

## Anger Management

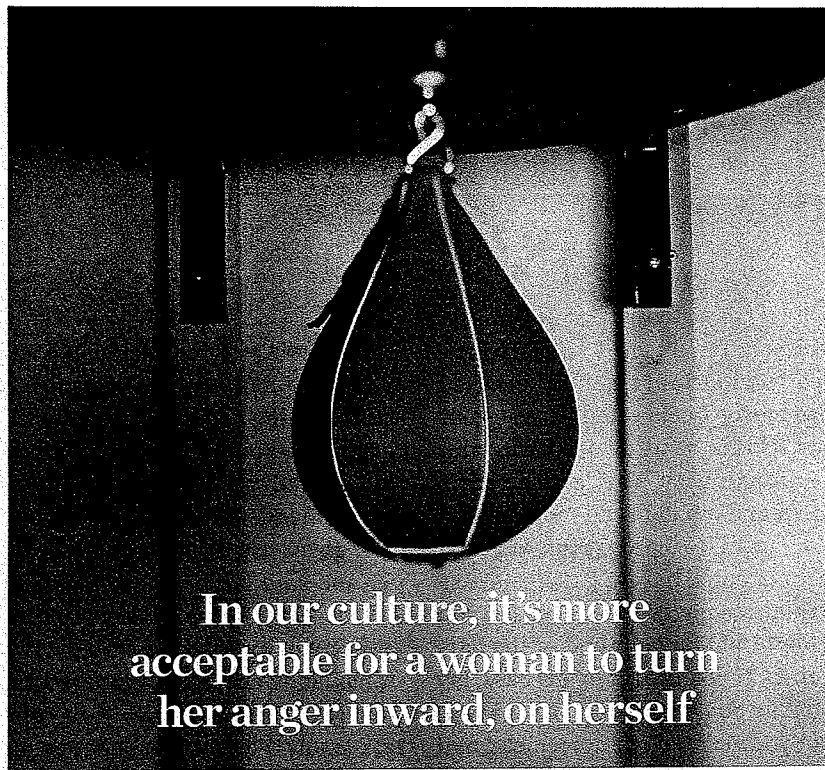
Sometimes, getting good and mad is the best way to handle a tough situation. Here, how to do it right **By Betsy Rapoport**

Somewhere between the rantings of a rageaholic and the pained silence of a wuss who's been wronged, there falls the perfect fit—an expression of anger that's clear, calm, effective, and satisfying. I've seen it done, and it's a beautiful thing.

In fact, I can do it myself. I wasn't able to master getting productively mad until I was well into my 30s; it took years of trial and error and anxiety levels so clenched high that my hair permed itself. These days I'm able not only to air my anger without traumatizing my kids or causing a run on Mylanta stock, but also to help other people express their fury fruitfully. I've coached women who deny that they feel it but launch sneak-attack snarky zingers instead, women who bite their tongues, women who tamp down their anger until they suddenly pop their corks so high that NASA tracks them. And I've come up with a set of instructions, vetted and deepened by experts who've researched the subject of women and anger: →



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**In our culture, it's more acceptable for a woman to turn her anger inward, on herself**

**I** Cop to the reasons why it's hard to get mad. Though I've observed plenty of women practicing safe and sane anger, lots of us can't pull it off (or must regularly relearn the skill). All evidence shows anger to be a naturally occurring, evolutionarily sound emotion, healthy when handled properly, a necessary part of a mature person's emotional repertoire. Furthermore, decades of rigorous research have shown that women are capable of expressing anger just as well—or just as poorly—as men. The landmark 1982 book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, by social psychologist Carol Tavris, Ph.D., digested the research to date and exploded the myth that women couldn't "do" mad: "Of the many studies that have surveyed the kinds and causes of anger, very, very few have uncovered any sex differences," Tavris wrote. "[N]either sex has a 'special difficulty' in expressing anger." Study after study showed that men and women scored nearly identically on the two key questionnaires used by psychologists to measure anger.

