

5.

Neither Fight Nor Take Flight

Managing My Anger



What most people recognize as an emotion on the inside is expressed in words, voice tone and actions on the outside. We all remember what our mother looked like when she was angry, even if no words were spoken. We know what our former spouse sounds like when he/she is angry by the tone of voice used, even when we can't hear which words are being hurled at us. We all know the sting of words spoken or that "cut us to the quick." In studies with adults, it's been shown that the tone of voice carries more of the meaning than even the words chosen.

Activity: Signs of Anger

Can you see anger? How can you tell if someone else is angry? Categorize the ways your co-parent expresses anger. What are some signs indicated in his or her body language? What do you notice about her tone of voice? What do you notice about the words he chooses? Write your response below.

1. Body language

2. Tone of Voice

3. Words

Which has the greatest impact?

Try this experiment: Say in a sugary sweet tone, "You're a mean little doggy aren't you?" Now repeat this statement using a firm and angry tone: "You're a sweet, sweet thing." Which example would make your little puppy wag its tail and lick your fingers? I'll wager it's not the second one. Although the words were sweet, I think you'd find the little puppy cowering in the corner. Our children, of course, react the same way. The language spoken by the body and the tone speaks loudest of all.

So is anger an emotion or an action? It's an inner feeling that may get translated into action. It's a force, like a cyclone, starting at a point in the middle, picking up energy until finally it has to let some of that energy go, and it does . . . somewhere, somehow. It may become a constructive force, like the breeze that blows out the fog allowing clear skies to show through, or it may become destructive, like the tornado that destroys everything in its path.



Triggers

Now that you've identified your own first signs, think back. What triggered that outburst of energy? What kicked off the rush of adrenaline? What happened just prior to your teeth grinding or your fists clenching? Whatever happened prior to your anger building was the trigger for your anger. A trigger doesn't necessarily cause the anger, like a burning match doesn't cause a forest fire, but it can be used to start one. See if you can identify hot buttons that are pushed by your former spouse. Write down the ones that set you off.

Then see if you can also identify the triggers for your co-parent. What are his/her hot buttons? What starts his fire or fuels her flames? Write down your guesses in the space below.

Anger Triggers

What are the triggers in your relationship with your co-parent that cause you the most disappointment, frustration, hurt, sadness or fear?

My Triggers

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What do you think are some of your co-parent's triggers that cause him/her the most sadness, hurt, frustration, disappointment or fear?

Co-Parent Triggers

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Anger Progression

What did you discover about your anger triggers, the points in the middle of a cyclone around which energy starts to swirl and build? You may have learned that certain issues are your hot buttons: maybe concern over your child's safety, your own hurt if your former spouse had an affair, a tone of voice that puts you down or shows a lack of respect, a phrase that reminds you of your own insecurities or of disappointment with some of the choices you made. Let's see what happens next in the process as the anger storm builds. Look at the cartoon on the next page.



Expressions of Anger

As mentioned earlier, anger felt on the inside eventually gets expressed on the outside. All that energy just has to go somewhere, and it does. It often gets expressed verbally, in words and tone of voice, and in actions. It may be directed with full force toward someone else or it may be directed toward oneself. It can be diverted or deflected or even used to pull someone else into its black hole.

Sarcasm is one expression of anger; rolling one's eyes, shrugging one's shoulders and emitting a huge sigh are other, more subtle expressions. More overt actions include shoving, punching, or holding someone in a position that prevents free movement. Slamming doors and manipulating situations can express anger. Below are seven common expressions of anger.

After reading their descriptions, decide which description best illustrates the pattern that you usually use to express your anger and note it on the bottom of the page. For now it's helpful to identify the style of expression that you use. Later we'll look back at this page for greater understanding.

Expressions of Anger

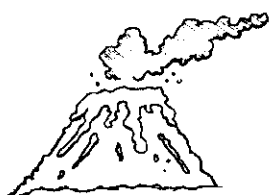
The following are different ways that people use their anger. As you read these styles, focus on your personal style rather than your co-parent's.

