

## THE THIRD CHOICE TECHNIQUE- HOW TO MANAGE OUR ANGER

Arlene F. Norsym

University of Illinois at Chicago  
Chicago, Illinois

### Introduction

Many of us have gone through life encountering situations that make us angry and feeling powerless to resolve them in satisfactory ways. Often we believe we have two choices - and we hate them both! We either explode in someone's face and suffer the (usually unhappy) consequences; or stuff our anger down, which is the unacceptable choice women often make. Many of us have been struggling with the same anger issues for a long time.

But, there is good news. We've had a third choice all along; we just never knew it existed. We didn't know because anger management techniques are not taught in school. They are not taught at home either because our parents were never taught how to manage their anger. Worse yet, we have become a society that denies anger. In fact, we often feel guilty for feeling angry. Given this scenario, very few of us have developed effective techniques for dealing with the legitimate anger we experience from time to time. Consider this early life experience...

You are sitting in the sandbox playing happily alone. Another child reaches over and takes your shovel. That makes you angry; you want your shovel; you take it back. What typically happens? Some well intention adult blames YOU for being angry. And if you complain the standard response is: "'Now, Nancy, don't be angry; nice people share their toys. Say you're sorry.'"

We call this anger management in America. It could make a kid nuts; it often does. We go through life living on other people's terms, swallowing our anger, feeling it is inappropriate to put ourselves first, and wonder why we end up talking to ourselves.

### An Epidemic of Violence

There are very serious consequences to our lack of skill in managing anger. Read any newspaper and it immediately becomes clear that there is an epidemic of violence in this world. Whether it is the spectacular horrific bombing of innocent people, or the never-reported child abuse we suspect is occurring next door, in some way, each of us has been touched by violence. What causes it? Could it be that there is a connection between violence and out of control anger? There can be no violence without anger.

Once we learn more about anger, come to see it as an emotion like any other and discover some choices we did not know we had, we will find it easier to find solutions to life's anger-provoking situations. In fact, we can learn to use these occasions to grow on and get the bonus of increasing our self-respect in the process.

### What is This Thing Called Anger?

Unfortunately the word "anger" has taken on dark connotations once applied to another "scarlet" letter. We use all kinds of euphemisms to avoid uttering it; we are annoyed, miffed, pissed, ticked-off, frustrated, burned, furious, ...but we are NEVER angry. We have gone on generation after generation, learning techniques that do not compute, and passing them on with the best of intentions, since it is all we know. We must do better. Let's start with some definitions.

**ANGER** is "an emotional response to a grievance". It is neither a weakness nor a crime. It is merely unpleasant. The grievance we suffer can be real or imaginary, but in either case, the anger is valid. **SUPER ANGER** is anger in the present which is compounded by anger from the past. It is out of proportion to the precipitating factor and often arises from a perceived similarity between the current situation and an unresolved anger problem. Super anger cannot be managed. Our goal is to reduce it to anger, which can be managed. The first step is to validate the anger. **MISCHIEF** is "that which does not need to be done". Mischief can range from practical jokes to "good intentions" to all varieties of violent behavior. It can be perpetrated by anyone from the age of six months to 96 years. It makes us angry. Once we learn to recognize mischief, we can tailor our responses more precisely. We will not get angry so often and will lessen the damage that might otherwise result when we do.

**DISENGAGE** is what we do when we become aware someone is perpetrating mischief at our expense. Instead of defending, protesting, explaining, cajoling, we do the unexpected. **SELF RESPECT** has a very precise definition. It is the feeling that "I am a worthwhile human being in spite of my faults and imperfections". Self Respect includes feelings of trust in our judgment, competence, confidence, maturity, security, identity, equality, independence, liberation, courage, being in control, accomplishment, success, serenity, and belonging. Self Respect should not to be confused with self-esteem, an estimation. Self Respect is earned. We earn it by learning to manage our - and others' - anger. It is in these moments that we are changed.

### The Objects of Anger

Anger does not exist in a vacuum. There is a subject - you, or the person who is angry at you, and there are objects. The five objects of anger are: Our Anger at Him; His Anger at Us; Our Anger at the Absent Other; Our Anger at the Deity; Our Anger at Ourselves. As we come to accept that anger as a legitimate emotion, we lose our fear of addressing it. When someone's behavior causes us a grievance, we will have the courage to bring it to their attention. So, what Third Choices do we have?

