

Managing Anger: Your Own and Others'

When it comes to managing anger, what's your style? Are you a **suppressor** – someone who avoids openly dealing with conflict, even if it means absorbing psychological blows and sticking to “I'll just do it myself; no sense making this situation worse” when you are slighted?

Or are you an **expresser** – someone who strikes while the iron is hot, believes that “getting it out” is the way to get it over with, and that waiting before expressing anger is tantamount to tolerating the inappropriate behavior of others?

One of the most over-arching clinical observations in our work with physicians is that, as a group, you tend to mismanage anger. In fact, physicians tend to be conflict avoiders. This is not surprising, given that medicine attracts people who are oriented toward pleasing others, even if doing so proves detrimental to your own health.

But this is surprising news to many colleagues, staff, administrators, and patients who may quake in the intimidating glare of a physician or who become the targets of an outburst that resulted from too much frustration being stuffed for far too long.

Recognizing the Risks

Dealing with anger is an inevitable part of being a physician. Elsewhere, we have written about the double-cross that is shaping the lives of so many doctors today. This double-cross comes in many forms: ungrateful or oppositional patients; third party meddling in how you practice medicine; shifts in society's esteem and support of the profession; dwindling levels of collaboration and collegiality within medical organizations and communities; and the ultimate double-crosses, the ever-present threat of malpractice litigation and/or lack of family support for your stressful career (1).

It's also important to note that emotions are “contagious.” As you drift from being stressed to being frustrated, irritated, and, eventually angry, you shape similar reactions in others.

And don't fool yourself into thinking that you can contain your irritability to one area of your life. We recently surveyed physicians' wives and found that a major source of marital conflict was their husbands' tendencies to contaminate their at-home time with irritation, frustration, and worry leftover from the work day.

Similarly, if you accumulate frustration in your personal life, you put yourself at risk of mismanaging anger in the workplace. A physician who was sent to us for help with disruptive workplace behavior explained how this might happen. “I can't tell you how many mornings I've left home seething about some family conflict. As I drive to the hospital, I distract myself by imagining all the acts of incompetence I'm likely to encounter, once I get to work. By the time I hit my office's doors, I'm loaded, cocked, and ready to strike.”

This physician's comments point to a third risk for inappropriately managing anger: if you work with colleagues who frequently mismanage anger, you are at risk of doing the same.

Taking Charge of Yourself

Here are some tips gleaned from research and clinical experience with anger management and conflict resolution.

◆Recognize high-risk situations, and, where possible, do something to protect yourself from getting caught-up in an anger swirl once you enter it. Visualize yourself remaining calm, and practice some form of relaxation technique before you enter that relationship or situation. Once in it, try to distract yourself from the irritating person or stressor. Use anything that works to calm you: prayer, meditation, deep breathing, a focus on the task at hand.

◆Never strike when the iron is hot. Instead, express what's bothering you either before you reach the boiling point or once you've cooled down a bit. Give up the myths that either expressing or suppressing works: in the long run, both simply serve to fester your anger and damage relationships.

◆If nothing else, curb aggressive, hurried behaviors. Anger is an emotion that is fueled by thoughts that justify outrage and that tend to fuel aggressive behaviors. It helps if you can reframe ideas of persecution or outrage into those of compassion and empathy. But this is very difficult to do in a moment of anger. More realistic – and powerfully effective – is simply slowing down, rather than speeding up, once you get angry. Slow your rate of speech, your response time, even your pace of movements. If you curb aggression, your anger will subside.

◆Apologize frequently. One of the most powerful ways to manage anger is to clean up residue left in relationships when anger is mismanaged. "I'm sorry" are the most powerful words effective emotional managers use.

Managing Angry Colleagues

Here are a few suggestions as food for thought.

- ◆ Don't wait too long before discussing the issue
- ◆ Never blame or shape your colleague. Be clear that inappropriate anger is unacceptable and damaging to you and to your organization, but also let your colleague know that you value and respect him or her.
- ◆ Be specific. Do not use vague terms or innuendo. Defensive or denying individuals need to be confronted in a language that specifies exactly which behaviors they need to change, and what would work better.
- ◆ Do it in person. Never give painful feedback in memo or email form.
- ◆ Do it in private. Inept criticisms delivered in front of staff or peers is a collaboration killer.
- ◆ If one-to-one discussion doesn't work, do it as a group. Include colleagues or staff who are willing to speak up and clearly specify how your colleague's behaviors are damaging and what he or she needs to change.
- ◆ Do not get into a debate. Whether or not your colleague's anger is justified is not the point. The point is that, regardless of the legitimacy of his or her underlying issues, inappropriately expressing anger is unacceptable.
- ◆ Do not get defensive. Striking back is a natural reaction to the embarrassment that comes when we receive unwanted feedback from colleagues. Make it clear that your own behavior is, indeed, a legitimate topic of conversation – in a future conversation.

1. Sotile WM, Sotile MO. *The Resilient Physician*. Chicago: AMA Press, 2002.