

Ask Your Therapist

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Dealing With Anger - Our Own

My friend used to say there were 2 ways to react to Life - either you freak out or you freak in. I think that is a fairly good description of the differences between extroverts who freak out and introverts who freak in. People have "favorite" feelings which they are more comfortable displaying and they tend to lean on them to discharge feelings, even if they are not directly related to the event/stimuli. I bet you know people who cry when they are mad, or get mad when they are scared. Some folks laugh when they are really nervous.

In some ways, people who freak out are more transparent and easier to deal with when it comes to anger. They get mad, everyone knows it; there is no guessing about how they feel, and the style differences have to do with volume, politeness and how quickly their feelings are resolved.

The folks who freak in are trickier. It may not be obvious that they are mad. They may become hypercritical, withdrawn (Ice Treatment), sullen or passive-aggressive. They may punish the people who don't notice or understand that they are mad. They may have the distorted, childish belief that "If you loved me you'd know how I feel" which is immature and allows them to avoid taking responsibility for communicating how they feel.

I have a miniature Richter scale in my heart that records my reactions to my environment. I get a reading of how I am reacting and I use that information to guide me. For example, if I blow my top when someone is giving me constructive feedback, chances are my historical "Unjustly Accused" internal button has just been hit. So when I get the Richter scale reading and it is in great contrast to what is actually going on, I ask myself - "How much of this is about NOW and how much of my reaction is about THEN (whenever THEN was)? That simple question is usually enough to restore my perspective and help me ground myself back in the reality of the moment and shake off whatever associations I was adding to the situation that did not belong there.

Sometimes I'm mad in a clear and present way. You lied to me and I'm mad! Then my job is to communicate to you my feelings and what I want from you to fix the situation (the legal term is to "make me whole"). I must tell you about "what is" without bringing in all the other times/situations I may also have been mad about that are not relevant to this time. I have to say "Me sentences" such as "When you lie to me I feel I can never trust you ever again and I want you to never lie to me again" rather than "When you lie I know what a jerk you really are and I hope you rot."

Gaining mastery of your anger is an excellent way to increase your self-esteem and create safety via predictability in your relationships with others.

To read all the prior Ask Your Therapist columns go to www.krishnabai.com where you can also send Krishnabai a general question for her column.

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information. The Ashby Center for Counseling 978-827-1181.