1. HOLD IT



People who hold onto their anger are those who wish to avoid conflict. They try to avoid looking at the underlying or core problem and refuse to address it or solve it. They often become depressed or ill with headaches, stomachaches or other physical symptoms. Young people whose parents who hold their anger don't learn that there are ways to solve problems. Instead their role models demonstrate holding onto the tension, not daring to face it and deal with it.

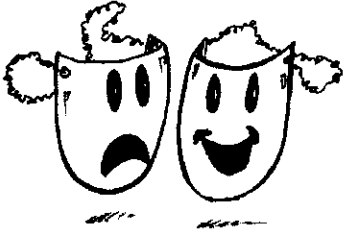
2. EXPLODE IT



People who explode their anger express it through abusive means. They scream, throw things, push, shove, kick and hit other people, sometimes even choke, slap or threaten to kill. Sometimes they commit murder. Other exploders are violent with words. They leave emotional scars that last a lifetime. Exploders are unpredictable, flaring up with little notice or at unpredictable times. The violence may be directed at the co-parent or may even be directed at the child or teenager in the family. Family members of the exploder are generally anxious and vigilant, ever watchful for the next attack. These children are constantly fearful that they or someone close to them may get hurt. If they try to rescue the victim, they can be hurt as well.

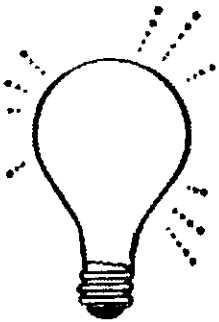


6. DENY IT



Deniers are good at masking their anger. They try to convince themselves as well as everyone else that their anger doesn't exist. As a matter of fact, they are so reluctant to allow themselves to be uncomfortable that they try to cut off any emotion rather than put themselves in a position where the core emotion makes them feel vulnerable. Fear, hurt or frustration are not part of their vocabulary or of their existence. They appear tough or unfeeling and almost never talk about emotions or feelings. Often they use drugs or alcohol to numb their feelings. Children of deniers learn to get on with their lives, but at the consequence of becoming robot-like and denying the emotional flavor of human existence.

7. SOLVE IT



Problem-solvers can admit that they are angry and can try to identify the core emotion that developed into anger. They can look beneath the surface to the root cause and identify the real problem that needs to be solved. They do not deny the full range of negative emotions like hurt, sadness, disappointment or frustration, but after acknowledging their own feeling, they start thinking about actions which can lead to a solution to the problem. They use their anger constructively to give them energy to solve the problem. When they do feel angry, they find appropriate means to let it go. Children who live with parents who are solvers learn that there are ways to use their anger to work for them.

What are the one or the two ways that describe how you express anger?

