

COPING WITH ANGRY FEELINGS

Anger is a very common response when someone in the family has a severe illness or there has been a bereavement. Anger is not a “socially acceptable” feeling and children and adults may feel guilty about being angry. Often people will even deny having angry feelings. The goal of this sheet is to become more aware of anger-related feelings and to increase understanding of why it is so uncomfortable and complicated.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT ANGER

(1) **Anger is not “just another feeling”.** There is an intensity about it which can feel scary to other people -- just think about what it feels like when someone says “I’m angry with you”. When we sense anger, we may anticipate confrontation or fear a violent response. We worry about whether the person may lose control. These are all good reasons to be uncomfortable with anger.

(2) **Anger is often the prickly shell around other more vulnerable feelings.** You may be able to remember times when you or someone else has reacted angrily but they were probably also feeling either embarrassed, or worried, or disappointed. Think of some other feelings which may be associated with anger. Recall a recent occasion when you were angry and complete the sentence “I was angry because I was feeling _____”.

(3) **Anger can make you feel strong.** On some level we may prefer to communicate anger rather than other feelings which may make us feel more vulnerable. Traditionally, this has been especially true for men; however, when families are in crisis, anger can be a useful coping mechanism for women and children too. The downside is that it can make other people withdraw.

(4) **Anger is a “slippery” emotion.** It isn’t uncommon to experience disproportionate anger towards people who are not directly connected with the true source of your anger, such as other drivers on the freeway, teachers, medical personnel -- or your children.

(5) **Anger can act as a distraction.** When other feelings are unbearable, anger keeps us engaged and distracted. This is a defense often used by children, and can easily be misunderstood by parents and teachers.

(6) **“Anger is the other side of depression”.** You may have heard people say that depression is anger turned inwards. These feelings often seem connected: ... angry feelings may pull you out of sadness, and depression can be a “safe place” to hide if you are worried about getting out of control. Anger and depression are often both associated with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

(7) **Anger can get buried.** Because anger is sometimes seen as unacceptable, we may hide it, even from ourselves. Next time you or someone in your family seems anxious, upset or withdrawn, this may be masking angry feelings.

COPING WITH YOUR OWN ANGER

Before you can help your children with their anger, it is important to come to terms with it in yourself. Angry feelings are completely natural and cannot harm anyone -- only angry actions and sometimes speech have the potential to harm. The following are some hints for getting comfortable with your own anger.

(1) Learn to recognize your anger, particularly as it is beginning to build. There can be varied cues to anger, such as tension in the pit of the stomach, a headache, clenching the hands or tension in the neck or shoulders. Think of some other cues and try to identify your own.

(2) When you notice that you are angry, ask yourself what other emotions are present. You may be feeling scared, lonely, abandoned or many other emotions. Recognizing this will help you to feel less out of control.

(3) When you identify these other feelings, try to acknowledge and honor them. If you feel scared, remind yourself that you can find help and support; if you are lonely or feeling abandoned, call a friend. It is useful ahead of time to think about who could be a support to you -- perhaps someone from this group. Also, talking to others about these feelings will help them to be more accepting of your anger.

(4) Be sure to use all offers of help. Although it can be hard at first, accepting help has the double benefit of easing your load and also keeping you from feeling alone with all you have to do. Keep a list of people who offer to help and take them up on it! Choose one or two good friends and let them know you might want to telephone or have them visit when times are hard.

(5) Talk about your anger. Letting others know about the intensity of your feelings will act as a kind of safety valve. There are very real reasons for your anger, and putting those feelings into words may be painful, but it can really help. If it is hard to talk to others about your feelings, try keeping a "feelings journal" where you record your anger and associated feelings. Over time it will be a valuable resource for you as a record of your ability to find ways of coping.

(6) Identify activities which help you to blow off steam. These may include exercise, punching pillows, art activities, writing, crying or many other activities that you know are right for you. (Make sure that these are not just distractions, but really do help you to discharge the intensity.)

(7) Give yourself permission to have your anger as well as your sadness. Clarify which contributing factors can be changed and plan to take action, or give feedback about situations which upset you. Acknowledge your sadness and frustration about those factors which cannot be changed.

(8) Give yourself and your children permission to cope. Sometimes, giving in to feelings of being overwhelmed can seem like showing loyalty to the person who is ill, or who has died. Instead, trust that your loved one would want you and the children to survive and do well in spite of all the hardships.

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN TO COPE WITH ANGER

(1) Many of the above suggestions are relevant for your children too. It is important that they not feel bad for having angry feelings. Equally, stress to your children that they may not express those feelings in ways which may be harmful or hurtful to themselves or others.

(2) Help your children to make more sense of their feelings by noticing that they get angry when they are feeling sadness or disappointment or unfairness.

(3) Talk about the ways you deal with your anger; ask them what ideas they may have for themselves such as sport, art activities, writing. Let them know that they may always talk to you about their angry feelings and you may find that communication is opened up in other ways too.

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