

Freedom From Anger

Among the most common phone calls we receive at the Lakes Area Youth Service Bureau are those calls enquiring about Adolescent Anger. The calls we receive, either from parents or adolescents themselves, are those from people who are at the end of their rope. They say things like, "I don't know what happens, I just lose control" or "He's a great kid, but I don't know where this anger of his is coming from." Anger runs rampant in the lives of some adolescents, causing them to hurt themselves and others, destroying much of what is important to them.

Anger can come from many different places. It may be a pattern learned in social settings, it might be a genetic predisposition to a more explosive personality, or it may come from a chemical imbalance. Understanding where anger comes from requires a lot of internal work either on your own or with a therapist, learning to live with anger is a difficult, but attainable goal.

It all starts with examining the process your anger follows. The process is fairly predictable. First, there will be something that triggers the beginning of an anger escalation. Maybe that is a comment from someone that hurts or an event that went wrong. Usually more triggering events follow which escalates the anger. Throughout this process the person will most likely have a physical reaction to the triggers. For example, they may grind their teeth, clench their fists, their heart will begin to palpitate, or they will begin to pace. These are just some of the physical signs we see. Finally, there will be a final event/trigger that pushes them over the edge, resulting in an explosion. To others this explosion may feel like an overreaction, but the process has been escalating for a while. If we just look at the explosive event, chances are we will have trouble getting to the bottom of where things go wrong. We have to look at the whole process.

The easiest way to unpack this process is to begin with the physical symptom. Almost everyone can identify a physical symptom that occurs when they are getting angry. For those people who have explosive anger this is the point where an interruption in the process can occur. Pay attention to the physical symptom you identify. For instance, if your throat tenses up when you are getting angry that's what you are looking for. As soon as you notice your throat getting tight, make the decision to take a break from the situation, i.e., walk away and cool down. When the tightness in your throat goes away, you can readdress the situation if necessary.

Once you have identified a physical symptom figure out what emotion evoked the physical symptom. For example, when someone puts me down I notice that my throat gets tense; or when someone picks on me I start gritting my teeth; or whenever I feel like a failure I start clenching my fists. We react physically to how we respond emotionally. When we uncover the emotion that gets triggered we can begin the process of looking for the emotion instead of the physical response. Whenever we notice that emotion we can interrupt the anger escalation process at an even earlier stage allowing us to make conscious decisions about how we proceed.

As I said at the beginning of the article, understanding our emotional response is where the internal work comes into play and this is by far the most difficult part of the process. Unpacking why we have such a strong reaction to failure or being made fun of (to name a few) is courageous and difficult work. This work may take a while to do, but with diligence it can be a process that allows you to say good-bye to anger.

With extensive work, either in therapy or through soul searching, you can uncover what is at the root of your anger. This will take a lot of hard work, and to truly understand your powerful reactions you will need to do that work. But the most immediate need is to get your anger under control so you can quit hurting yourself and those around you. You can do this by following the steps outlined here.

If you are looking for a more guided experience in understanding your anger, The Lakes Area Youth Service Bureau offers small groups, called R.E.A.C.H., to help adolescents understand and get a handle on their anger. If you are interested in knowing more about that group you can call, 651-464-3685 for more information and ask to speak with Kari Lyn Wampler.

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