



Anger Is Not the Problem¹

by Paul Kivel

WHEN WE LOOK AT MEN'S LIVES and the effects of our actions on those around us, it can look like anger is the problem. But anger is not the problem, violence is. It is a tragedy that we have been trained to turn pain into anger and anger into violence. We need to harness, work with, and use our misdirected violence and self-destructive anger to rebuild our lives and change our communities.

Anger does not have to be destructive. It can be a guide to injustice, a clue to powerlessness. Anger can excite, mobilize, and bring us together. It is a touchstone of our deepest sense of truth and rightness. It lets us know when we're getting ripped off or when we've compromised too much. Anger can be the force behind revolution, consciousness-raising, pride, and community building.

We have been taught to fear anger because we associate it with violence. It is scary. Therefore, when we feel angry ourselves, we get scared. We might stop it, stuff it, laugh it off, or pretend it doesn't matter.

We like to think of ourselves as nice guys. We want people to like us. We often say yes to requests when we really want to say no. We often say no to our needs when we really should say yes. The result is that we are constantly building up anger and resentment because we are taking care of others and not ourselves—our needs are not getting met.

Most of the time we pretend to ourselves and to those around us that we are not really angry. But there comes a time when we can't take any more. Then the anger explodes out of us in loud and frightening ways. After the explosion we are so scared that we clamp down again, try harder not to get angry, and begin another cycle.

The power and strength of our anger are frightening because we don't have models of men who

- get angry without becoming abusive or violent;

¹ Adapted from *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart* (Hazelden, 1998).



- can express a range of feelings, including anger;
- communicate their wants and needs effectively in nonthreatening ways.

We can become models of men who do these things.

As men we have two crucial tasks before us in order to use anger powerfully and not abusively. The first is to separate anger from the many other feelings we were never allowed to express. We need to acknowledge, feel, and express the love, caring, sadness, hurt, dismay, affection, gentleness, and hope we carry with us. As we separate these feelings from the anger, the second task becomes understanding where our anger comes from, what we can do about it, and how we can express it in positive ways.

We have been taught to expect women to take care of us, to nurture and support us in the ways our mothers were supposed to. It is easy to blame women and to project our anger onto them. We might feel they've caused our pain and hurt. Women, we must recognize, don't have this kind of power in our lives. Not blaming them, and not blaming ourselves as well, are part of dealing with anger and recognizing where its roots lie.

Another part is learning to express and talk through anger with the people around us. This means staying connected when we're angry instead of walking away, getting busy, withdrawing, or distracting attention away from the issues that divide us. We must also learn to listen as well as speak to each other. And speaking here means from the heart and mind. We must learn to compromise, give and take, and look for inclusive, more complex solutions. Patience, respect, courage, empathy, perseverance, and commitment are some of the virtues we need to develop for this to work.

Expressing anger fully, directly, and in a nonthreatening way is not easy. We need to know when to blow off steam, walk away, ask for a time-out. A good time-out might be to say to your partner, "I'm too angry to continue. I'm going to take a thirty-minute time-out to walk or talk with a friend so I can come back and continue talking with you without resorting to violence." Then use the time-out to relax or distract yourself or think about the interaction, but not to feed or build your anger. Doing something physical or being alone is necessary before we can continue talking. We also need to distinguish feelings of anger from physical restlessness, tension, or the need for sexual affection and expression. Sometimes dancing, playing sports, or shouting is all we need to do to get over our



anger. Other times we may need to hold someone or be held, to touch and talk intimately.

These are skills we can learn and bring to our everyday lives. At the end of this chapter are exercises that illustrate a variety of approaches and some useful starting places.

When we can clear away our other needs, stay with our anger without resorting to violence or blame, and express a full range of feelings, then we can move on to deal with the causes of our anger. This involves identifying the deeper sociopolitical problems that need community attention. Through concerted effort we can find ways to work cooperatively for change. Poor working conditions and low pay, lack of support for parenting, poor housing, poor educational systems, racial and sexual violence in our own past and in our communities, female and male role expectations—these are some of the things that cause pain, despair, anger, and violence. We can develop skills for working with others to eliminate the institutional sources of our anger.

Social change is slow, and the lack of response to our efforts can itself produce more anger and frustration. But if we focus on the work that we can do, we can turn that frustration into determination, that despair into hope. Everywhere in our society people guided by their anger are making changes in their own lives and in their communities.

As men we can use our anger to guide us in constructing a more just society. Or we can continue to use it to destroy ourselves and those around us. We each have that choice to make. We need to remember that anger is not the cause of violence.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.