

The ten basic ingredients for managing dispute in our lives

Considering the lack of education and tolerance of anger in our society, it's no wonder there is such a problem with the management of this powerful feeling. Anger is scary, but the denial of it only makes it stronger. With this in mind, I have created a list of ten basic ingredients required for managing dispute in our lives. These are considerations that you need to understand in order to manage conflict in a more productive way.

Have you noticed that when you get into an angry conflict with someone close to you, at some point during the argument you often discover that actually both of you want the same thing? When you finally say to the other person, 'So what is it that you want from me?', they reply, 'I want you to value and respect me!', and you find yourself saying in return, 'That's exactly what I want from you!' I have found in almost every personal conflict that people basically want the same things; they just have dysfunctional ways of going about getting them. In essence, we all have certain primary needs – such as the need to be loved and the need to be respected – and when these needs are not being met our anger is triggered.

The next time you find yourself in conflict consider the following:

1. We all see and hear the things we want to see and hear.
2. What we assume or take for granted is often incorrect.
3. Happiness is a choice.
4. Conflict is a necessary part of maturing emotionally.
5. It's your choice.
6. You can change.
7. Learning positive strategies to manage anger increases our ability to be intimate.
8. We are all multi-faceted.
9. We all need to feel understood.
10. We all need to communicate.

Let's go through those points in a little more detail.

1. We all see and hear the things we want to see and hear

Rather than seeing and hearing things the way they are, we dissemble, distort and manipulate reality so that it fits in with what we've come to expect. We do this in order to create safety for ourselves in the world, because what we're used to, good or bad, is comfortable for us. Each of us has a very specific experience of reality, made up of our past, our present and our foreseeable future. Your model of reality or subjective experience is certainly not the same as anyone else's. It is important to remember this and to acknowledge and validate each person's individual reality. A common problem for people who have difficulty managing their anger is that they cannot quite accept that people have different realities. Recognising this can often be the first step in dissolving anger. Have you ever wondered why on certain days you can roll with what life throws at you, while on other days you feel as if everything is falling apart? Moment by moment, our capacity to deal with events depends on our emotional state of being. We are all constantly shifting through different states of feeling, whether we are aware of them or not. How, then, can you realistically expect others to be different? Sure, we all have similar needs, wants and desires, but the way we react to them and the way we see our reality depends on the way we are feeling in the moment.

This simple truth is the key to much pain and conflict in our lives. We want people to fit into our own model of subjective reality even though it is not theirs, and we waste a great deal of time and energy trying to convince them that they should be more like us. Meanwhile, they're all trying to do the same! Needless to say, things just don't work this way. The task in managing conflict is to respect other people's world view and to find a way of agreeing to disagree.

2. What we assume or take for granted is often incorrect

In most disputes there are assumptions flying around – and with assumptions come expectations, and with expectations come resentments just waiting to bubble to the surface.

Always do a reality check before making an assumption (remember, when you assume you make an 'ass' of 'u' and 'me'). This also means that when you take someone for granted, you are assuming that their needs are not as important as your own – enough to make anyone angry! Thus it is very important to check out with the other person what they really need and feel in the moment. Take the view that to other people nothing is obvious and be very clear about your own thoughts, feelings, needs and desires. Don't assume that people can read your mind. I often find in my one-to-one work that certain clients expect their partner (or other people close to them) to be a mind-reader; if the partner fails at this, it becomes another bone of contention in the relationship.

Just because our mother may have known how to anticipate our infant needs, it does not mean that anyone else can or will. We certainly shouldn't expect them to. It's important that you are clear about what you want, and that you learn how to ask for it. Making assumptions is essentially immature behaviour and reflects a certain amount of resistance to growing up and taking responsibility for ourselves.

