Expressing Your Emotions

Bottling up feelings

How we go about dealing with our emotions has been shown to be very important when it comes to modifying the risk of developing heart problems. This is especially relevant when we consider anger.

Anger and hostility can show itself in many ways. Often people who bottle up anger can become very critical and cynical. Some people can even become rather withdrawn or depressed.

Bottling up feelings, especially anger, has been found to have all sorts of negative effects on our systems. In general, it is most healthy to express your feelings and least healthy to suppress them. Suppressing anger and other strong feelings can be like building up pressure inside a pressure cooker. Sooner or later, if you don’t release the pressure, there’s going to be an ‘explosion’.

Although suppressing anger and stewing on things can be bad for the heart, that doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily a good idea to get into verbal or physical fights. It is often the case that, if you become aggressive towards someone else, then they are likely to respond in an equally aggressive way (which is likely to result in you feeling even angrier!).

So, it’s much healthier to find alternative ways of expressing and dealing with your angry feelings.

Acceptance

First of all, it is important to accept what we are feeling. Sometimes people can deny to themselves or others that they are feeling a particular emotion. This is perhaps because emotions can feel frightening or painful or embarrassing. Emotions that are denied or ignored are not likely to go away. Instead, they remain with us and can lead to increased stress on our system.

It is important to acknowledge and accept what we are feeling in order that we can begin to deal with our feelings. Some people feel that hiding and controlling feelings show strength. However, in a way it is much more courageous and strong to admit to our feelings and give ourselves the opportunity to express these feelings.

Dealing with anger

When it comes to dealing with anger, it is helpful to think in terms of the 5 C’s:

Communicating
Confronting
Controlling
Channelling
Calming
Communicating

Perhaps the best way of dealing with any feeling is to communicate it directly; to express how you are feeling and what has led to you feeling that way.

Of course, it is helpful to think through to whom you are going to express your feelings, where you are going to express them and when you are going to express them. Sometimes, expressing your feelings right there and then can be most helpful. At other times, it can be useful to take time to think through what you are feeling and thinking and to look for opportunities to express your feelings when you are likely to be supported by family, friends or colleagues.

With angry feelings, it may be most useful to communicate your anger clearly and directly to the person to whom you are feeling this anger. Be aware that they are not making you angry. Rather, you are feeling angry about something that they have or haven’t done. In other words, your own feelings.

There may be times when it is not possible or appropriate to express your anger directly. For example, sometimes we can feel angry about things that nobody in particular has any responsibility for. Alternatively, we may judge that the costs of expressing our anger directly (e.g. to our boss) may outweigh the benefits. At such times, it can be helpful to find opportunities to “sound off” to others. We can do this at home, or at work or down the pub. The important thing is that we allow ourselves to express how we really feel.

Confronting

In many circumstances when we are feeling angry, we may find ourselves having opportunities to do something about the cause of our anger. A good way of dealing with anger is to confront the problem.

Anger can be an extremely useful emotion if we learn to harness it. It can spur us into action. So, take the time to consider what you are feeling angry about. What options are available to you to deal with the problem? How have you dealt with similar problems in the past? How would you like to deal with the problem? What do other people do in similar situations? What advice would you give to other people in similar situations? It might help to talk the situation through with others.

Having considered all this, plan a course of action and then carry it through. Allow yourself enough flexibility to alter your plan of action if you discover ways of making it even more effective.

Often, confronting the causes of our anger can be a really useful way of using our anger. It can help us to feel effective and in control of our life.
Controlling

There are times when we can find ourselves feeling “on a short fuse” and “ready to blow” when it is just not appropriate to give vent to our angry feelings. It may be that we find ourselves getting annoyed at something trivial or insignificant (often this suggests that we are really feeling angry about something else). Alternatively, it might be that the costs of expressing our feelings outweigh the benefits of expressing them (for example, we’ll end up getting the sack) or we are not sure that we can express our feelings in a clear or constructive way.

There are times, therefore, when it is helpful, at least for the immediate moment, to control our feelings. There are a variety of techniques for doing this, some of which are described in the information sheet on “Relaxation and Self-Calming”.

Channelling

There are certain circumstances when it is not possible or appropriate to either to vent our angry feelings directly or to deal with the circumstances that have given rise to our anger. In such situations, some people find it useful to channel their anger in other directions. For some, this is done through vigorous physical activity, such as sports, gardening or housework. For others, it is done through giving voice to their feelings, for example singing or yelling. For others, it is done through safe forms of hitting out, such as punching a pillow or hitting a chair.

The helpful thing about channelling is that we are acknowledging that we feel angry and we are expressing our anger, but we are expressing it in a controlled manner.

Channelling can be a helpful way of letting off steam from time to time. It is important not to over-use this approach, however. Among the dangers of over-using channelling is that we might avoid dealing with the sources of our angry feelings or that we miss the opportunity to stand back and put things in perspective.

Calming

It is possible, over time, to develop a calmer and more relaxed approach to life. For example, find ways of taking some of the stress out of your life. Take time out for relaxation and develop strategies for managing stress.

People find all sorts of different ways of taking a more “laid back” approach to their lives. For some, it is through more formal techniques, such as yoga, medication, acupuncture or aromatherapy. For others, it is through taking a more detached perspective, standing back from some of the sources of stress and weighing up what really matters to them. For others, it is using their sense of humour to see the funny side of things.

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