

A Parent's View: Cracking the anger code

By Gail H. Johnsen, KSL.com Contributor | Posted Dec 13th, 2011 @ 7:29pm

SPRING, Texas — Anger has always frightened me. It doesn't really matter if it comes in short, explosive spurts, or from a slow burn. When people get angry with me, I feel scared. But it's not just the anger of others; my own anger worries me a little, too. I feel like it is unacceptable to feel angry, and that I am not measuring up to a personal standard I have set for myself.

While raising seven children, I had the opportunity to read a great many books on parenting. These contained theories and practices for improved parenting, and for teaching children to become fully functioning adults. Fortunately for me, in the process of reading all these books, I came across one that not only helped me with my children, but also with personal relationships, and in better understanding my own negative emotions.

(Author Dorothy Briggs) explains that anger is rarely our first emotion and instead calls it the "masking emotion." Once I understood this about anger, I felt less afraid of it.

My treasured find was "[Your Child's Self-Esteem](#)" by Dorothy Briggs. It has proven to be a powerhouse of useful ideas that not only help with raising children, but in many aspects of my life. I recommend it to your own reading.

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In one of the chapters Briggs writes about cracking the anger code. She explains that anger is rarely our first emotion and instead calls it the "masking emotion." Once I understood this about anger, I felt less afraid of it.

Now when a person appears to be angry at me, or at someone else, I ask them, "What are you really feeling?" I generally hear the answer, "Mad." But when I say, "What did you feel before you felt mad?" I get the true response: jealousy, hurt, frustration, etc. As a matter of fact, I have never had a situation since I learned this principle that I didn't find that there was an original emotion other than anger.

When someone gets angry, they usually have moved quickly from their first emotion to the second. For example, what parent hasn't been shopping in a store and had their child erupt into a temper tantrum? What's your first emotion? Often, it's embarrassment. We might think, "Now everyone is looking at me. Do they think I am a bad parent? What will I do to quiet my out-of-control child?"

The solutions are about as varied as the amount of parents that have encountered this problem. However, anger emerges next as one of the most commonly displayed emotions in these situations. Parental actions such as threatening, shouting or spanking are generally a product of anger.

5-Step Approach to Managing Anger

1. Identify the problem (What's making you angry?)
2. Think of potential solutions before responding
3. Consider the consequences of each decision
4. Make a decision
5. Check your progress (Ask yourself: How did I do? Did things work out well? If not, why?)

-Read more at KidsHealth.org.

For another example, I know that when someone hurts my feelings, I don't like how that feels. It is difficult to deal with the hurt. If I go immediately from hurt to anger, I can lash out at that person, and perhaps I can hurt them back. I believe we allow ourselves to become angry in return because we don't want to deal with our hurt, or we don't know exactly what to do, but our anger makes us feel a little more empowered. I can, however, learn a lot by asking myself, "Am I really more powerful when I choose anger, or am I just covering up my true feelings?"

Later in life, I either read or discovered that many of us deal with feeling powerless. How we happened to lose the feeling of personal power in our lives doesn't matter as much as recognizing that in some situations we don't always feel like we have the power to change or control a situation. When that happens, we turn to anger.

How does anger help us? It gives us the false sense of real power. When we use anger to control what is happening to us, we may be able — for a time — to intimidate, control or change the outcome, but it is usually only a temporarily fix. We all want to feel like we have choices, and that we have the power to make those choices based on the information that we have. When I insist that people around me do things a certain way and I use anger to enforce it, I soon find that, like a leaky cup, the problem seeps out into other areas of behavior.

When I feel anger rising within myself, I begin to look for two things. What is my first emotion? Second, why did I mask that emotion with anger? Does the situation feel like something I couldn't control, or that I was powerless to remedy?

I find that many people display anger by using unkind words, shouting, threatening, physical abuse, obscene gestures and a multitude of other actions. When I encounter these now, instead of feeling scared, I wonder what that person could really be feeling and why they felt they couldn't express it in any other way.

Perhaps as more of us learn about cracking the anger code, we will be more able to express our true emotions to others, and they will in turn feel more apt to share their true feelings with us. This may also result in the increased feeling of personal power, and give us a bit more control over our lives.

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