3. Happiness is a choice

This is the title of a wonderful book by Bill Kauthman about his experience of having a child with special needs. In this book he suggests that just because your child has special needs and does not function in the world in the way you want him to, does not mean you have to be unhappy. We can apply this concept to anger management. Just because you are angry with me, it does not mean I have to be angry or unhappy with you. It just means you are angry with me. I do not have to become like you, nor do I have to take responsibility for your anger (although I may empathise or show compassion).

A few years ago, I noticed that when I had seen clients I would often come home in a jolly good mood. When I asked my wife how she was, she would tell me how unhappy she felt because of the challenges of the day, and my mood would change instantly to fit hers. This happened without my even knowing it. Once I had become aware of this, I decided to take note of every time I shifted into another mood gear and try to make a choice to remain happy. And it worked. It was quite hard in the early stages, but eventually I got the hang of it. Your happiness does not depend on

whether those around you are happy or not; it depends on whether you are happy or not. You can make a choice to be happy in the moment, moment by moment, and commit to sticking to this choice. When your spouse or your child or your boss is in a grumpy mood, this does not mean that you also have to be in a grumpy mood; it just means that they are. You can remain in the mood you're in, without having to feel that you are not being sensitive to their needs.

4. Conflict is a necessary part of maturing emotionally

No pain, no gain, so the saying goes. Part of being human is to experience anger and express it accordingly, as with any other feeling. In our early years we face conflict as a natural part of our existence, and our parents or primary carers are either equipped to deal with our anger or not. If carers are themselves not comfortable with conflict, they will either try to shut it down in us or punish us – with the result, in either case, that our relationship to disputes, disagreements, arguments and conflict in general becomes dysfunctional. Thus many of us have come to equate anger and conflict with pain.

If this is the case for you, it is critical that you reframe your relationship to conflict. It is only through facing up to conflict that we can become more intimate with others. If I cannot express my angry feelings towards you, and you cannot express yours towards me, then our ability to be close is stunted by our fear of hurting each other or ourselves. Dr Carl Jung, the founding father of transpersonal psychology, suggests that in order to grow we need something to push against. The task is to push in a way that both determines and increases our self-awareness and consciousness. By being able to communicate our angry feelings we can grow and become more emotionally mature.

Everything depends on how we communicate our feelings. The most effective way I have found of communicating angry feelings in a safe way is by using what I call 'the clearing process'. We will be discussing in a later session

5. It's your choice

You can deal with conflict with a knee-jerk reaction or with a more positive form of learned behaviour. The choice is always yours, even though at times it may not feel

like it. According to behavioural psychologists, all behaviour is learned, even when it feels instinctive and out of control. This means that we can learn to stop ourselves over-reacting and to respond in appropriate and creative ways. We react rather than respond because anger equals pain, and where there is pain, our defence mechanisms kick in involuntarily to avoid it. Until we make the conscious choice to change, all our behaviour will be dominated by reflex reactions. When you find yourself reacting unhelpfully to situations, you need to focus your attention on this self-destructive behaviour pattern and do something about it. The best way to do this is by using the detour method or and the eight golden rules of anger management.

6. You can change

With choice comes the responsibility of sticking with it. Ask yourself, ‘Do I want to make changes in my life or do I just want to pay lip service to the healing process?’ In order to change you have to really want to. If you simply want to read a book on anger management for the sake of reading, well, that’s fine, but if you have an anger problem and you are serious about dealing with it, my suggestion would be that you really take your time with this course and do all the exercises and tasks thoroughly. Investing time and energy in understanding your behaviour will increase your capacity to develop more choices in your life, so enabling you to change destructive and self-defeating behaviours. The knowledge that you can change will help to bring value and meaning to your life and the lives of those around you and will also increase your self esteem.

