

Peak at Parenting Anger - a fire alarm...or Firefighter?

Anger is a signal

- It is meant to alert you that something might be wrong. When the feeling of anger flashes through your body it is doing at least two things – alerting you to the possibility that there might be a problem and getting the body ready for action. In the past this was a survival mechanism meant to help keep you alive. Since today we don't have many Saber Tooth Tigers to deal with we usually only need it for notification. Interesting how often we choose to use it to fight instead.

Events are neutral

- The situations that occur on any given day can not *make you mad*. Things are happening all the time that will affect different people different ways. It is our thoughts that determine whether or not these things are good or bad and our thoughts all stem from our beliefs. For example – let's say I was to tell you that someone is pregnant. How would you feel? Likely you're thinking – well it depends... who is it? How old is she? Do I know her? What's her lifestyle situation? In other words this news is neutral and not labeled good, bad or otherwise until you're able to apply your beliefs. The event itself is neutral.

Anger is a contagious emotion

- Ever notice how people look when they are angry? They seem to puff up a little bit bigger, often they turn red and their words come out like a growl or roar depending on the situation. If you're in that person's line of fire what do you do? You either quake in fear and like a puppy shrink down to try and show them you mean no harm... or you puff up yourself and give it right back. There is a saying – Aggression begets Aggression. When someone attacks us our own system signals the danger and our body immediately gets ready to respond. Of course, there is another option here – assertiveness is when we stand our ground without puffing or shrinking and calmly but firmly let them know our take on things. i.e. *I can see how angry you are and would like to help you sort it out. Do you need a minute to get yourself ready before we start?*

Note: Being assertive does not mean allowing people to put you down, swear at you, etc. If the person angrily responds to your above statement or attacks you in their reply, it is fair to say: *I can see now is not a good time to do this – we can talk later*. Then quickly but confidently remove yourself from the situation. An angry person can not think things through until their body knows they are out of danger.

Identify the source – try to pinpoint where your angry feelings are coming from.

- High emotional states are very close to each other meaning it's easy to jump between them and not even realize what you have done. For example – your child runs through the busy parking lot and nearly gets hit by a car. What are you feeling at that moment? Probably fear! What happens when you reach your child? For many it's anger! Any intense emotion can do that jump quickly and easily – often convincing us we are right to feel that way. I wonder how many kids have been spanked because they almost got themselves hurt?
- Sometimes our anger will surface because we take something personally that is actually a reflection of what (we believe) are our own shortcomings. For example we might have just finished a project for work and someone might point out an error that we had noticed but decided wasn't a big deal. Our anger is actually at ourselves but comes out directed at others.
- Know your expectations and share them with other people before expecting compliance. Many a partner, child or colleague, have been verbally attacked because they didn't meet expectations. Their look of shock is genuine and their outrage is due to the perceived injustice of it all.

Angry thoughts are subject to distortion

- Often when we are angry we start searching our brain for other evidence to justify the way we feel. If that evidence cannot be found we sometimes will distort what is there to make it match the intense feeling we are experiencing. In other words if the evidence doesn't support what we are feeling we change the evidence. This is the reason we need to take the time to calm down before we can sort things out.

Feeling angry is a fact of life – we cannot and would not want to eliminate such an important piece of our make up. The trick is to recognize this feeling for what it is - a signal that puts our body on high alert. Our job is to take a look at the situation before us and unless there is a Saber Tooth Tiger just waiting to take us on, we need to turn off the alarm, calm ourselves down and take control of the situation. We can't ask the fire alarm to put out the fire it's simply not equipped to do such a job.

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