

Anger in the Workplace

By Jim Kendall, LCSW

In any business, the greatest resource is its people. In health care, it is the team of people who care for our patients and families, ranging from the physicians, nurses, therapists, care partners, receptionists, technicians to environmental and nutrition service personnel. In the University setting, the faculty and staff are the facilitators of learning. As human beings, we are each subject to a range of emotions from elation to rage. While anger is a normal human emotion, it is important to express anger in healthy ways that are appropriate in the workplace setting.

Anger is an adaptive response to internal and external events. We generally feel angry in response to feeling threatened, hurt, challenged, scared or hurt. These feelings serve as a teacher to us. They help us understand that our values or beliefs - what we really care about. An apathetic employee doesn't get angry about the quality of work, only the person who cares about the job that they are performing.

Anger impacts us physiologically, making itself known to us through muscle tension, headaches, rapid breathing, increased heart rate, stomach distress, elevated blood pressure and even flushing of the skin. Emotionally we can feel the intensity range from irritably to rage and from shame to guilt. One theory suggests that melancholia or sadness and anger are different ends of the continuum of a Core emotion. Depression is the passive manifestation and anger is the active expression.

Anger, like stress, is a response to a felt threat or perceived danger. Adrenaline increases in the classic "fight or flight" stress response syndrome that heightens our emotional and physical readiness. It can save your life (a protective signal) by letting you know there is a perceived threat. It can also take your life if inappropriately handled (road rage). Although we are socialized to believe that anger is bad, it really is an emotion that can be instructive. The positive resolution of conflict and anger is a real skill and can feel invigorating.

There are social norms that dictate acceptable ways of expressing the emotion of anger. All feelings are acceptable, but all behavioral expressions are not. Profanity, threatening statements, belittling remarks, tantrums, throwing things, etc. are not acceptable behavioral expressions in the workplace. Talking about one's concerns, feelings and frustrations are appropriate but best done in private and behind closed doors. This is the expectation of professional behavior in the workplace.

When people are angry, their ability to listen and cognitively reason decreases in proportion to the intensity of anger. It is important to recognize the signals of anger, analyze the etiology and make a plan as to how to most effectively deal with that anger. According to anger expert Dr. Ben Bissell in his "Managing Stress" series, anger intensifies if it is stored or ignored. Suppression or repression of anger over long period

of time can lead to depression. That is why learning to effectively manage anger and stress can be so helpful for our health.

As a member of the Vanderbilt faculty and staff, if you recognize the signals of anger and need help formulating a plan to best manage your anger; you may need to get help from a counselor or expert in the area of managing stress and anger. The Work/Life Connections-EAP and Faculty and Physician Wellness Programs at (615) 936-1327 can to help you deal with these symptoms or access community resources.