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COUNSELING SERVICES

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures
a city. -King Solomon - Prov. 16:32



What to do with your Anger

Part II

Remember this quote from the last letter? "Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight!"

Comedian and actress Phyllis Diller said this in jest, but unfortunately, too many have adopted this approach and regretted it. Is this you and your roommate? Some feel pressed to do so because they have misapplied the bible's admonition, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph. 4:26), and thrown gas on the fire by deciding to argue late into the night, when tired and more irritable. If this is your story, there's still hope!

Let's begin by revisiting the simple, but profound point made by University of Denver research psychologists Markman, Stanley & Blumberg¹: The two most common causes of decay or breakdown in close human relationships are these -

- **When positive feelings between persons are [gradually or abruptly] replaced by negative or adversarial feelings, and**
- **An unpleasant or destructive style of handling conflict or disagreement.**

I'm going to present to you a few "best practice" guidelines that will likely steer you away from trouble, if you'll simply give them a try.

First, each of us must be fearless enough to consider whether we might have a problem with anger. "Not me," you might promptly say to yourself. But, the truth

of the matter will be an illusive thing if the only person you're asking is yourself. Ask two or three of the people who've lived in close proximity to you if they think you might have a problem with anger, or how your anger may impact others - if you're brave enough to risk it!

At the conclusion of the last article on this subject I referred to three issues we'd target further: **Escalation, Awfulizing, and the ABCD method of communicating when offended or feeling angry.**

Escalation - Interpersonal conflicts escalate rapidly whenever we toss into the mixture the these kinds of behaviors:

- Interrupting others and neglecting to listen carefully
- Raising your voice (& voicing rash, harsh judgements)
- Name calling or other "put-downs"
- Invalidations (i.e., "That's stupid/ridiculous!" "You think what?" "That's a terrible idea!")
- Cross-criticisms or cross-complaints (i.e., "You're late, again!" "What? You're the one to talk - You're never on time for anything!")
- Bringing up past incidents or situations (It's better to stay in the present! Address what just happened.)
- Over-generalizations (i.e., "You never/always...")
- Invasions of personal space. Getting in another's face.
- Violent behavior: throwing or breaking things, slamming doors, hitting walls or others, etc.
- Arguing about who said what before
- Assertions about who's to blame for the argument

Remember, anything we do that causes another person to feel attacked, belittled, or unsafe (emotionally or physically) will begin to create for them a preponderance of negative or adversarial feelings which will soon overshadow whatever positive feelings or secure assumptions they may have once held about us. Once these experiences begin and are repeated, the relationship will not long survive. We must work to avoid escalation when disagreements or offenses arise.

Awfulizing - This occurs as we begin to make premature assumptions about other's thoughts & underlying intentions. When angry or hurt, we too quickly assume the worst. We're all tempted to do this at one point or another in our close relationships. It's dangerous and destructive because while we're convinced our reactions are condign, often our assumptions are too harsh, faulty, lacking sufficient information, or flatly wrong. Because we feel offended, we too rapidly conclude that the other party must have known that his/her words or actions would affect us that way and acted without regard for our feelings or interests. Once headed in this direction, this anger brings people to eventually develop a sense of **contempt** for each other. From this vantage point most of what the other person says or does is interpreted or seen through a filter of mistrust, and ultimately disdain.*

Another form of this tendency occurs when people, usually unbeknownst to themselves, begin to think in extremes relative to what they believe are the essentials of happiness or contentment. **Let me explain.** If a person's self-talk asserts, "My Thanksgiving will be ruined if my mother doesn't come!" Almost assuredly, misery is on its way if mother doesn't show up. If a freshman young man says to himself (while holding up the wall at the Sadie Hawkins square dance event), "I'll be humiliated if none of the girls ask me to be their dance partner." Then he will be. Our pre-existing beliefs about what we can handle and what we cannot will largely determine how we respond. Controlling people THINK or reason that things must be as they prefer them, if they are to be happy and for the world to be "as it should be." These people are predisposed to be often and predictably angry and dissatisfied.

Consider using the **A-B-C-D method** for communicating your hurt feelings, anger, or confusion. This approach can help you move productively through a bad experi-

ence involving someone with whom you may hope to maintain a positive relationship. When attempting to address the problem with the other person, use this format:

"When you said/did (A), I felt (B), because in my mind I began thinking/wondering (C). Please explain to me what happened, and why you did or said that (D)."

This structure helps the speaker to identify and articulate his feelings clearly, without blaming or attacking. It also helps highlight, for the speaker's own benefit - and for the listener, the self-talk and significant assumptions that are now influencing him/her since the incident occurred. When the other person responds in a manner indicating that their intentions were quite different that what was assumed, we must either accept the authenticity of their statements, or determine how we'll proceed in the relationship if we have good evidence indicating that they are not telling the truth.

On another note, it is almost always a bad idea to use Facebook, texting, or some other form of digital media to express or resolve your anger. A phone call may be all you have to work with, but it still fails to afford both parties the benefit of the many non-verbal cues (gestures, body language and facial expressions) that help us more accurately interpret others' messages and meanings. Face-to-face verbal interaction is always the preferred method of communication when anger may be brewing or a potential response.

I hope you'll come by and see me if you need to talk about this subject further.

Dan

*Let me add a qualifier. Intense anger can be appropriate in many situations, of course. We're not dismissing this reality here. Talking to others about your situation can usually help you sort out what action, if any, may be necessary. When you have been subjected to criminal, physically or sexually abusive or exploitive behavior, it is healthy and important to recognize the nature of what's happened and take the right steps to protect yourself and others. Amidst and following these kinds of scenarios people can feel confused, disoriented, unsure of themselves, numb or intensely afraid. In these circumstances it is important to tell more than one loved one or friend what happened, ASAP. They can help you see the situation from a clearer perspective and get you the help you need.

¹ Fighting for your Marriage (2001), San Francisco: Josey-Bass

Need to talk?

- phone: 245-5591
- email: jarboed@obu.edu
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