And yet negative stereotypes abounded. "An angry man is considered assertive and strong," Tavris concluded back then; "an angry woman is considered bitchy and overbear-

ing." Moreover, she says today, the stereotypes are as pervasive now as when she first reported on them. In a 2008 Yale study, subjects of both sexes were shown videos of other men and women—all actors—rather assertively applying for a job. Male and female viewers reached the same conclusion, reports Yale psychologist and lead researcher Victoria Brescoll, Ph.D.: "Angry men deserved more status and a higher salary, and were expected to be better at the job than angry women. People accept and even reward men who get angry, but view women who lose their temper as less competent. An angry woman loses status, no matter what her position."

When psychologist Deborah L. Cox, Ph.D., and colleagues at Missouri State University conducted research on women and anger in 2005, several subjects reported that they felt ashamed of feeling angry. "They tried to control their anger, hide it, and apologize for it," Cox says. Fear of being labeled with the scarlet "B" for "bitch" can drive us to self-censor or disguise how we really feel—from ourselves and others.

**2** Check for hidden anger Do any of the following sound familiar?

"No, honey, I'm not angry at you, I'm just...disappointed." *Sigh.*

"Never mind. I'm just mad at myself; it's really all my fault."

"Why would I be mad? Say, it sure looks like that cruise agreed with you—hit the midnight buffet a few times, did you?"

"Yes, I know I said I wasn't upset before, but you know what? @\$%@!%@ you!"

Cox and her colleagues identified four "diversion styles" women often use to deal with anger: containment (deliberately holding it in), internalization (turning your anger on yourself, often unconsciously—more acceptable for women than direct expression in our culture), segmentation (denying your own anger, which can turn into passive-aggressiveness, like the nasty weight comment above), and externalization (taking it out on someone else). Anything but simply getting good and mad.

"If anger's an issue for you, becoming more conscious is the first step," Cox says. Recognize that you're angry—not sad, disappointed, or frustrated. Say it to yourself, loud and proud: "I'm angry because \_\_\_\_\_." You might confide in a trusted friend, Cox suggests, or use a physical release—anything from punching a pillow to breathing deeply to taking a brisk walk—to defuse strong feelings in a safe, contained way.

**3** Go face-to-face to make your case When you've pillow-pounded, walked, or exhaled your way to feeling calm, you're ready to speak to the target of your anger. Tavris urges women not to ask themselves, "Should I or shouldn't I express my anger?" but rather, "How do we solve the problem that's making me angry?"

A good, direct approach is a technique suggested by psychologist Lois Frankel, Ph.D., author of *Nice Girls* →

*Don't Get the Corner Office.* First, she says, use "I-messages" ("Here's how I feel"), which let you take ownership of the issue and make it harder for someone to argue with you (a "you-message"—"here's what you did"—can put the other person on the defensive). Muster facts, not emotions, to make your case. Did your coworker take credit for a task the two of you did together? Say, "I was really put out that my name wasn't on the PowerPoint, so I didn't get any credit for our presentation. I thought that showed disrespect for me." Then

## The question isn't "Should I get angry?" It's "How do we solve what's making me angry?"

use what Frankel calls a "tagline"—inclusive language that puts you and the other person on the same side of the problem: "You've heard how I feel; I'd like to hear your input." Now you've got the basis for a discussion. Finally, manage expectations by stating what you want to have happen next time, and the consequences if things don't change: "In the future, please make sure you give me equal credit, or I'll have to think twice about contributing to future projects with you."

This technique works at home, too. Let's suppose you're late for a meeting. You grab your car keys and pick your way across a hall land-mined with your teen's backpack and rumpled jacket and a gym bag exploding with sour-smelling gym clothes. *Grrrrr.* As you turn on the ignition, you see that he's left a flurry of fast-food debris all over the car. Great; he's left the gas tank on empty, too. Again. When you confront him later, he's sprawling across the couch playing *Need For Speed* on Xbox, amid a scattering of Doritos.

