

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

As a youngster, I was taught that expressing anger was “unladylike” and never acceptable. This lesson has followed me like a curse. My doctor tells me that my hypertension, ulcers, and stress are aggravated by “stuffing my feelings” all the time. That may be true, but what can I do about it now. I’m almost seventy years old?

-- Angela

Dear Angela,

Your doctor is correct. Unexpressed emotions – especially anger – can have significant, negative effects on health. A recent study reported in early 2003 by the Harvard School of Public Health suggested that the moderate and appropriate expression of anger seems to have a protective effect against developing cardiovascular disease and stroke. We suffer far more from anger itself, than from the things that caused us to feel angry in the first place.

Regardless of our age, we are all capable of creating meaningful transformations in our lives. It may be more difficult to make changes when we’ve lived a lifetime a self-defeating behaviors and beliefs, but it is certainly possible. Humans are remarkably adaptive creatures, and as Charles Darwin once reminded us, “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

Remember that your life is not written in stone, it is a work in progress. Believe that you can change, and then you can set out to live those changes. It may be helpful to talk about your feelings with your women friends. You may be surprised to find how many of them were given this same kind of admonishment about expressing anger. You can offer comfort and support to one another as you make changes in this aspect of your lives. It may also help to work with a counselor or therapist who can help guide you toward your goals.

Like many women, especially in your generation, you’ve been told that anger is an unacceptable emotion and should never be expressed. This is an irrational goal. Every human being feels anger from time to time. It is a natural and normal emotion. You cannot choose to never feel anger. You will feel anger, the question is, “how will you express this emotion?”

Of all our emotions, anger seems most likely to make people uncomfortable. Perhaps that’s because so few of us have learned how to express it constructively. Let me assure you that there is a wide range of behaviors between stuffing all your anger inside and lashing out like a marauding Vlad the Impaler.

The healthy, constructive demonstration of anger is one in which you show both respect for the person who has angered you, and respect for yourself and your right to express your feelings. Don’t project anger caused by the collapse of your financial security in the stock market on your neighbor who forgot to return the book you loaned her. Make certain that your anger is being expressed to whom it belongs.

It is also best to be specific and stay on point. Avoid name-calling, insults, bringing up past anger and hurts, and, of course, physical violence. Don't say, "I hate you!!!!" Instead, use "I" statements that describe how you feel: "I feel angry when you don't listen to me."

These are just a few ideas about a complex subject. There are lots of good books and other resources about how to "fight fair" and express anger in healthy ways and it will help to become familiar with some of these.

Most important, recognize that you are entitled to your feelings and the right to communicate them. Anger, when expressed with respect and honesty, has the power of authenticity with our friends and families. We're being truthful when we reveal what is in our hearts, and there is no reason that anger has to damage our health, or our relationships.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) All of the "Your Personal Coach" columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.