

Why Do We All Struggle With Anger?

Chip Ingram and Dr. Becca Johnson

After a long workday of early morning meetings, several “crises,” and an evening meeting, I (Chip) was looking forward to getting home to be with my wife, Theresa. She’s my best friend, my counselor. I really wanted to talk with her, to feel connected, to find out about her feelings and her day, and to share with her some things going around in my head. I wanted to bounce some ideas off her, get her thoughts, find out how the kids were doing, and just be together.

Perhaps we’d have a cup of tea or coffee and enjoy a good conversation. She’d give me a big hug and say, “It’s okay. God’s big, and I love you,” and all that other stuff I want to hear. I was also thinking that I hadn’t been able to spend much time with my son, Ryan, and he’s always fun. And my little girl, Annie, would be excited about reading some new books. I hoped to get home in time to hear about some of them.

I got home around 9:15 p.m., and the house was already dark. Very dark. Everyone was in bed. I tiptoed into the bedroom, thinking Theresa was probably lying there in the dark waiting for me so we could have a good talk. But she wasn’t waiting for anything; she was sound asleep. I went to Plan B and headed for Ryan’s room, but he was out too. And by this time, Annie had long been asleep. I felt hurt. Lonely. Sad. I didn’t get to process things. I needed someone to be there for me, but no one was. My head told me I was wrong to expect them to stay awake all the time waiting for me. After all, they didn’t know I really needed them that evening. But my heart ached. I was hurt.

So what did I do? I got mad. Mad at my family for not being there for me. Mad at my crazy week. Just mad. I went to bed and took my anger with me. And I’ve found over the years that when I go to bed with a little anger, if I haven’t resolved it before I sleep, it grows.

When I got up the next morning, I still had that edge. But I wasn’t aware of it. I didn’t make the connection between my hurt feelings turning to anger the night before and my bad mood the next morning. I got dressed, walked out into the hall, saw my daughter. “Annie,” I said sharply, “go make your bed!”

“But, honey, she just got up,” Theresa said.

“I don’t care if she just got up or not. Make your bed! And Ryan, have you done your chores yet? Have you had your quiet time?”

“Dad, I just . . .,” Ryan stammered.

Then I wrapped it up: “Hey, if the morning is going to be like this, forget it. I’m going to the office. I’ve got a lot to do.”

I went out, got in the car, and shut the door. *No one appreciates me*, I thought. *No one is there for me*. After fuming for several minutes, I finally admitted to myself that I was angry. Then I remembered what I’ve been saying about anger being a secondary emotion and asked myself, “What’s going on? Why am I feeling so angry?” I realized I was feeling hurt, lonely, and disappointed.

The Holy Spirit prompted me with that still small voice: “Well, what are you going to do about it, Chip? Are you going to just drive away and not deal with it?” Finally, after at least ten minutes, I got out of the car and went inside. I apologized to all three members of my family individually.

Although this event happened nearly ten years ago, I remember it as if it took place yesterday. It was one of the first times I ever connected my anger to the deeper, unresolved issues in my heart.

It’s easier to be angry than to face the deeper issues. It’s vitally important to understand anger is the outside emotion sent to protect the inner, more sensitive aspects of our hearts. It’s a secondary response that hides a deeper or more sensitive issue. If we grasp this point, we’ll be well on our way to dealing with anger in constructive ways. When we feel angry, we need to ask ourselves, “*Why* am I feeling this way?” Anger isn’t the first feeling to come, though it’s generally the first one to show outwardly. Wherever it surfaces, another emotion already existed.

When I (Becca) was very late to pick up my son from school, I got mad at the clock, the school, the traffic lights, my watch, and the school’s schedule before I finally admitted the real issue: that I was embarrassed that the school secretary had to call me. When a client of mine got mad at his boss, he realized that the strong underlying emotions were really insecurity and fear, not anger. When I got mad at a driver who made a visual gesture at me, I later realized that the root feeling was guilt because I had pulled out too far and was dangerously blocking traffic. When I got angry at a colleague for not including me on a decision, I discovered hurt pride underneath. If you and I are honest with ourselves and brave enough to peel back the anger, we can discover its true motivating force.

When people abandon us, when they let us down, when someone doesn’t come through, when we feel rejected, left out, lonely, sad, or sorrowful, we generally cover it up with anger. Because these emotions are so strong, painful, and confusing, anger serves as a more satisfying substitute. What did Cain do? Did he face feeling sad, rejected, and jealous? No. Instead, he acted on his anger and killed his brother Abel. Anger artificially helps us feel in control when we’re feeling out-of-control and falsely helps us feel powerful when we feel powerless.

Anger is not the problem; it's the warning light. Anger is like the red warning light that comes on the dashboard of your car. Our error is that we tend to view the problem as the light rather than what it's indicating. Even if we take the dashboard apart and replace the bulb, the problem is still there. It's still red! Why? There's something wrong with the car, not with the light.

This secondary emotion tells you something is wrong under the *emotional* hood, under the *spiritual* hood, or under the *relational* hood of your life. Most of us spend too much time trying to figure out how we can get rid of our anger when we should be asking ourselves, "What's going on inside that's making me angry?" To resolve your anger, you'll need to identify the root reason for it.

Anger is the light on the dashboard that signals that something is wrong under the hood. It's the way we protect ourselves from hurt, frustration, and insecurity. It has positive potential, but if it goes unchecked, it also has negative ramifications.

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