreciate the wisdom of this proverb. You may even be afraid of people when they're angry because you've seen how it destroys relationships. "A gentle answer" can mean staying in control, not raising your voice, and focusing on how you feel, rather than on accusing the other person.

- *“Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end”* (Proverbs 29:11). Giving full vent to your anger can result in destruction—as with the two women in Alabama. How foolish! And for what? Nothing is solved. You can control your anger and let it motivate you to communicate better and accomplish things for a positive effect.
- *“In your anger, do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold”* (Ephesians 4:26-27). You will get angry, but you don’t have to let anger dominate your life. If you go to bed angry, you may lose sleep, become angrier, and be less able to deal with it constructively. When you nurse your anger, it intensifies and gains a foothold in your life, inhibiting your self-control. Anger is a red flag. It warns you to turn around before you do something you’ll regret. Deal with it before it goes that far.
- *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:32). Acknowledge that you aren’t perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes you might get mad at yourself because you did something that disappoints you. When that happens, forgive yourself, and move on. When someone else makes you angry, forgive them also.

We also do things that disappoint God. We make other things in life more important than God, and we do things that hurt us or other people. The Bible calls all these things “sin,” and sin keeps you apart from God. But God’s Son, Jesus Christ, gave His life to pay for all of our sins, and because of that, God forgives us.

Just as God has forgiven you for everything you have ever done that offends Him, you can forgive yourself or others for the things that offend you. That’s how relationships keep going.

## **How to Say It**

So, how can you express anger constructively? The following guidelines are based on material made available by the New York Online Access to Health ([www.noah.cuny.edu](http://www.noah.cuny.edu)).

### **First of all, describe what is making you angry.**

- Be as clear and specific as you can, focusing on the concrete details. Don’t generalize or speak in vague terms.
- Use the “W-words”—tell who, what, where, when, and how often it happened.
- Don’t make guesses about what the other person meant in the situation.

### **Second, describe your feelings about that event or situation.**

- Now, calmly describe how you feel about the thing that made you angry—NOT about the other person involved. Use “I language”—that is, sentences like, “When \_\_\_\_ happened, I felt \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Avoid huge emotional storms as far as you are able, but don’t minimize your feelings either. Don’t pretend that your feelings aren’t real or don’t matter.
- Don’t utterly condemn the other person as a human being. Stick to talking about your feelings.

### **Third, tell the other person what you are asking him or her to do.**

- Ask for a little change, or maybe two—things that the person can actually manage to do. Don’t pick something huge that they can’t manage, or that will discourage them from trying.
- Be as specific as you can. What exactly do you want to stop, and what do you want to keep happening? Spell it out.
- Pay attention to the needs of the other person, and take a good look at yourself as well. Are there ways in which you need to change? This could be a good time to bring those up, too.

### **Fourth, tell that person why you are asking for this change.**

- Lay it all out—the good results you expect if the change is made, and the poor results you anticipate if it doesn’t happen. Talk about the effects on both of you, not just one.
- Make it clear just how important this change is to you. Don’t be shy or embarrassed about it.
- Avoid making threats or bullying the other person. Just be as straightforward and non-condemning as you can.

Here is an example of how you might express anger using these guidelines. Suppose your child came home late one evening, and that upsets you.

1. **Say what happened:** “You left a note on the refrigerator last night that said you would be home by ten o’clock, but you didn’t come in until eleven.”
2. **Say how you feel about it:** “It upsets me when you aren’t home by the time you said you would be. When this happens, I get scared something bad has happened to you.”
3. **Say exactly what you want the other person to do:** “If you won’t be home by the time you said you would, please call and tell me when you will be home.”
4. **Tell the other person why:** “If you call, I’ll know you’re okay. If you don’t call, I worry and get our friends concerned when I go looking for you.”

You can express anger in a way that respects you and the other person and clearly communicates what you want to change.

## I’m TRYING, but ...

“Anyone can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose—and in the right way—that is not easy.” Aristotle

You may be saying, “I’m trying to resolve my anger appropriately. I’m following all the rules, but nothing’s changing.” The truth is you could master ten different sets of guidelines for expressing anger but still feel like you’re not always in control of it. We’ve dealt only with being angry “in the right way,” but there are still the problems of being angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, and for the right purpose.