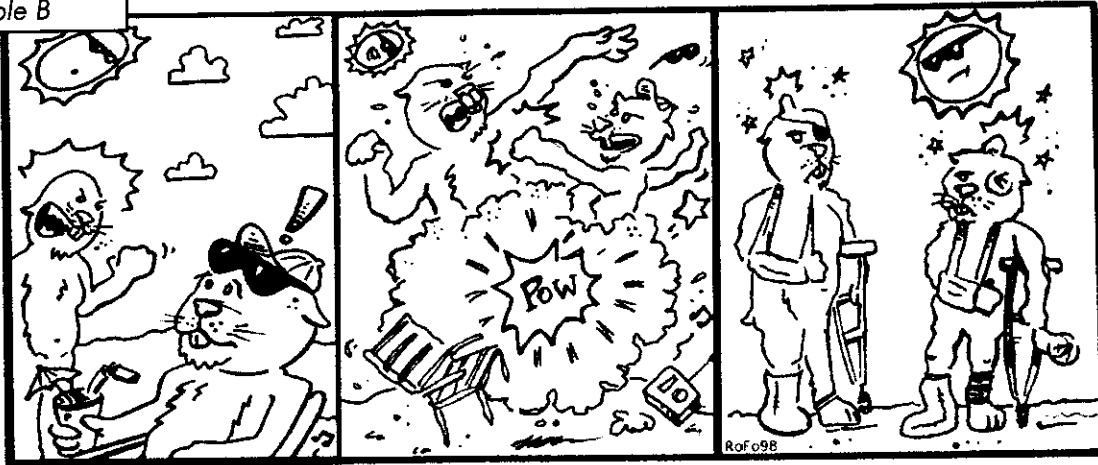


The prairie dog's core or primary emotion: _____

The prairie dog's action: _____

When the prairie dog was first threatened, he probably felt annoyed. His feelings turned into assertion, with the prairie dog taking a stance warning the predator to keep its distance. The predator, in turn, decided to back down and move away. Now look at the next cartoon.

Example B



The prairie dog's core or primary emotion _____

The prairie dog's action: _____

The result _____

Which situation did the prairie dog deal with his anger constructively? ___A or ___B

What was the result? _____

Rather than take a stance and set his own boundaries this time, what did the prairie dog do instead? He allowed his emotional response to turn to rage, attacking his foe. The result was a bloody one with life hanging in the balance.

When the prairie dog used his anger to set his boundaries assertively, he acted in a constructive manner. But when he used his anger to fuel his attack, the consequences were destructive for both animals. Just think what would have happened if the prairie dog had young pups; he might not be able to care for and protect them. Anger in humans can have the same destructive results.

Methods of Destruction

Anger has many methods of destruction. One is to hurt someone directly, either through a physical assault or through an emotional attack on someone's self-esteem. For example, saying "You never were a good provider" to a former spouse.

Another is to begin a revenge cycle; for example, one parent brings a suit to obtain more child support; the other retaliates by bringing a suit against the co-parent for gaining custody. The cycle continues to escalate.

A third destructive use of anger is to turn the anger inward and go into a depression, thereby proving that the former spouse caused the problem.

Read back over the seven expressions of anger on the previous pages and on the lines below each one write down how that anger expression can be destructive to: 1) oneself, 2) one's child



Staying Stuck in Anger

In the last chapter we mentioned that anger is one of the stages of grief. What would happen to a person if he or she got stuck in that stage and couldn't move on? He wouldn't be able to improve his situation or increase his own happiness; she wouldn't be able to solve old problems and gain the accompanying benefits as a result.

What about the children? How much does the fear of upsetting their parents or the dread of observing another round of parental revenge affect their well-being? Please ask yourself these questions: "Am I stuck in anger? Am I ready to move on?"

Reasons People Don't Move On

It's not an easy task. After all, anger is familiar. It becomes a habit and we all know that habits are hard to break. It's scary to do something different and takes effort to change.

Sometimes a person just doesn't know how to do anything different. He's never had a role model for handling anger any other way; she doesn't know what else to try. Yet the biggest reasons for staying stuck in anger are the following two:

- You have to face the real problem at the core
- You have no one else to blame

To give up anger, a person has to take responsibility. The person has to rely on herself and say, "If it's to be, it's up to me. Even if I got a lousy deal after 20 years of marriage, the rest of my life is what I make it. The past is past; the present is now and I make my future. Although I'm alone, I don't have to be lonely. I may not be financially secure right now, but the effort I make today will determine where I am tomorrow. My children will learn more from a good role model and I choose to be one."

Anger is a Choice

Try doing the next exercise. Write down two sentences that you often say about your relationship with your co-parent starting with the words "I can't," such as "I can't seem to talk civilly with my former spouse."

