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Anger is the first emotion human beings experience and the last one we learn to effectively manage. As early as four months of age, the human infant's vague feelings of distress differentiate into recognizable anger. For many of us, a lifetime is spent denying, suppressing, displacing, and/or avoiding this troublesome emotional sensation. Because anger usually occurs within an interpersonal context, it is a frequent group phenomenon and presents a management challenge to all concerned.

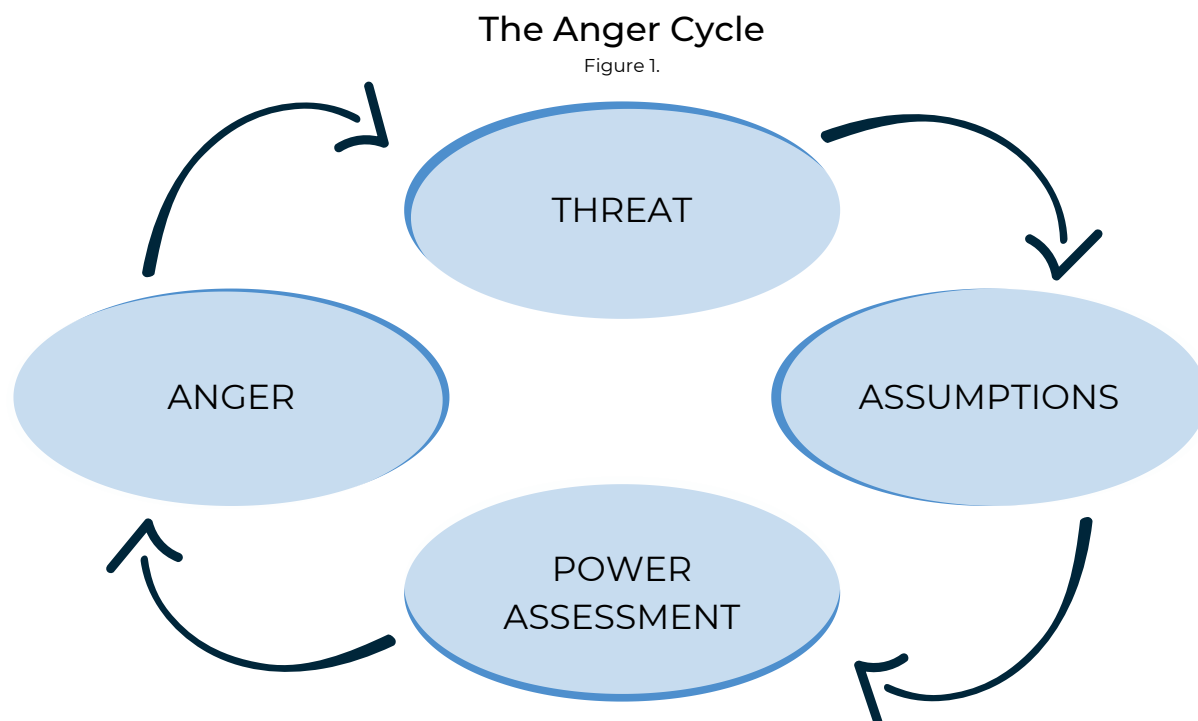
Anger happens when we perceive an external event (object or person) as threatening or when we experience the frustration of unmet expectations. Although anger seems to be a response to something outside of us, it most often is an intrapersonal event: We make ourselves angry. However, because anger is so unpleasant and human beings are so adept at projection, we usually attempt to locate the source of our anger

outside ourselves with statements such as "you make me angry," "you have irritating habits," "you bother me."

Anger and Threat

When we perceive an external event as threatening to our physical or psychological wellbeing, a cycle of internal movements is initiated. As their perception is formed, assumptions are made internally about the possible threat of danger.

The assumption is then checked against our perceived power for dealing with the threat. If we conclude that the threat is not very great or that we are powerful enough to confront it successfully, a calm, unflustered response can occur. If we conclude that the threat is dangerous or that we are powerless to handle it, anger can emerge in an effort to destroy or reduce the personal threat and to protect ourselves from assumed impotency. The anger cycle can be graphically represented. (See Figure 1.)



Resentment and Expectations

In the Gestalt view, anger is resentment, an experience accompanying a demand or an expectation that has not been made explicit. Unanswered demands or unmet expectations are frustrating; they become another kind of threat, that trips off the anger cycle within us.

Maladaptive Expressions of Anger

Unlike most other feelings, anger has no specific body organs for expression. Physiologically, anger is accompanied by an increase in blood pressure and muscle tightness; psychologically, there can be impulses to say aggressive words, strike out, and commit violence. The expression of anger can be so terrifying and threatening that, rather than express it outwardly, we sometimes turn it inward, against ourselves. This short-circuiting of the anger cycle produces distortions of another magnitude: anger turned inward is experienced as guilt. Guilt can produce feelings of depression, incompetence, helplessness, and, ultimately, self-destruction.

