Twelve ways to deal with angry people

Dealing with angry people can be downright debilitating and exhausting. Without any doubt – anger brings an enormous amount of suffering. Not only to the one who’s expressing it but also to everyone who’s in its path. Like wildfire, it can consume friendships and burn merits that took years to accumulate. It is said that it can take years of hard work to build a house but one single spark can burn it down in minutes. Ancient wisdom traditions, especially Buddhism, invites us to take matters into our hands and look deeply into the nature of our mind in order to find the true source of our suffering. Buddha’s advice on how to deal with angry people is simple, profound and involves three steps:

1. Examine your own mind
2. Examine the mind of other person
3. Use skillful means to make peace.

**Examine your own response to anger**

Do you spark up like a Chinese firecracker in response to other people’s anger? For example, do you tend to shout in response to someone shouting at you? If yes then I have a surprise for you. Years of researching, working with my own anger issues and studying Eastern philosophy has led me to one stark realization - the best way to deal with angry and difficult people is to work on our own anger. The fact that someone was able to “make me angry” felt like that person could control me. Being an independent person, that gave me the backbone to start looking deeper into the root causes of my own anger and take full responsibility for it. Only after I was able to cope with my own fiery emotions I was able to gain more mental clarity to deal with other people’s problems.

**Examine the driving force behind the anger of the other person**

When your own emotions are in check, then you will have the clarity to deal with other people’s anger. Even better, when you have a surplus of patience and mindfulness you will not be affected by “their” anger and you can then actually help them. Generally, angry and difficult people have a lot of resentment and discontent. They like to take it out on others. They are usually insecure, confused in life and hide their weaknesses under the façade of cunning comments. They can also be in a lot of physical or mental pain and/or have simply run out of patience to deal with life’s challenges.
Understand what anger is. Learn everything about it so that it is not a mystery to you. Understanding what makes people tick is an incredibly empowering experience.

**Twelve ways**

1. **Relinquish any hope that you can control other people’s behavior.** Simply let go of that idea entirely. With some people, there is just no way to make them happy anyways. They are angry when they get what they want, they are angry when they do not. They often blame others and make them the cause of their anger rather than assume responsibility for their own misery. Anger can be a habit. The only person who can change that it is the owner, not you. You can not work out their anger issues, just make peace with this. You can only encourage them.

2. **Protect yourself from being hurt physically but do not be afraid of anger itself.** Anger is a baby's cry in adult language. It is a sign that someone is hiding a weakness, lost control, feels inadequate, threatened and is driven by fear. When dealing with angry people, always try to figure out what is feeding their anger. If you understand the source, you can be much more creative at dealing with it.

3. **If you know its coming – prepare yourself.** A fascinating new research from a team of Stanford researchers shows that the state of mind in which a person listens to an angry outburst has a big effect on whether or not they actually get upset. A common anger management technique I teach here is to view an angry person through a different lens. So if someone is yelling at you, you might tell yourself that they have just received some bad news and are now taking it out on you, or maybe it is just their Mount Kilimanjaro size ego talking or perhaps they are simply overwhelmed by their responsibilities or events taking place in their life.

   The Stanford research shows that this technique also works before the angry outburst has even begun. They call this pre-emptive action the “re-appraisal.” They concluded that “Emotional processing proceeds from the front to the back of the brain, and the reappraisal is generated in the front of the brain and proceeds toward the back, where it modifies emotional processing. If you are trained in reappraisal, and you know your boss is frequently in a bad mood, you can prepare yourself to go into a meeting. He can scream and yell and shout, but there will be nothing.” In basic terms: The researchers found that “reappraising” – in effect, making excuses for the angry person and expecting them to get angry – was able to reduce negative emotions when faced with the nasty situation later on.

4. **Practice being unaffected.** This is very very hard but even if you are freaking out inside, stay gentle and keep a kind tone. Stay cool. **Breath deep into your abdomen.** Do not sob, do not cry, be strong and do not let them get to you. Anger feeds on other people’s power. It is an ego trip at its worst. There is nothing more confusing to the angry person than sensing that his anger does not affect you. I mean subconsciously the mind freaks out. Anger feeds on submission, on ridicule. When the feeling of having the power to belittle someone is missing anger subsides. The angry person himself may even start feeling stupid for their behaviour. It really is like this. So remain calm.
5. **Pick your battles.** Do not try to get your point across or prove your truth to someone who’s drunk with anger. They are just not rational at this stage. Wait it out till they calm down, then find a spot for an intelligent dialogue and sneak your point across when they least expect it. You got to be smarter and have a strategy. I would like to make one exception for acting “civil.” When you witness someone physically abusing another being (especially a lady or a child), please feel free to punch them in a blooming nose if you can. Sometimes you just have to. In some desperate cases the only way to interrupt one’s rage is to send them into a shock or physically disabling their ability to inflict damage onto themselves or others. The key here is to do it without anger and with least amount of damage.

6. **Aknowldege their anger.** “I can see you are angry.” Acknowledging their feelings is a kind thing to do and do not worry, it is not the same as validating their anger. Saying “I understand how you feel,” is not the same as “You have good reasons to feel like this.” By relating the fact that you know how they feel opens the gates for a mature conversation.

7. **Leave them be**, give them space to cool off. If they are not wise enough to do this then you do it. Do it before you get in a heated argument and exchange lots of hurtful words. Its kind of like putting a fire out on a match rather than the barn.

8. **Use others to confront them.** Angry people are just like drunkards, many of them do not realize the kind of damage they wreak while they are on their mental trips. Find a moment when they are calm and even in a good mood. Then bring a family member or two and confront the person kindly. The reason you do not want to do it alone is because it may look like you have personal issues. However if you have allies to help you address your concerns, they will more likely accept this as their issue.

9. **Set your boundaries** and enforce them. As described in detail in a previous post about personal boundaries, this is one of the most effective anger management techniques. Make sure you are firm and set up consequences if this gets out of control, for example all the family moves leaves him for a few days. These are not easy options but this is not an easy problem as well.

10. **Write a letter.** The thing is, if you try to talk to him he will interrupt you, you will get flustered and not say what you want to say so write a letter. Sit down, think things through and write from your heart.

11. **Make an inventory of everything that makes them angry.** *What? Why?* Let me explain. Most angry people will blame you or others for their anger. Start secretly making a list of everything that “brings the anger on.” Seriously, go for it. It is fun too. You will be surprised how many and how ridiculous most of those things are. Then present the list to the angry person and ask them if this is all and whether you got this right. Ask them whether they think that other people would agree with these as reasonable reasons to get all pissed off and bothered if you printed this on a large canvas and posted it at the bus stop. It will be an eye opening experience for them.