I can't

I can't

Now go back and repeat the same sentences, saying them aloud and **substituting the word "won't"** for the word "can't." How did you react? Many people choke over the words when they realize that it really is a decision they can make. Some even fight the idea. Then, after a pause, the result is often one of complete and total freedom. If the choice is mine, I am free to choose the result I want. I no longer am controlled by anyone else. I no longer choose to be caught in an anger trap or a revenge cycle. I can choose another direction and I do.

If you followed this line of thinking, you may also be terrified right now. While you had a comfortable pattern of acting, knowing what to expect and who to blame, you now have a vacuum where that pattern once was. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to filling that vacuum with techniques and tools designed to replace the ones you left behind.



Beliefs and Thoughts

Most people aren't even aware that these thoughts are swirling around in their heads. They think that the trigger automatically makes them feel a certain way. However, it is your beliefs or your thoughts about an event or situation that make you act a certain way. Let's say it's snowing outside right now. What could you be thinking? You might be nervous because you don't want to drive in it to get home tonight. You might be excited because you could go skiing tomorrow. You might feel peaceful thinking about sitting in front of the fire you'll build at home this evening.

Yet if a person started screaming and yelling because he or she believed that the snow would cover the world and everyone would be smothered to death, you would probably say that those beliefs weren't accurate. They were distorted beliefs.



TRIGGER	BELIEFS	FEELINGS	ACTIONS
A. Snowfall		nervous	go home ASAP
B. Snowfall		excited	go skiing
C. Snowfall		peaceful	build a fire
D. Snowfall		devastated	scream/yell



Again, the trigger (snowfall) doesn't cause the emotion, since the people involved all experienced different emotions. What caused the emotions is the thoughts that occurred between the trigger and the feelings. Fill in the blank spaces guessing what thoughts or beliefs caused the emotions.

Possible Thoughts or Beliefs:

- A. The snowfall would create dangerous road conditions
- B. The snowfall created the opportunity for skiing
- C. The snowfall offered the chance to go home, build a fire and curl up in front of the fire with a good book
- D. The snow would cover the world and everyone would smother to death. (This is an example of a "distorted belief." It distorts the real situation.)

Distorted Beliefs

Let's look at another situation. A father brings his son back to the mother's house after the child has spent the weekend with him. The child starts crying uncontrollably when the father leaves. What is one thought the mother could have? Write your answer down under the space provided in the Recognizing Beliefs Activity below.

She might think that the father had said negative things about her and turned the child against her. As a result she would likely feel upset and angry at the father and might act negatively toward him. Is this accurate or distorted? We don't know, but we do know the result of the beliefs.



Changing Distorted Beliefs Activity

An event, situation or a person cannot cause you to feel nervous, angry, depressed or devastated. Your thoughts determine your feelings and actions. And that is the good news. Since our beliefs cause our emotions, which lead to actions, we can choose to change our actions by changing our beliefs. So, a change in beliefs causes a change in actions.

It's especially important, when anger occurs, to examine the beliefs that lead to that feeling. The next step is to determine if your belief is distorted. One way to tell if your belief is unrealistic is by listening for a few key words in those beliefs. They include words like "ought," "should," "never," and "always." Challenging our distorted or unrealistic beliefs and replacing them with thoughts that are more realistic is one of the ways to manage anger and distress.

Change each of the following distorted belief statements to one that is more realistic. Some have been done for you.




Distorted Belief	Realistic Belief
He ought to give me more money than he does.	He gives me what the courts decided. I might think it's unfair but that only makes me upset; it doesn't change anything. If I need more money, I'll have to find a way to earn it.
She ought to let our son spend more time with me.	
He ought to care more about things like rules and bedtime and such.	
She ought to be more flexible.	
He should do more for us.	Even if I think he could do more for us, we will learn how to make it on our own.
He shouldn't go fishing on his days with the kids.	
She shouldn't go off with her friends when she's got the kids.	
I'll never get over him.	Even though it feels like it will be difficult, I can learn to be independent.
I'll always be poor.	I may not have much money right now but...
She'll never be a caring mother	

Changing distorted beliefs to constructive thoughts is very difficult. It is hard to break old patterns. Sometimes our distorted beliefs bring us comfort because we don't have to take responsibility for our actions. We may fall back into a "victim" role or quickly blame another person instead of accepting that we are the source of our own anger. Overcoming and managing anger by changing your thoughts takes patience and practice. But, most of all, it takes a "leap of faith" and a willingness to give your co-parent the benefit of the doubt. After all, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose but your own personal distress.