### Our Anger at Him

What do we do now when we are angry at someone? Shout, cry, slam doors, swear, walk away, throw something, take it out on someone else, over eat or drink. All of these techniques are equally ineffective. Even if we get some temporary relief, when we calm down, we find the problem has not gone away. What's the Third Choice?

The next time someone makes you angry, consider doing the unexpected, consider **telling the truth**. **"It makes me angry when you do that."** Usually they know it will. Consciously or unconsciously they have planned it that way. What reaction do you suppose your new response might get? It is likely (after recovering from the shock) they will deflect you by some clever remark such as: "Tough!"; "So What!"; "You're Always Angry". They don't know anything about anger either. Now, however, you are prepared.

How does their "deflection" make you feel? Even more angry! **So, you tell the truth again.** **"Now you've made it worse; I'm even more angry than I was before."** They usually get it on the second bounce and just might stop and begin a dialogue. This is a necessary first step to securing their cooperation on the basis of mutual respect.

### His Anger at Us

Given the fact that we are imperfect human beings, something we do, may, from time to time, cause someone else to become angry at us. What are some typical responses we employ now? We defend ourselves as if we are guilty, go to pieces, try to make them understand, walk away, get angry back, etc. These responses tend to make the situation worse, not better.

When someone is angry, they are in emotional pain. If they were bleeding, you'd know where to put the band-aid. Is there some emotional first-aid we can apply? Is there a Third Choice we didn't know we had? Yes, the emotional first aid we employ when someone is angry is to **Validate, Validate, Validate**, in that order. We say something like, **"I'm sorry you're so angry."** **"If that happened to me, I would be angry too."** **"I don't blame you for feeling that way."**

Why three? The first is to validate the other person's anger; they have experienced a grievance, whether real or imagined, and it hurts! Giving someone permission to be angry validates this emotion - perhaps for the first time in their life. The second validation is to validate the individual as a person in spite of his human imperfections, one of which is that he happens to feel angry at the moment. Your validation reassures him that you will not abandon him. The third validation is for you. You have faced anger and managed it. Now you are both more able to cooperate to resolve the issue.

If you actually did do something to cause the other person's anger, validate their anger first then make a sincere offer to make amends... **"I am really sorry that what I did made you angry; I don't blame you for feeling that way; what can I do to make up for it?"** If, however, you suspect that their anger is caused by something other than the immediate situation, you have a different Third Choice. It is still very important to validate their anger - just don't take it personally. Remember, "I'm sorry" is an expression of regret, not guilt. They are angry and in pain and you regret that it is occurring. But, since you now know what is going on, you can disengage from their mischief and say, **"I'm sorry you're**

so angry; if I saw the situation that way I would feel angry too; but the truth is....." . Or, "I'm sorry you're so angry; if I saw the situation that way I would feel angry too; could it be you perceived victimization where no victimization was intended?"

### Our Anger at an Absent Other and Our Anger at God

These two topics are shown together because they concern those to whom we do not have ready access. What is to be done with feelings of anger, frustration, powerlessness, etc. toward them? What do we do now? Hold a grudge for fifty years; badmouth them to everyone else; give ourselves ulcers, or worse? If we do not deal with this pent up anger, we may find ourselves returning to the painful feelings associated with earlier grievances whenever life presents us with a reminder. The energy spent on suppressing these feelings is energy we might otherwise spend in more constructive ways. Again you have a Third Choice.

The antidote to this kind of anger is to **write an anger letter**. For example, "**Dear George, I just want you to know that I am very angry that you drank yourself to death twenty-five years ago and left me with six children to raise.**" It is important to use the word anger and to include everything that comes to mind. Remember this letter is for you, not them, and paper is cheap. In the act of taking pen to paper you take an action on your own behalf in the present to give yourself some relief from this buried anger. You are no longer powerless.

The same applies if an "Act of God" robs us of our parents, spouse or children, causes economic hardship or other unhappy things in our lives. In these situations also the act of writing an anger letter gives us relief from our anger and the feeling of powerlessness we have carried around for so long. Even when addressing the Deity, it is important to use the word anger. For example, "**Dear Sir or Madam,(as the case may be) I am very angry that.....**" Include descriptions of all the loss you feel.

