

Anger and Frustration

When Ashlee’s husband came back from Afghanistan she noticed he was agitated about everything. Even little things bothered him. He was anxious, jumpy, and angry. “He was always angry at me or angry at someone or something,” Ashlee says. He’d sometimes get physical or emotionally abusive. Ashlee, like most military spouses, who learn to be strong and self-reliant, took the abuse, feeling like she had to be the rock for him. “I needed to be the warrior,” she said. Well, she was the warrior. She fought her own campaigns while he was away; now, she felt like she had to carry his burden, too. That often strains a marriage to a breaking point.

The presence of these symptoms is like a keg of gunpowder just waiting for the fuse to be lit. In Ashlee’s situation it didn’t take long before the explosion. Ashlee writes: “I experienced always being anxious of when my husband was going to be mean to me or the kids, always on alert to anger or aggression about to be taken out on me, or when is the next attempt [he might take on] his life?” Ashlee hated him for that. It could be construed as manipulative behavior. But it’s hard to tell. She felt confused, wondering what was happening in her marriage; and, she gave excuses for his behavior—something very common among spouses. Spouses sometimes feel it’s their fault, and everybody has to “walk on eggshells” because the family should not upset the warrior.

When people get angry they’ve already given in to the emotion of anger. Anger breeds more anger, leading to an emotional and devastating downfall that many do not easily recover from. Persistent anger is wasted energy; and when people get angry they can lose their objectivity. But how can we prevent that from happening? How can we learn to use anger constructively? We must begin by understanding that anger is a God-given emotion, which may be expressed appropriately or inappropriately.

Anger is found everywhere in the Bible. It shows up in the first book of the Bible (Genesis 4:5) and as late as the last book of the Bible (Revelation 19:15). The only emotion mentioned more often than anger is love. There are a few different words used in the Scriptures for anger. The most common New Testament word for anger conveys a gradual and sustained emotional attitude that often includes revenge.¹ It’s a slow-burning type that gradually heats up

¹ Gary J. Oliver and Carrie E. Oliver, *Managing Your Anger*, in T. Clinton, Hart, A. and Ohlschlager G. (Eds.) *Caring For People God’s Way* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 203.

and is often aroused under conditions of perceived evil and injustice. Another word used in the New Testament describes a boiling commotion of feelings that quickly dies down like a screaming teapot that's removed from a stovetop burner.

In Ephesians 4:26, the word for anger appears twice and is the same word that conveys an enduring, slow-burning emotional attitude with one exception: revenge is not included.² The same idea is seen in Mark 3:5 where Jesus confronts the Pharisees. In Ephesians 4:26, Christians are admonished not to let their anger lead to sin, and to deal with it promptly.

Anger is also a secondary emotion that follows a primary emotion such as hurt and fear.³ Anger is easily perceived; but it's usually linked to some other issue, some deeper emotion, some frustration, some disappointment or failure. It is helpful to understand this aspect of anger and how it's expressed because it reveals the primary issues that must be constructively addressed. In the case of returning warriors or their families, these primary issues are always present (albeit hidden) and are often complicated by feelings of guilt, grief, and shame.

Anger may mask primary pain and serve as surrogate for it.⁴ Some people may be more comfortable "blowing off steam" in anger than ever dealing with the reasons for their anger. Sometimes the real pain, the issues for the anger, are not even perceived by the person who is angry. They don't know why they're angry.

For many veterans, the expression of anger is a safe haven. Its expression keeps everybody "at arms length," further isolating the sufferer from dealing with the real issues. In this way, veterans maintain a sense of power over others, feeling less vulnerable and less helpless.

Nevertheless, the presence of anger, often attended by frustration, is very real for warriors and their families. How can these people move on from their anger and frustration? Let me suggest a few things. Recognize the value of anger.⁵ Anger can signal opportunities or warn of coming danger. It's the "check engine" light on your dash. Anger is a resource. It's packed with energy; and we can choose to express it constructively or destructively. We can use it to

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 204.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Gary J. Oliver and Carrie E. Oliver *Managing Your Anger*, in T. Clinton, Hart, A. and Ohlschlager G. (Eds.) *Caring For People God's Way* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 201-219.



articulate and solve problems or we can ignore it; like a waterfall, we can harness it or be washed away by it.

The best time to address anger is before it takes over. Recognize its signals, the slow-burning, gradual rise in temperature or that sudden emotional flash when in a brief moment you have a choice: blow up or count to ten? But too many people get “washed down the river of anger,” denying their emotions and ignoring an opportunity to explore options.

One option is to follow the Scriptural advice to deal with anger promptly (Ephesians 4:26). Failure to do so gives the Devil a beachhead, a place where he can launch future attacks (Ephesians 4:27). Recognize God condemns anger that is expressed indiscriminately and hurtfully (Ephesians 4:29-32). Give your anger to God (2 Corinthians 10:5; I Peter 5:7) and turn it into a prayer like the psalmist did.

We always have choices. Everyone is going to experience anger at some time; but the unbridled expression of anger is not inevitable. We don't have to go there. We can choose to control how we express it or allow it to control us. Finally, a person who is angry must look for the primary causes for their anger. A primary source for anger may be hurt or frustration, something from the past or the present when we're not able to reach our goals or meet other people's expectations. It may be fear—fear for the future; it's an unsettled anxiety about what may happen or can happen.

All of these primary sources for anger may be present in families of returning warriors. These families can begin to deal with their expression of anger by exploring these deeper causes. Rest assured that God is present for those families, despite these causes or the anger that ensues.

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