Challenging Beliefs

The situation can be turned around by the parents' willingness to challenge their internal beliefs. To do this, one or both parents must take a "leap of faith," avoid assumptions, consider alternatives and focus on their child. Take a second look. Which scene do you want to be part of?

	TRIGGER	BELIEF	FEELING	ACTION
Dad:	Son informs him about the missed soccer game	"My son is disappointed that I missed his game." I need to find out why I wasn't told."	Disappointment Irritation	Listens to son, Calls Mom next day 
Mom:	Dad calls using a neutral tone of voice	"He really wanted to be at our son's game." "He wants an explanation."	Regret Shame	Calmly answers Dad's questions 
Dad:	Mother calmly answers Dad's questions	"She is willing to work with me."	Satisfaction Hope	Calmly listens to mom 
Child:				

Challenge: Now, take the father's first action and let it trigger the son.



16. Write a letter to the person with whom you are angry, stamp the envelope and mail it to some strange address. Have fun with it, such as “Jerk City, USA,” or “Divorce Do-Do, USA.” Place this hostile letter in the mailbox and say good bye to all your anger. When any angry feelings try to come back visualize dropping another letter in the mailbox.
17. If all else fails, find a large rock, let it represent your angry feelings and place it in your purse or pocket. Do not go anywhere without it. Put it next to your bedside table at night and take it with you to business meetings during the day. No one needs to know about this. Carry it with you for weeks or longer until you get really tired of carrying it. When you are serious about getting rid of your anger, bury the rock in your back yard or throw it in the river.

WARNING: Do not let your child see these behaviors. They are intended to help you with your anger. Do not bring your child into your anger; it will only confuse or frighten your child.

DON'T

1. Do not try to ignore your anger, save your anger, swallow your anger or sweep it under the rug. Do find a way to express your anger and your pain.
2. Do not take your anger out on the wrong person, for example, your child. If you do, forgive yourself, apologize, and make amends.
3. Do not eat, drink or use other substances to numb the pain of anger.
4. Do not discuss your co-parent in a negative or angry manner when your children are present. Do not be fooled into thinking that your children will not hear or understand you; they will.
5. Do not use your children to get even with your co-parent.
6. Do not use your anger to justify sharing negative information about your co-parent with your child. There is **no good reason** for doing this. It will ultimately backfire on you. Let your child discover who his other parent is, in his own time and in his own way.

Remember, anger, like emotional pain, can be useful. We can choose to use it as motivation to do things that will help us get better, or we can choose to hold onto it and keep ourselves bitter. It is up to each one of us to decide.

Anger and Children

Managing Your Anger at Home

It is common for parents to feel confused about managing their own anger when they are around their children. On the one hand, we're told not to deny our feelings, but on the other hand, we know that our anger can upset them or have other negative consequences. Owning your feelings and choosing how to express them are two separate steps. Let's see how that works.

If your child notices that you seem quiet since you got home from work and he asks if you're upset, you can respond in one of several ways. Your tone of voice and body language will give your child the message about the level of your anger. Then the words you choose will add to



When your child says, “I hate you!” or “I hate _____ (my other parent),” realize that he is just attempting to express his anger. You can help by not becoming angry yourself. Instead, reframe the hate, changing it to anger. For example, “I can see how angry you are with me for not letting you stay up late. You can be angry but you still need to go to bed.” Or “You really are angry with your mother right now. How could you tell her how you feel?”

