

HELP FOR RAGEAHOLICS

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

There appears to be an epidemic of angry people in our world. We see anger expressed in multiple ways: school yard shootings, spousal abuse, road rage, drive-by shootings, destruction of property, and so forth. What can we do to stop the proliferation of destructive acting out of anger in society today? Like all problems, the solution can be targeted at a global or system's level, as well as at an individual level. The solution I want to address is a very individualistic one. Each of us can make a difference if we take personal responsibility for our own acts of anger. This article is written especially for people who have constant problems with anger that is out-of-control.

In truth, some people are addicted to anger and rage like many alcoholics are addicted to alcohol. It is believed that people may become addicted to their own internal neuro-chemical changes that occur inside the body when they are feeling angry. Adrenal is produced in the body as a response to the primitive fight-flight response that is triggered when we feel psychologically or physically attacked. Some people enjoy the feeling of adrenalin pulsing through their body and welcome this experience.

Over the years, there have been many psychological approaches to treating people with chronic anger problems. Unfortunately, many approaches have fallen short. If there is one consistent thing we've discovered, it is this: outward expressions of anger (verbal and non-verbal) usually don't work. For example, if a person with a short fuse begins to defend himself in a verbal confrontation, it won't take long for his anger to escalate and for self-control to be lost. Once the expression of anger begins, it is like a stone rolling down a steep hill. Once momentum is gained, very little is capable of stopping the process.

So what is the alternative to verbal self-expression of anger? Let's look at the option of "abstinence." In the past, very few therapists, authors, or workshop leaders have advised, "Don't express your anger." Yet, that is what I'm about to suggest. Hence, this information will seem totally foreign, especially to those of you who have sought anger management treatment in the past.

How to Abstain from Anger

Be honest. How many times have you felt irritated, annoyed, or downright angry today? Anger is a normal, naturally occurring feeling not unlike feeling sad or glad, for instance. It is impossible to stop angry feelings from occurring inside us. When I suggest you abstain, I'm suggesting that you abstain from expressing your anger outwardly. If anger has been a problem for you, then it is important to realize that you can't trust yourself to outwardly express your anger. Just as an alcoholic cannot drink socially the way a non-alcoholic person might safely drink, a rageaholic cannot express their anger outwardly without losing self-control. This is not always true for an individual without chronic anger problems.

In AA there is a saying, "If you don't take the first drink, you won't get drunk." If we apply this to the anger addiction, we can say, "If you don't express or mentally rehearse your anger, you won't become enraged." We all know somebody we might call a rageaholic. They are people who are constantly indulging themselves by expressing their anger toward others. Hence, rageaholics are frequently getting fired or divorced because other people can't stand being around them. If you'd like to stop this self-destructive pattern, read on.

How do I get started "abstaining?"

A few years ago, psychotherapist, Newton Hightower, wrote a book called, Anger Busting 101. Prior to publication, I was one of the reviewers for the book and I was extremely excited by Hightower's unique approach. Unlike other therapists who encouraged people to "get their anger out so they could get over it," Hightower said this traditional advice simply didn't work. He himself, a former rageaholic, knew personally what worked and what didn't. Given his professional training and personal struggle with rage, he was in a unique position to develop a treatment approach that he could field test on himself. He developed the following creed for people who truly want to stop raging and recover. I urge anyone with an anger problem to begin immediately living by the following recommendations from Hightower:

1. I will practice self-restraint as a top priority today.
2. When angry, I will act ****the opposite**** of how I feel.
Contrary to what you might think, this does not say: "Share how you really feel!" You should assume that you have lost the right to "express" your anger. In fact, most rageaholics have used up their quota for this lifetime!
3. If I feel my anger is about to erupt, I will quietly leave the situation.
Contrary to traditional advice, you should **not** stay around and discuss your feelings if your wife wants you to. While many people have a choice between a rational calm discussion and leaving, a rageaholic has already proven his only choice is blowing up, so he'd better leave.
4. I will find truth in all criticism directed toward me today, especially from my partner. The emphasis is on listening and taking the criticism inside instead of attempting to explain your point of view.
5. I will say, "You are right," in a sincere meaningful way, when criticized.
This doesn't give you permission to say, "You are right, BUT..."
6. I will give an example of how the person who criticized me is right.
7. I will repeat the following sentence to myself today, "I am better off being wrong, because when I am right, I am dangerous." Notice that it does not say, "I need to stand up for myself when I am right."
8. I will avoid explaining myself in any way by saying, "I have no idea why I did that. It doesn't make any sense to me either. You don't need to make sure she understands your point of view." Life can go on without you being understood.
9. I will listen sympathetically to my partner when she tells me about her day. This

means eye contact and turning “off,” not “muting” the T.V.

10. I will give no unsolicited advice to my wife or children.

11. I will avoid blaming family members for anything today, especially if it was their fault. Remember, rageaholics love to feel righteous, which leads to serious out-of-control problems.

12. I will avoid trying to make any family member understand anything.

13. I will avoid trying to convince my child or spouse that I am being fair.

14. I will look for an opportunity to sincerely praise everyone I live with, especially the cat I don't like.

15. I will humbly commit myself to removing my angry behaviors today as my contribution toward a more peaceful world.

I imagine many readers are surprised by Hightower's above creed for abstaining from a lifestyle of raging at others. Remember, a strong solution is needed for a very abrasive, caustic, problem. In Hightower's words, “Destructive anger hurts your health, makes you miserable, blocks solutions, wastes your energy, keeps you helpless, invites attacks, imprisons your spirit, wrecks human relations, gives you headaches, causes accidents, ruins restful sleep and turns a love life into a lonely life.” When a person with out-of-control anger finally acknowledges the havoc his anger has brought to his life, Hightower's advice won't seem so drastic. Instead, when followed exactly as prescribed, this advice can become a Godsend.

Obviously, this creed is not easy to follow. It goes totally against the grain of the person who has chronic problems with angry. However, the positive change in the rageaholics life that will result from living this creed will be extremely reinforcing. Similar to any addiction, the addiction to anger will never be resolved. It will always need to be actively managed. If you would like to subscribe to hightower's free e-newsletter, you can send an e-mail request to Newton@angerbusters.com.

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