

Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

Dealing With Anger - Other People's Anger

Last month I wrote about dealing with our own anger. This month it's about dealing with the anger of other people. As I said, it seems everyone tends to either "freak out" or "freak in" and people tend to be comfortable with others who act the ways they do, so if you "freak in" it is much easier for you to handle the anger of someone else who also "freaks in".

There are several tricks to dealing successfully with the anger of others. The first is to stay focused on them and not to get lost in your reactions to their anger (which makes it about you and takes attention away from them). For example, if a friend gets mad at you for being late, instead of getting defensive and telling your friend why you were late again, listen to his complaint and feelings and address the feelings. Maybe he is really mad or maybe he is hurt. If he is mad, say something such as "I hear you feel disrespected every time I am late. I do respect you and I will do the following things to change my behavior for next time..."

If he is really hurt and covering those feelings with anger, try this. "I am sorry I upset you by being late. I know you work hard to be on time for me and I need to do as good a job being on time for you. Please forgive me."

Very often people try to short-cut someone else's anger by verbally pushing back with the reasons or excuses for why something happened. This tends to make the angry person more angry or frustrated because you are not letting them say what they need to say. It is far better to be quiet and listen until they are done, then acknowledge them and how they feel. Then you can ask if they want to know the reasons why you were late, etc, but if they say NO, the best you can do is to not be late again.

Another approach for dealing with anger is to wait until the person is no longer angry and then talk about it. For example, perhaps your spouse or parents dislike one of your friends and feels free to complain about them or criticize them. When that is not going on, talk to them about it. You can't get them to like someone they don't like, but you can ask them to keep their thoughts to themselves. You can bargain. "I won't badmouth your friend if you won't badmouth mine. Let's have a truce."

Another reason to go back over an incident after it is over is to learn something for the future. You can tell the person you did not know why they got so angry and you want to understand so that does not happen again. If you are sincerely interested, the person will know that and usually open up so that the situation can be avoided in the future.

Finally, many couples come for a few sessions of couples' therapy when they are so mad at each other that they have retreated into their own corners and can't talk to each other anymore. A lot of healing can happen in one or two sessions with a trained professional.

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.