

SCENE

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Lonne Sterling and Christine Michaels, Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHC) and Certified Employee Assistance Professionals (CEAP) have worked in the mental health, employee assistance and substance abuse fields for over 25 years. They are in private practice in Sarasota and have founded the Center for Change of Florida, providing clients with outpatient counseling and area businesses with employee assistance services. Together they have established a reputation as dynamic professionals, each bring unique and varied experiences to the partnership. Lonne was Director of an Employee Assistance Program and Outpatient Program for one of the area's largest Mental Health Corporations, and successfully managed EAP and Managed Care product lines for 19 major firms and 20 national affiliates. As a Certified Relapse Prevention Specialist, Christine has extensive experience working in addictions with particular expertise in substance abuse assessment, early intervention and prevention. Clinically, both Lonne and Christine are highly skilled in utilizing a brief, solution-focused, therapeutic approach.



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MAD ABOUT YOU

T **True or False?** *Aggressive behavior is instinctual to man. Some people never get angry. Anger always results from frustration. Venting "releases" anger and therefore "deals" with it. Anger is a destructive, undesirable emotion.* Actually none of these are true; they are merely popular **myths** about anger.

According to Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons in their best-selling book, *Your Perfect Right*, "the common confusion of angry feelings with aggressive behavior creates a tremendous barrier to expression of the natural, healthy, universal and useful human emotion we call anger."

So, what is anger? Anger is a universal feeling not a mode of behavior. It is an emotional and physiological response to an activating event based on how it is perceived *by the viewer*. We choose our view of a situation and our response to it by a reinforced set of beliefs held and practiced for years. Anger does not, therefore, operate like a boiling kettle, first building up steam, then being released through an explosion of feeling. It is more like a memory bank of stored negative experiences that, when periodically triggered by external events, produce feelings of, for example, hurt, shame, guilt and fear.

Why do we get angry? There are four basic catalysts: (1) **to establish control**—to force cooperation or to get one's way; (2) **to win**—to prove one is right at the expense of another; (3) **to get even**—to use as a weapon to punish when one is hurt; and (4) **to protect one's rights**—to reestablish rights that one feels have been violated. When any one or more of these areas are in play, we feel emotional pain that, in turn, creates stress. One of the primary functions of anger is to relieve this stress.

Why is anger so prevalent? So many situations in today's complex and demanding world create feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and fear. Most of us are uncomfortable with these feelings because we perceive them as making us appear weak. Anger, on the other hand, is perceived as a strong emotion, creating a sense of power and control that, in too any of us, is getting expressed as hostile behavior.

Let's take a common driving example that often results in "road rage". John has been stuck in a traffic jam for 45 minutes due to an accident on the highway. He has been patiently plodding along in his used, beat-up sedan waiting his turn to merge into the one open lane, when a brand new SUV cuts right in front of him. He starts furiously honking his horn while screaming obscenities out the window. The offending driver appears clueless. John stops his car and, ignoring the traffic, lunges over to the SUV and starts banging on the driver's side window, making threatening remarks.

Remember, it is not the actual event but rather our individual interpretation of it that causes our emotional reactions. So what actually has occurred in our example? It can best be explained by the **"ABC" theory** of emotional disturbance promulgated by psychologist, Albert Ellis. **"A"** is the **activating** event, i.e. John being cut off while patiently waiting his turn. **"B"** is John's **beliefs** about or interpretation of the

activating event, i.e. "I'm a victim" (I have no recourse); "My rights are irrelevant" (I follow the rules and he doesn't have to); "I'm less than" (I'm poor and have to drive an old car); "I'm not important" (look how easily I can be ignored). **"C"** is the upsetting emotional **consequences** resulting from these beliefs, i.e. hurt, shame, fear and powerlessness. As we pointed out above, when we experience these painful feelings, we become stressed, and our most powerful tool to relieve this stress is anger. Although John feels justified in his anger because he believes his rights have been violated, his hostile behavior is a result of not having adequate skills to effectively cope with the emotional pain he feels.

Everywhere in our lives we see the devastating consequences of unmanaged anger (murder, suicide, addictions, domestic violence), but there are preemptive and constructive ways to go about dealing with anger.

Preemptive techniques include:

- Recognizing anger as a natural and healthy emotion not to be feared
- Accepting that **You** are responsible for how you feel; no one "makes you" angry
- Remembering anger is not the same thing as aggression
- Knowing yourself and your triggers and then not setting yourself up to get angry
- Learning to relax
- Practicing *assertive* ways of expression
- Dealing with issues when they happen rather than procrastinating

Constructive coping mechanisms for anger include:

- Engaging in physical activity to release the adrenalin
- Creating and memorizing affirmations to cool things off
- Taking slow, deep, abdominal breaths and counting to ten
- Knowing your own "buttons" and how your body expresses anger
- Practicing the visualization of alternative calm responses
- Leaving the anger-provoking situation
- Looking for the humor and ignoring the provocation
- Using thought stopping, telling yourself "Stop it!" and obeying the message
- Identifying and challenging your irrational beliefs (i.e. "the world should be fair" "you must never show weakness") and replacing them with more rational responses ("disturbing things happen; they are disappointing and inconvenient but I can handle them")

When self help techniques fail and anger is increasingly causing problems in your life, we suggest you seek professional help. *The old adage is inaccurate. People do **not** push our buttons; they simply point at them and we push them!*