Another common way to short-circuit the anger cycle is to vent the feeling, not at the perceived threatening event, but at someone or something else that is convenient. We are angry at a traffic jam, but we snap at an innocent spouse. The children refuse to meet our expectations, but we yell at the dog. We are angry at the group leader at a meeting, but instead, we complain about the food. Such displacement of anger serves to ventilate, but not to resolve. The anger cycle still lacks closure. When displacement becomes generalized to the system or the government, we begin to see the whole world as hostile, we can develop a wrathful, attacking behavior style.

Expression of anger can lead to violence; turning it inward produces depression. Displacement is ultimately ineffective and can damage innocent third parties. Repeated failure to close the anger cycle can produce a hostile, cynical, and negative view of reality. Although anger usually occurs in an interpersonal context, it is not an interpersonal event, but is self-generated.

We make ourselves angry, and there is no one else who can honestly be blamed. Suffering the anger can often seem to be the only alternative.

Dealing with Personal Anger

The obvious way to eliminate anger from our lives is to become so personally secure that nothing threatens us. Short of that level of self-actualization, the procedures described here may help.

Owning anger. Acknowledging anger and claiming it as our own behavior is a helpful first step. It increases self-awareness and prevents unwarranted blaming of others. Turning blame and attribution into “I” statements locates the anger where it actually is—inside us. This procedure can help develop a sense of personal power over anger.

Calibrating the response. Anger is not an all-or-nothing experience. It ranges from relatively mild reactions, such as “I disagree,” “I don’t like that,” and “I’m bothered,” through medium responses like “I’m annoyed,” and “I’m irritated,” to intense reactions such as “I’m furious,” and “I’m enraged.” Learning to differentiate between levels of anger helps us to accurately assess our capacity for dealing with anger.

Diagnosing the threat. What is frightening about the perceived threat? What do I stand to lose? Anger happens because we quickly assume that the situation is dangerous—so quickly sometimes, that we frequently do not know why the stimulus is threatening. Diagnosing the threat frequently reveals that it is simply a difference in values, opinions, upbringing, or styles of behaving.

Sharing the perceived threat is a way to make the internal anger cycle a public or interpersonal event. It diffuses the intensity of feeling and clarifies our perceptions. It permits us to receive feedback and consensual validation for what we are feeling and how to assuage it.

Forgiveness involves letting go of the anger and canceling the charges against the other—

and ourselves. Forgiving and forgetting cleans the slate and is a way of opening yourself to future interactions and healthy relationships. Forgiveness is a magnanimous gesture that increases personal power.

Dealing with Another's Anger

In interpersonal situations, we often respond to another person's anger, whether or not we have occasioned it, with threatening or frustrating behavior. It frequently happens that we receive another's anger just because we happen to be there. Laura Huxley, in her aptly titled book *You Are Not the Target*, views the anger of another person as negative energy that is dumped on us, just as ocean waves dump their energy on the beach.

Anger from another person has a high potential for hooking us into what is essentially someone else's problem. If we view another's anger as threatening, we start the anger cycle in ourselves, creating our own anger to deal with, as well as the other person's. To be angry simply because someone else is angry makes no sense. However, it frequently happens. Contagion is a usual byproduct of intensity created by anger.

Responding to anger from another person appropriately can increase interpersonal learning and strengthen a relationship. The following steps may be helpful.

Affirm the Other's Feelings. An old Jules Feiffer cartoon devotes nine panels to one character building up his anger toward another. Finally, he verbally confronts the other with, "I hate you!" The other character replies, "Let us begin by defining your terms." To **affirm** another's anger is to acknowledge that you are receiving it and to express a willingness to respond. To **reject** another's anger usually heightens its intensity.

Acknowledge Your Own Defensiveness. Let the other person know what you are feeling. Acknowledge that your own tenseness may lead to miscommunication and distortion. Develop an

awareness of the impact of received anger on your body.

Clarify and Diagnose. Give and request specific feedback. Distinguish between wants and needs. Check expectations. Discover together who owns what in the situation. When interpersonal needs and wants are out on the table, the resolution of anger becomes more probable.

Renegotiate the Relationship. Plan together how similar situations will be dealt with in the future. Contracting to practice new behavior may help to eliminate the sources of friction. Acknowledge regret and exchange apologies if that is warranted. Agree on a third-party mediator to help if the two of you are getting nowhere.

Summary

Anger does not disappear as we refuse to deal with it; it continues to grow within us. If we deal with anger directly, the discomfort and unpleasantness are rewarded by the new learning and self-strengthening that occur. If we deal with it indirectly, we can easily trap ourselves into polarization, passivity, name-calling, blaming, and viewing ourselves and our adversary as weak and fragile. Anger is not the worst thing in the world. It is a powerful source of energy, which, if creatively and appropriately expressed, leads to personal growth and improved interpersonal growth.

Reference: Huxley, L. *You Are Not the Target*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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