FAMILY *Matters*

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YOU MADE ME ANGRY!

It is common to hear the complaint that someone made us angry. This commonly occurs between parent and child, spouses, friends and co-workers. Feeling angry is inevitable but when a person frequently becomes angry and has difficulty controlling anger, significant relational and health problems may arise. News articles about road rage and community violence illustrate the problem well. However, it is important to realize that no one can make you angry. This is not an easy concept to accept because many people believe strongly that someone else can make them angry. It is important to realize that anger is a personal response that is based on how a person perceives a situation.

Research has identified the common perceptions held by people who have trouble controlling anger. The most prevalent perception is the hostility bias. People who have trouble managing anger tend to view the actions of another as hostile and intentionally directed toward them. That is to say, "you did it to me on purpose" with hostile intentions. The behavior of others is perceived as intentionally hurtful, manipulative, controlling and/or as an injustice. Therefore, a neutral event could be perceived as hostile. For example, a driver cuts in front of you at high rate of speed. Do you become angry or not? Well, it depends on how you perceive the event. Did the driver do it on purpose to you? Or was he racing to the nearest hospital because his infant child is having a medical emergency. Certainly, the latter perception shouldn't stir anger. This example illustrates how the same event perceived differently can lead to different reactions.

The belief that someone has behaved in a hostile way towards you also serves to rationalize the legitimacy of retaliation. Specifically, this cultivates the belief, "if you did something to me, I am justified in doing something back to you." However, no matter who starts something, you are responsible for your own actions. This tendency to blame others comes easy to most people. However, would a defendant in a criminal trial be able to use the defense "he made me do it."? Certainly not.

People who often feel angry tend to have poor problem solving skills, see mostly aggressive resolutions to problems and have controlling tendencies. They can also have a "short fuse" temperament and limited empathy for others. The research indicates that the more people can empathize, the less likely they will behave aggressively. Angry people often rehash angry events in their mind over and over, which serves to maintain the anger.

If you want to improve your anger management, here are some tips:

- Take responsibility for your own anger (i.e., don't blame others).
- Understand how your hostility bias contributes to your anger.
- Recognize typical anger triggers and either avoid them or develop a plan to manage them.
- Focus on non-aggression conflict resolution options.
- Keep the situation in perspective, "it is not the end of the world."
- Focus on resolving the problem not rehashing it.
- Become aware of your body sensations (i.e., clenched fists or muscle tension) signaling that you are feeling anger. Taking several deep breaths and counting to 10 can help to reduce your agitated mood
- Use positive and calming self-talk i.e., "it's not so bad and I am not going to take it personally, we can deal with it better when I'm calm."
- Exercise regularly to reduce stress which may be a contributor to your "short fuse" behavior
- Diffuse the situation with humor
- Refrain from derogatory or degrading remarks
- Recognize chronic anger will adversely affect your cardiovascular health if you don't learn to manage it
- Assertively express your anger using "I" statements not "you" statements

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