Take a deep breath, then try this:

"Listen, I'm upset. I was late for a really important meeting because I had to stop unexpectedly to get some gas. Fill-up, as we decided, was your responsibility. You left the car a mess, and you didn't do your laundry. You and I had an agreement that chores come before games. Please explain to me, is there a reason you didn't hold up your end of the bargain?" If you hear only excuses, lay out the consequences: "I hear you, but you violated our agreement, and that means no Xbox for a week. Next time, I expect you to consider our

agreement and respect that my meetings are as important to me as your video games are to you. And, dude? You just got busted in that pursuit."

**4 Consider the consequences of silence** If you tend to duck or deny confrontation, try to identify what's keeping you silent. "Often it's the fear of not being liked," says Tavis. "But ask yourself what will happen if you don't speak out to make your point and fix the problem. Here's the truth: If suppressing your anger makes you passive-aggressive or withdrawn or hostile—and it most likely will, sooner or later—you're not going to be liked anyway."

Silence is pricey in other ways. Anger mismanagement is unhealthy, research shows, setting you up for weight gain, depression, stress, and heart disease. Internalizing anger can lead to crippling self-blame; holding it in until you explode can also exact a cost in later shame. When we choose not to deal with our anger, says Cox, we hurt our health and lose the chance to solve problems.

**5 Stop the steamroller** If you conquer silence, try all the above steps, and don't quite get the proportions right—your angry roiling erupts into a scalding attack—you've got to make amends immediately. "Don't offer an excuse if you lost your temper and said hurtful things," says Tavis. "Say, 'It was wrong of me to yell at you and say those hurtful things, and I apologize. I'm sorry for what I said.' Then move on: 'I'd like to talk about the problem between us because I'd like to fix that so we can stop having these stupid quarrels that go nowhere.'"

**6 Stay in your own business** And if you execute anger perfectly according to the above suggestions, but it doesn't go over so well? Remind yourself that you can only control what you say; you can't control how others respond. People who want you to be perpetually cheerful may not be thrilled when you change. "And no one likes being criticized or chastised," says Tavis, who coauthored *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*. "People feel dissonance when they see themselves as good, kind, and competent, and they're confronted with evidence that they did something bad, harmful, or incompetent. They're not going to say, 'I'm so grateful for the information.' They're going to say, 'You're wrong. How dare you say this to me!' They're going to justify the mistake they made to preserve their feelings of competence."

When this happens, turn to a trusted sounding board for validation. "You're probably going to need support or a reality check from someone in your corner who can say, 'What you said was the right thing to say,'" says Cox. You can't script the other person's reaction, but you can be satisfied →

that you acted with integrity.

Above all, if you're convinced your concern is legitimate and you've aired your anger respectfully, hold your ground. The best way is simply to listen, says Frankel. "Don't give up your position, don't acquiesce; just acknowledge that you hear what's being said: 'I understand what you're saying, and I'm very sympathetic. At the same time, I need to let you know that this is how we need to move ahead in the future.' Repeat the same message in as many different ways as you can until the other person hears it."

Pitching your fit productively will help you reach your goals with less stress and anxiety, and keep your relationships clean and clear. That's what happened to me. I used to live

in fear that expressing my anger was going to cause my husband to divorce me, my coworkers to vote me off the island, my name to be dropped off the Friends and Family phone plan. I didn't want to be like the pal I'll call Jan, whose carpet-bombing tantrums were cathartic for her but traumatizing for the rest of us—and eventually resulted in her arrest after the unfortunate upending of a department store makeup kiosk. (True story!)

It was a longing for a better relationship with my father that finally persuaded me to confront him about a long-standing issue. I chose a restaurant so that if my hair burst into flames, a waiter could douse it quickly. Then I proceeded to express my

anger clearly and firmly. Dad was... not happy. I stood my ground. He was shocked by my "back talk." I laid out my consequences: We needed to work through this, or we'd have to rethink our relationship. We both trembled at my effrontery. We talked for hours; I managed to shred the corner of a linen napkin. By the end of the evening, though, I think he was as proud of me as I was of myself. The world hadn't ended, my head hadn't exploded, and my father hadn't disowned me. In fact, that night of honest, healthy anger marked the beginning of our much deeper, more loving relationship. ■

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