7. Learning positive strategies to manage anger increases our ability to be intimate

Managing anger is all about supporting ourselves in learning to reduce the number of times we find ourselves in reaction to events and situations and to increase the number of times we can respond in healthy, respectful ways towards others generally. By being less reactive you will reduce the amount of stress you experience, thus becoming more relaxed and happy – and you will live longer for it. Learning how to respond effectively will make you more popular. People will love to be around you. Rather than feeling afraid of you because of your inconsistent and threatening behaviour, people will want to be closer to you. Of course, to reach this stage takes guts, perseverance, discipline and a commitment to your own wellbeing and

emotional health, but it is possible. Many people before you have done it, and you can do it too.

8. We are all multi-faceted

Each one of us is unique in the way that we respond to situations. Moreover, none of us responds to the same situation in the same way all the time. We need to respect our own and others' complexity. This is often where we become stuck – we assume that people are going to remain constant. Remember that the only thing that is constant is our inconsistency. Our reactions to situations is determined by many factors, including our personal history. I myself have changed a remarkable amount over the past 18 years. For example, I never used to get angry when someone arrived late to a meeting or workshop; in recent years, however, this has started to annoy me. This has to do with my discovery that lateness can sometimes be a passive-aggressive act and is to do with holding oneself accountable and having respect for other people.

9. We all need to feel understood

One of our primary needs is to be understood (we will be exploring more about primary needs later in the course). Feeling that they are misunderstood can make some people go ballistic! From a very young age we cry in order to get attention. Consider the petulant teenager: most of his or her gripes are about not being understood or taken seriously.

The problem for us as adults is that if we don't understand ourselves, we can't expect others to understand us. And why don't we understand ourselves? This is a controversial subject, but I believe we are simply never taught to understand ourselves. In my view, the school system is based not on fostering personal growth or developing potential but on creating more worker bees for trade and industry. To grease the wheels of capitalism. If you teach people about personal power, they derive meaning from who they are, not from what they do for a living or how much money they have. So promoting self-understanding is not a priority for educationalists or governments. When I work with personal growth groups, teenagers and adults alike, a common response is, 'How come we are not taught these basic life skills in school?' The task is to understand who you are and what makes you tick. Through understanding yourself, you take back the power that you have given away. This book

will help you gain insight into your own potential and show you how bringing your anger under control makes you more powerful, not less.

10. We all need to communicate

Learning how to communicate your feelings and needs is part of taking responsibility for yourself. When you are bound up in past hurts, it is almost impossible to communicate your feelings to others; everything that emerges from your mouth will be designed to wound the other person. Rather than speaking from this place, try to communicate when you are in your 'adult' state. This means at a time when you are able to think clearly, remain objective and avoid flying off the handle or bulldozing the other person despite the strength of your feelings. When we are in an adult state, we avoid taking things personally, and we are sensitive and receptive to those around us. Conversely, when we are in a child-like state, we are volatile and behave as if no one else exists other than us. (For more on this subject see page 80). In other words, if you do not feel able to communicate from your adult self, you need to take time out until you do.

Once you are ready to communicate, the other person needs to know:

- How you feel
- What you think
- What you want and need
- That you are willing to take responsibility for your own behaviour
- That you are willing to listen to them and see their side of the story

Most of us will readily agree that it is vitally important to be able to communicate effectively, and yet for many of us communication is very difficult. Learning this crucial skill is a key task in emotional literacy. This course will provide you with some tools to begin the process of communicating more clearly.

As you work through this course you will discover many tools and skills that will help you to put flesh on the bones of the ten basic ingredients. Before you move on in this task, take a moment to congratulate yourself. You have already taken the first steps

towards managing your anger; gaining control of your life; and finding greater self-esteem, confidence and strength for the journey ahead.

Exercise:

Out of all these 10 points which are the points which you most need to work on and in order to work on these points who can you get to support you through the process, knowing that each of these points are vital and critical to your healing.

To remind you of the 10 key points again:

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EXERCISE:

Have a conversation about these ten points with people in your support network, you will find that each person you speak to will either agree or disagree, explore how you feel about these ten points with others in your network. You might discover something meaningful about yourself and others that you no know before. Go ahead and have fun with this process.

Make notes in your journal regarding this process