The core of the problem is our hearts. We are born self-centered. Like the tiger who wanted everyone to say he was the best, we want our own way and don’t value others as much as ourselves. That tiger was so focused on himself he didn’t realize the elephant was stronger than he was! Anger can be fueled by illusions of our own goodness or by a self-righteous attitude that says, “I’m right, you’re wrong. My way counts, yours doesn’t. You’re a nobody.”

If you want to know how to do anger right, watch God. He is perfect, complete, and always sees every side of the issue. He never feels threatened or misinterprets a situation. He is always angered by injustice and sin. You and I, on the other hand, are limited. We misjudge situations, take things personally, feel threatened or hurt, and can be vindictive.

Each of us has a deep craving for things to be right. We want them to be right in our relationships with others and with God. Maybe you know the story of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. They wanted things to be right in the very beginning. God created them with His own hands and wanted them to love Him, each other, and everything He had created. They lived in the Garden of Eden, a perfect place where everything was in harmony. God provided everything they needed and told them to take care of the earth. The only thing off-limits to them was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A time came, though, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command. The harmony and perfect love He had designed were destroyed when they ate the fruit of the tree. Afterward, they were ashamed and hid from God among the trees in the garden. Let’s look at what happened next:

*“The LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’*

*He answered, ‘I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’*

*And He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’*

*The man said, ‘The woman You put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’*

*Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”*  
(Genesis 3:9-13).

Did you notice what happened there? God asked Adam if he had disobeyed, and he blamed Eve. So God asked Eve what was going on, and she blamed the serpent. “It’s not my fault,” they both said. They knew they had disobeyed God, but they didn’t want Him to be angry with them. They wanted God still to love them and for everything to be right. To do that, they

tried to hide their responsibility for the disobedience and blamed the problem on someone else. But it didn't work. Their mistake was still a problem. (If you read the rest of the story, you'll see that God had to evict them from the garden.)

A first-century writer named Paul knew about selfishness and kept trying to overcome it, but he was continually frustrated. *"For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it"* (Romans 7:18b-20).

Paul recognized there was a point where no matter how much he wanted to do the right thing, he wasn't successful. Ultimately, there was something wrong inside that got the better of him. He was at his limit and could not be the good person he wanted to be.

Can you identify with Paul? Does anger get the better of you sometimes? Do your best attempts at self-control fall short? Do you lack a sense of peace and rightness in your relationships with others? Are you unable to forgive? Do you feel distant from God? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, God invites you to come as you are, with all your frustration and failure. This is how much God loves you: *"He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him"* (John 3:16b-17).

Believing in God's Son gives you a right relationship with God right now, today. We all make mistakes, like Adam and Eve and Paul. The mistakes hurt our relationship with God. God has fixed that problem by sending His Son, Jesus, to earth to pay for our mistakes, our sins. By admitting that you do wrong things and knowing Jesus has paid for your sins, your relationship with God is made new again.

Perhaps you think you have to learn to control your anger before God will accept you. That's not the case.

*"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:6-8).

God invites you to be loved and forgiven.

Use this prayer or pray in your own words to express the faith God has put in your heart:

*Loving God, Thank You for loving me and for inviting me to come to You just as I am. As much as I've tried to deal with the anger in my life, I continue to be trapped in it. I can't see my way out. I don't have a sense of peace or rightness with myself, the people in my life, or You. Just like Paul, I need You to rescue me. Let Your words of love and peace be more than words I've just read. Bring healing and hope to my heart. Give me faith to trust in Jesus and to live freely and rightly in Your love. Amen.*

If this prayer expresses your sincere belief, you can trust God's promise that *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

As you continue to learn to manage your anger in a healthy and productive way, God is with you. Remember to speak gently, use compassion, and express your anger in appropriate ways. Whenever you feel weary from the effort or frustrated by failure, remember this invitation from Jesus: *"Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28).



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