

Handout 4.1: Common Myths About Anger

Myth 1: Anger is an unhealthy and negative emotion and should be avoided.

Anger is actually a normal emotion that is needed for living a complete and well-functioning life. Anger is part of living that helps us react to situations in an appropriate way.

For example, if someone insults you or calls you names, anger is an appropriate feelings because your rights were being violated. Anger helps you stand up for what you believe in and is often the impetus for healthy change. Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. were effective because they did not accept the status-quo notion that people of their race were second-class citizens. Rather, they were angry enough to bring about positive changes in the world. However, they were not aggressive.

Myth 2: Anger means that behavior is aggressive.

Anger and aggression are often confused, and this remains the main reason why anger is so often seen in a negative light. The distinction between them is very important. Anger is a *feeling*, and is part of a normal gamut of human emotions, while aggression is a *behavior*.

Except when it is necessary to maintain personal safety or the safety of others in response to a physical attack or threat, aggressive behavior is not appropriate. By definition, aggressive behavior is disrespectful, meant to demean someone, change others, tell others what to do, and get your own way.

Myth 3: Anger is uncontrollable.

If we can exercise self-control, we can control how our anger is expressed. Anger doesn't have to be like an uncapped bottle of soda pop that fizzes and explodes when it is shaken and uncapped. Anger can actually be quite controllable. The more skills you have to manage and handle intense emotions, the more you will be able to handle anger rather than letting it all out. Anger becomes destructive when it is uncontrolled, which usually entails trying to control another person. Interestingly enough, the more you try control others, the more out of control you become!

Myth 4: Other people can make us angry.

When you think that other people can make you angry, you give the power to them; you believe they are making you feel like your anger is out of control. However, if you think assertively and accept that no one has the power to make you angry unless you give it to them, you'll find that your anger is much more under control.

Just as no one can change the neurons in your brain, no one can change your emotions and your perceptions. Your triggers may be external, but your emotions and reactions belong to you alone. If everyone had this understanding, it would eliminate many arguments and conflicts, which often arise when people feel as if they are victims, that they are not in control of themselves, and that there is no way out.

Myth 5: Anger is more common in men than in women.

Men and women both get angry, but men often express it in more overt and louder ways: i.e. aggressively. So it is not that women don't also get angry, but they have been socialized to express it differently. Through conditioning in our society, women are often encouraged to suppress their anger and be "ladylike" and "not make waves," whereas anger expressed by men is more acceptable and even rewarded in our society.

When men are angry, their reactions tend to be more physical and violent, whereas women are less likely to get physical with their anger. After anger is released, women tend to hold on to their anger longer than men—perhaps because women limit how their anger is expressed.

Myth 6: People tend to get more angry with age.

To the contrary; with age comes wisdom and perspective, and most people's anger and aggressive behavior decline with age. Individuals who tended to be aggressive as parents tend to be much more mellow with their grandchildren and their own children as they age. The urge to control others is lessened.