

Myths Regarding Anger

Taken from *Anger Management for Substance Abuse & Mental Health Clients*
U.S. Dept of Health & Human Services, 2008

Myth #1: Anger Is Inherited. One misconception or myth about anger is that the way we express anger is inherited and cannot be changed. Sometimes, we may hear someone say, “I inherited my anger from my father; that’s just the way I am.” This statement implies that the expression of anger is a fixed and unalterable set of behaviors. Evidence from research studies, however, indicates that people are not born with set, specific ways of expressing anger. These studies show that because the expression of anger is learned behavior, more appropriate ways of expressing anger also can be learned.

It is well established that much of people’s behavior is learned by observing others, particularly influential people. These people include parents, family members, and friends. If children observe parents expressing anger through aggressive acts, such as verbal abuse and violence, it is very likely that they will learn to express anger in similar ways. Fortunately, this behavior can be changed by learning new and appropriate ways of anger expression. It is not necessary to continue to express anger by aggressive and violent means.

Myth #2: Anger Automatically Leads to Aggression. A related myth involves the misconception that the only effective way to express anger is through aggression. It is commonly thought that anger is something that builds and escalates to the point of an aggressive outburst. As has been said, however, anger does not necessarily lead to aggression. In fact, effective anger management involves controlling the escalation of anger by learning assertiveness skills, changing negative and hostile “self-talk,” challenging irrational beliefs, and employing a variety of behavioral strategies.

Myth #3: People Must Be Aggressive To Get What They Want. Many people confuse assertiveness with aggression. The goal of aggression is to dominate, intimidate, harm, or injure another person—to win at any cost. Conversely, the goal of assertiveness is to express feelings of anger in a way that is respectful of other people. For example, if you were upset because a friend was repeatedly late for meetings, you could respond by shouting obscenities and name-calling. This approach is an attack on the other person

rather than an attempt to address the behavior that you find frustrating or anger provoking.

An assertive way of handling this situation might be to say, "When you are late for a meeting with me, I get pretty frustrated. I wish that you would be on time more often." This statement expresses your feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction and communicates how you would like the situation changed. This expression does not blame or threaten the other person and minimizes the chance of causing emotional harm.

Myth #4: Venting Anger Is Always Desirable. For many years, the popular belief among numerous mental health professionals and laymen was that the aggressive expression of anger, such as screaming or beating on pillows, was healthy and therapeutic. Research studies have found, however, that people who vent their anger aggressively simply get better at being angry (Berkowitz, 1970; Murray, 1985; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). In other words, venting anger in an aggressive manner reinforces aggressive behavior.

Myth #5: Since Anger is a Habitual Response, It's Okay. Not only is the expression of anger learned, but it can become a routine, familiar, and predictable response to a variety of situations. When anger is displayed frequently and aggressively, it can become a maladaptive habit because it results in negative consequences. Habits, by definition, are performed over and over again, without thinking. People with anger management problems often resort to aggressive displays of anger to solve their problems, without thinking about the negative consequences they may suffer or the debilitating effects it may have on the people around them.

If you or your loved ones believe that you are experiencing anger issues, please call us at Homestead Hope Counseling Services at 817.812.3021.

We offer help for today; Hope for tomorrow.