Some parents *help their young children find appropriate physical expressions*, such as a stuffed animal to hit rather than a person (“People aren’t for hitting; you can punch Old Sarge instead, if you want”). Find several expressions that you will allow and suggest them to the child. You can even put pictures up on a poster of things that are OK and things that are not OK to do with anger. Point to the pictures when your child is angry or ask if she wants to draw an angry picture or take apart a take-apart doll.

It’s also important to let your children know that they have *permission to express feelings that are different from your own*. When you are angry, it doesn’t mean that your child needs to feel angry. Likewise, the opposite is true; when your child feels love for the other parent, you do not need to feel the same. For example, “It’s OK for you to love your father even if I do not want to be married to him.”

Remember that *anger and discipline do not go together*. When you try to discipline when you are angry, the child might get the message that he/she was powerful enough to make you mad. If that happens, the child has already gotten his reward. It’s better to make decisions about discipline when you are not angry so that you can think and communicate clearly about the misbehavior. Then you can let the child know that you were worried that another child might get hurt or concerned that she might get hurt. Then you can set a consequence that’s fitting the behavior: “You can come inside to calm down before continuing to play with the neighbors.” Or “You can play in the back yard or you can play inside the house (rather than be close to the road).”

SUMMARY

When you manage your own anger in ways that your children can model and when you help your children find ways to identify and express their own feelings of anger, you are equipping them with important life skills. They will be prepared to understand the feelings that cause them the most distress and find expressions of those feelings in ways that safely allow them relief from that distress. Your role as model and teacher will greatly aid them in moving through the experience of divorce and move on with their own lives.





UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONS

Example # 2.

A: You are on the phone with your child when the co-parent says it is time to get off.

B: You believe that the co-parent has been attempting to alienate you from your child. You believe that you and your child will never be close as long as the other parent is in the picture. You know how it feels to lose a parent. You believe that the co-parent will continue to control you and your child forever.

C: You feel angry and discouraged.

D: You call the co-parent on the phone and accuse her of making up excuses to get your child off the phone. You may even threaten to go back to court for custody.

Or:

A: Same trigger

B: You think that your child wanted to get off the phone but waited for the co-parent to request it. You wonder if your child loves the co-parent more than they love you. You also think that the co-parent will always be closer because your child lives with her more than with you. You believe you will never win.

C: You feel hurt, resigned, angry, resentful or depressed.

D: You may respond by rejecting or by spoiling your child during the next visit. You may also become depressed or irritable. You may try to put the co-parent down; this hurts your child.

Or:

A: Same trigger

B: You believe that the request was based on unfinished homework or some other issue. You believe that you and your child will talk tomorrow. You also believe that the co-parent is attempting to value your relationship with your child rather than block it.

C: You feel disappointed and understanding.

D: You ask the co-parent, in a reasonable tone, to let you know when is the best time to call in the evening. You negotiate with the co-parent or you plan to have your child call you instead.





LET'S PRACTICE (*continuation*)

Situation #3

A: Your child refers to her new stepparent as daddy/or mommy.

B: Belief

C: Emotions

D: Action

Situation #4

A: You were the one to file for divorce. Your child asks, "Why don't you love Daddy anymore? He still loves you. Can't we still be a family? Please?"

B: Belief

C: Emotions

D: Action





LEARNING NEW REACTIONS

Directions: Look back at page 110. Place the original activating trigger in the far left column under (A). Now create a new and improved belief regarding the trigger. Force yourself to open up to new possibilities. Do this for your child, not for your co-parent. After you complete each new belief in the middle column, go through each one and label the new emotion you might have if you could use this new belief. This is a very difficult yet important task. Your growth will be influenced by this activity more than any other. An example has been provided.

Original Trigger (A)	New Belief (B)	New Emotion (C)
1. Parent does not return child's clothes.	He/She is washing the clothes. He/She was in a hurry and forgot the clothes.	Partial Understanding Slight Annoyance.
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		



