

**Kwantlen Counselling Services Present ...**

# **An Introduction to Managing Anger**

Angry? Who, me?!? No way. When we hear the word *anger*, an image comes to mind: somebody yelling and swearing, banging their fists, red in the face. Actually, that's *rage*. The fact is, we don't really know what anger is and we may be uncomfortable with the idea of it, because anger is often associated with punishment. It is true that anger can be destructive - for example, when it is expressed as outbursts, insults, threats or violence. But anger can also be constructive - when it takes the form of assertiveness, limit-setting, or problem-solving.

Let's back up and make an important distinction: the *expression* of anger (constructive or destructive) is different from the *feeling* of anger. And, getting angry is not the problem. The issues are how little we understand our anger, how readily we criticize ourselves for getting angry and how often we don't know how to let go of resentments. To be emotionally healthy, we need to deal with and process *all* our feelings. Competence comes in acknowledging feelings for what they are - just feelings - and realizing they can be expressed in healthy ways, rather than either being denied or being used to manipulate, bully or control others.

## **What is Anger?**

Anger is a signal that important needs are not being met or that a boundary has been violated; anger can be a defense (and therefore, a secondary feeling) against other painful feelings, like fear, hurt, grief or unworthiness. What is tricky here is that anger has many faces: we can express it indirectly (withdrawal, complaining and impatience) or we can turn it inward (feelings of disappointment, guilt and depression). We can even try to hide it or repress it, but anger seeks to be released and therefore, will eventually "leak out" as sarcasm, gossiping, self-righteousness, procrastination, "forgetting", physical symptoms or illness.

## **How to Manage Your Anger**

### **1. Accept your anger**

When someone treats you unfairly, it's natural and even healthy to feel angry. Maybe a boundary of yours has been violated and needs to be recognized. Rather than automatically lashing out or bottling up your anger until it explodes, you can learn constructive ways to let others know about your needs.

### **2. Take time out to manage your anger**

Anger arouses the body's stress response. Your body reacts as if you are physically threatened and prepares to fight or flee: your breathing and heart rate increase, your pupils dilate, your muscles tense up, and your ability to think and reason diminishes. You may need to dissipate some of this energy (e.g., go for a walk or do some other physical activity) so that you can see the situation more rationally.

### 3. Think through your anger

Once you have calmed down a bit, try to "own" your anger by acknowledging to yourself "I am angry". Then get to the source of your anger by asking yourself: "What am I upset about? What need or want of mine is being blocked? Am I really angry at this person or am I misdirecting my anger?" Questioning your expectations about how things *should* be and learning to accept them the way they are will help put your anger in perspective. Some common assumptions at the root of anger are "life should be fair", "people and things that are wrong should change" and "people should give me what I need and deserve".

### 4. Express your anger responsibly

Try to talk out your feelings without attacking the other person. Don't yell or blame which will only alienate the other person. You may be right but you won't be heard unless you communicate in a way he or she can hear. A helpful formula is "I am upset because when you \_\_\_\_\_ (undesired behaviour), I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (how it affects you). Instead I'd prefer \_\_\_\_\_ (desired behaviour)." You'll be surprised how this honest, direct, and non-hostile approach can disarm both of you so that you can talk calmly about ways to handle your differences.

If anger is handled appropriately, it can let others know where you stand. Reporting your feelings does not mean the other person is wrong - it just points out your differences and identifies the source of the conflict. It's like saying "This matters to me and I need to share it with you, because if I don't, I will resent you". When you express your anger in an assertive way, you are more likely to get your needs met and feel and have more control over your life.

### Dealing with Angry People

1. First, remember it is difficult dealing with somebody who is angry, so take a few deep breaths and tell yourself to take it easy and remain calm so you don't escalate the situation.
2. Acknowledge their feelings with an empathic statement like "I can see you're really upset by this", matching their intensity but not their volume (if their voice is raised).
3. Ask what can be done to resolve the situation and take action (if appropriate).
4. If you are unable to de-escalate them through actions or empathy, then consider setting limits or disengaging. Limit-setting is part of assertiveness and is used to protect yourself and to model how you want to be treated (what's ok and not ok). For example, "I can't focus if you yell at me. If you don't lower your voice, I will leave/hang up." It is helpful to set limits on behaviour that is insulting demeaning or otherwise aggressive. You are best to disengage (that is, to actually leave) if you believe you are not safe with the other person.
5. Finally, if you would like help dealing with anger, either your own or somebody else's, make an appointment to see a Kwantlen Counsellor individually. We especially recommend this if you are in a relationship with a pattern of violence. Furthermore, if you experience or witness any incidents of violence (verbal or physical) at Kwantlen, then please contact Security on campus, as the safety of all members of the Kwantlen community is our top priority.

Sources: Middleton-Moz, J. (1999). *Boiling Point* and Haddigan, K. (2002). *Dealing with Anger in Conflict Situations* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.), Centre for Conflict Resolution, Justice Institute, B.C.  
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