



Busting Some Myths About Anger Management

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Introduction

When we thoughtlessly and impulsively react to feelings of anger it becomes a weapon. It is as if we are running red lights at intersections and putting ourselves and others in grave danger. Many of us are emotionally color blind at the intersection between feeling, thought and action precisely because like any intersection these events appear connected in a logical sequence. When we take out our experiences of anger on others we tend not to slow down long enough to recognize that what seems logical may not be. Furthermore, what we want to see as a green light is really an impulse running through what under calmer and cooler circumstances would have our consciences, and reality testing/judgment flashing red lights. If the red light is flashing we are moving too quickly to slow down and pay attention. Hopefully, we learn over time to exercise more self restraint so that when the dust settles we are not left dealing with the painful realities of having hurt the ones we love.

Having worked as a social worker in a criminal court in Connecticut I know from experience that the jails and prisons in this country are populated by folks who have both used anger as a weapon as well as by those who sincerely believe they were victims of such aggression and were acting in self defense. This article busts some of the myths responsible for the irresponsible management of anger and other emotions that light fuses on verbally and physically abusive behaviors. I hope this article will lead many of you out there who know of someone who fits the descriptions in the following paragraphs to share this article with them so that they may do some soul searching and perhaps, if warranted seek counseling.

Myth #1: "He pushed my buttons so he got what he deserved."

Does an unsuspecting person deserve to be our personal whipping post when something he says annoys us and lights the fuse for 40 years of collected grievances? If we have not forgiven _____ for what was done to us during our childhoods then, we are likely to still have an axe to grind and may unbeknownst to ourselves spend our days looking to avenge such injustices. Unfortunately, an untreated victim never loses the drive to repeat history and place himself in harm's way with the story ending where he either repeats the role of victim or assumes the role of perpetrator after finding a suitable victim. Misery never finds enough company and is a self-perpetuating machine until we break these vicious cycles often with the help of trained professionals. It's not anyone's responsibility except our own to work at healing the emotional wounds suffered early in life. It's not anyone else's fault if something happens between ourselves and others that may trigger painful associations to earlier traumas. It's sad and unfortunate but, is a reality of life. If we fight this reality we keep heaping more pain and suffering on everyone including ourselves. If we accept this unfortunate, unfair and unjust reality then, we may head on the road toward forgiveness. Forgiveness is in our self-interest. We can't shape brighter futures if we are still held hostage by our pasts. If we were nothing more than vending machines then, when someone pushed our buttons we would not be responsible for using anger as a weapon. We are responsible. Just ask a criminal court judge in any state.

Myth #2: "I didn't do anything wrong. I tried to walk away from fighting with him and he pursued me into the bedroom, cornered me and then, called me every name in the book. Of course I slugged him. What else could I have done?"

Life is often not fair and sometimes we have only one unappealing choice to make in the name of our health and welfare. That choice based on the scenario above is to move out. Separation anxieties are not an excuse to stay with a partner who will degrade us and otherwise provoke us into a fight until we lose our cool and retaliate. If our efforts to call time out or otherwise deescalate conflicts are not respected and the two of us wind up in violent encounters then, we have one and only reasonable choice at our disposal. We must find a safe haven until we have evidence that both of us are willing and able to manage our feelings in a more respectful and considerate manner. Two wrongs never make a right and the party that retaliates is often deemed to be as guilty as the one who started. When the police are called to break up domestic disputes who started often does not determine whether or not both parties will be asked to appear in court to face charges.

Myth #3: "If I get angry I get very destructive."

The title of this article could very well be "Busting Myths About Rage Management." Anger all by itself does not necessarily lead to abusive behaviors. Most often you have to sprinkle a little rage, envy and hatred to get something akin to an explosive cocktail. Wars start when people feel attacked and attacks on our life, liberty and pursuit of happiness are often taken very personally by many. If we are wronged and hurt by others we will most likely be angry. If we assume that we are being mistreated because we don't count, and we don't count because the message we hear is that we deserve to be treated this way for some ugliness or defect of character or physical appearance, if we swallow this message whole then, anger will bleed into rage. Rage is a signal that our value and significance is under attack and we are feeling helpless to defend ourselves. This experience breeds destructive acts of retaliation because it becomes a matter of kill or be killed off as a worthwhile person deserving of respect and consideration.

Myth #4: "I was out of control so I'm not responsible for my actions." This translates to: "Denial is not a river in Egypt."

Not infrequently those of us who abuse substances and others who are non compliant consumers of mental health treatment services use "being out of control" to "feel in control" of getting what we want. If we are responsible by acts of commission or omission for relinquishing control over ourselves then, we are in a very precarious position. We become very dependent in an unhealthy way on others to look out for us, clean up our messes or otherwise, take responsibility for us. If the dependent relationship falls apart we may be one step away from a rude awakening that goes along with being held accountable for our actions. This applies whether or not we drink ourselves into oblivion or lose control of our minds as a direct consequence of the decision to stop taking our medications. "The Devil made me hit that person" will not cut it if we have years of psychiatric hospitalizations under our belts that could have taught us what we need to do to manage our hallucinations and delusions. Sometimes notions of being powerful, important and special are linked to being treated as if the rules of society don't apply to us. This is a symptom of not feeling special or important in our own right.

Myth #5: "If I don't think about it then, I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not going to be your victim. I'm going to fight back!"

We do not exist to polish images of ourselves that are false so that we can make real that which is flattering for us to look at in the mirror. We can walk around and actually believe our press clippings are true if we confuse who we are with what we want ourselves and others to see. We may dismiss evidence that contradicts our valued self images as bogus. In such instances we may feel attacked when these images we depend on for a semblance of self esteem are not validated and are exposed as fraudulent. We may feel that another person has attacked us by exposing us. In truth, we attack our true selves because we have contempt and hatred for how we conduct our lives and yet, we refuse to make changes. Consequently, the messenger is blamed for shedding light on our true natures. We can make ourselves larger than life when our egos are inflated by false notions about who we are and then, when reality intrudes our egos become deflated as if were balloons in The Macy's Thanksgiving Parade that were pricked by a large pin. The messenger becomes the enemy and the stimulated rage, anger, envy and hatred may result in acts of retaliation. It's not necessarily that our characters are being judged as all bad. It's more like we become self conscious of a stain on our imagined pristine character that we cannot tolerate because we do not know how to keep these stains from spreading and coloring the experiences of our selves.

Myth #6: Adults who behave like children feel much better after they explode and release their tension.

I can tell you from many experiences counseling couples that there may be immediate and gratifying releases of emotional tension from our bodies and minds when we let our feelings fly. However, most of the adults I have worked with wound up feeling ashamed, guilty and depressed in the long run. Adults need to be behave like adults and effectively manage age appropriate roles to feel happy, at peace and fulfilled. When they behave like children they may feel immediately gratified but, later on when they have moments to reflect on their actions, they often feel awful.

Conclusion

Impulse control problems of any kind are most often treated with counseling and/or medications. Counseling requires that we make time and space to learn to contain, reflect on and change our perspectives about anger and other hostile emotions. It takes

only one degree of separation from the person we are interacting with, and only one degree of separation from our own feelings, thoughts, and fantasies to start us on the road to neutralizing potentially volatile, destructive and regrettable actions. I hope you will spend some time reflecting on some of the myths I've made a case for busting with this article.