

Help with Anger

By Alex Galloway

Anger is a healthy response to injustice. It is a common and normal reaction after a traumatic event. Sometimes, however, anger can be delayed and/or misplaced which can be confusing to the survivor as well as those around them. Because of cultural or family expectations, people can be reluctant to admit the anger they feel inside, not just to others but even to themselves. This can make it challenging to come alongside people when they are afraid to acknowledge their anger and move beyond it.

Ways anger can show itself

- Irritability—trauma survivors are already in a heightened state of anxiety or “on edge,” so they can easily become overwhelmed and easily irritated.
- Passive-Aggressive—this often takes place when the overt expression of anger is not allowed (personally or culturally) so people passively express their anger (e.g., refusing to communicate, subtle insults, stubbornness, not completing tasks, etc.)
- Rage—sudden outbursts of anger that feel out of control and can scare others as well as the person themselves. This may be directed at loved ones. This can occur when people feel threatened as if the trauma was happening all over again.
- Depression—angry at themselves (for not rebounding, not responding as they would have wanted to).
- Withdrawal—keeping people at a distance serves to protect them (and others) from experiencing the anger inside.

Addressing anger

- Normalize their feelings of anger—it is right and good to be angry at a wrong that occurred.
- Give support and empathy by saying, “I’m angry too that this happened to you.”
- The injustice needs to be understood and validated. Help them pinpoint the source of the anger. Help them connect to God’s anger toward the wrong that was done to them or someone they care about.
- Anger can sometimes be an easier, more tolerable emotion than the intense fear that they may be feeling underneath it. Help them explore any negative emotions associated with the trauma, not just the anger.

Helpful things to ask

- If I had experienced some of what you went through, I would have felt really angry. Do you ever find yourself feeling that way?
- When we get angry, it usually signals something is wrong. What were the wrongs that are making you angry and how did it impact you and/or those you love?
- What is the anger telling you about what you expected, wanted or needed?

Helpful things to say

- Anger is a natural feeling people have when something bad or wrong happens.
- Often we can feel anger toward God but feel ashamed to admit it or talk about it which puts distance between us and God. Try not to let it close off communication with the Lord. Like David, don't be afraid to share your frustration, hurt, confusion and anger with the Him.
- The feeling of anger is neither good nor bad, but how we express our anger can be either destructive or constructive.

Things to avoid saying/doing

- You just need to learn to control yourself; your anger is getting out of control.
- Good Christians don't get angry.
- You have no right to be that upset.
- If you just forgive them the anger will pass.
- Quoting Scripture in a way that is judgmental or untimely

Encourage them to...

- Explore reasons for why they feel angry and the significance of this anger.
- Once anger is acknowledged, explore how they have expressed anger in the past and encourage healthy expressions (e.g., physical activity, art, journal, dance, poetry, write a psalm, find music to match the feeling, etc.)
- Physical activity can help reduce the internal tension associated with prolonged anger.
- Find good supportive friends who won't judge or try to fix them, and with whom it is safe to express the anger they feel inside.

What we learn from the Bible about anger

Anger is a normal emotion. God himself experiences and expresses anger. He does not forbid anger, but Scripture speaks to the potential for anger to be destructive if we give it free reign. What do we learn about anger from these verses?

- In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.' – *John 2:14-16*
- When the Pharisees refused to answer Jesus' questions, "He looked around at them in anger, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5).
- God was angry with the nation of Israel and with Israel's kings every time they turned away from obeying Him (e.g., 1 Kings 11:9–10; 2 Kings 17:18).
- In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble. – *Exodus 15:7*
- How long, O Lord, will you look on and do nothing? Rescue me from their fierce attacks. Protect my life from these lions! Then I will thank you in front of the great assembly. I will praise you before all the people. – *Psalms 35:17-18*
- Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. – *Ephesians 4:26-27*
- Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. – *Proverbs 19:11*
- Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. – *Ephesians 4:31-32*
- Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. – *James 1:19*