### Our Anger at Ourselves

From time to time it may even happen that we fail to live up to our expectations for ourselves. We fail to get the promotion we believe we deserve; lose a tennis match; feel "not smart enough"; etc. What do we do now to relieve ourselves of this painful self-anger? Kick the cat, cry, over eat or drink, beat up our spouse, give ourselves high blood pressure, etc. Again, we have a Third Choice that can give us some relief. We can choose to **write ourselves an anger letter** and see what bubbles up. Often we are angry at ourselves for some imperfection that we perceived early in life as a negative reflection on our worth as a person. When we write ourselves an anger letter, we often discover some of our vulnerabilities - our attitudes from the past which cause us to overcompensate for these feelings of inferiority. We may discover that we have been reacting in ways that are out of proportion to the reality of the situation. Writing an anger letter will drain the pus out of our pent-up putrefying anger from the past. Once the pus is drained, we can open ourselves up to new choices.

### Negative (Anger Provoking) Behavior

In learning more effective ways of dealing with anger, it also helps to examine the behavior that causes us to get angry. Often, attempts are made to understand negative behavior by examining its causes. Theories abound...it's the environment, the break-up of the family, abusive parents, TV, peer pressure, etc. Yet, from the same environment, the same broken home, with the same abusive parents, some children do not grow up to become mad bombers, rapists or serial killers. Upon examination, these "causes" are revealed to be merely descriptions of the circumstances under which the violent acts are perpetrated. More insights can be gained from examining these behaviors in terms of their **purposes**.

If someone's behavior is making us angry, chances are they have an underlying purpose to their actions. Earlier, we defined this type of behavior as MISCHIEF, "that which does not need to be done." If we can identify the goal of someone's mischief, we have a head start on managing the anger that often results.

How can we tell what is motivating an individual to act in a particular negative way? The Almighty has provided us with handy-dandy internal radar detectors that are almost foolproof. They are called feelings. Unfortunately, we are often taught to deny and/or discount them. With a little practice, they can be put to use identifying the **Goals of Mischief**. **There are four such Goals: Attention and Service; Power and Control; Revenge and Withdrawal from the Tasks of Life.**

After identifying the goal(s) of someone's mischief, we can DISENGAGE from the emotional response it causes in us and manage the situation better. We will have choices we did not know we had. Disengage does not mean ignore. On the contrary, we become much more sensitive to exactly what is going on. We disengage by taking a moment to tune into our feelings. Some examples may help illustrate the point:

Goal One Mischief - Purpose: To Gain Attention and Service. People who have not learned to validate themselves need someone to pay them attention in order to assure themselves that they exist. If someone is making goal one mischief at your expense you feel **annoyed and irritated** (a mild form of anger).

Generally we give these people what they want - attention, advice (which they never take) and time. We often continue conversations with them longer than we want to (so as not to displease them) and end up angry at ourselves. What's a Third Choice? Consider **telling the truth**: "Could it be Blanche, that you just want to keep me busy with you? We have these conversations frequently and you never take my advice; I'm just wondering could it be?" or "Blanche, you have more trouble than any twelve people I know. I don't know what to tell you (she doesn't listen anyway), but I'm sure you'll think of something, you always do. Gotta run now". You haven't blown up; haven't been disrespectful; but also haven't let her mischief control your life.

Goal Two Mischief - Purpose: Power and Control People who feel powerless and out of control are afraid if they do not control everything in their lives, something dreadful will happen. They are not aware that they are controlling in crazy ways to compensate for their

feelings of powerlessness. If someone is making Goal Two mischief at our expense, we feel **powerless and out-of-control**.

Often we enter into power struggles with these individuals, or suffer in silence while shaking our heads and feeling powerless to make them understand. What's a Third Choice? There are several. **Drop the Rope** - if you can live with it her way, drop it as a bone of contention. **Let it Go** - What's the worst thing that will happen if junior doesn't clean up his room until he gets married? or, **Apply Logical Consequences...** "If you continue to eat in your room and bugs appear, the cost of the exterminator will come out of your allowance. But, it's your choice, not mine." or "If the garbage does not get taken out by 5:00 p.m. on Fridays, you will find it in your shoes - but it's your choice."

The Third Goal of Mischief is Revenge. When we feel **hurt** by someone's behavior, it is a good bet that that was their goal - to hurt you. They are angry, although perhaps not conscious of it, and they want to hurt someone to relieve the pain of their anger. They can hurt you by failing in school, getting pregnant, setting the house on fire, refusing to talk and a hundred other things. The ultimate revenge is suicide.

We often make counter mischief by denying what we feel or hurting back. Neither technique brings much relief to them or to us. The situation remains unresolved. The Third Choice in these situations is to **tell the truth...** "If you were trying to hurt me with that (remark), (behavior), etc., you did; what did I do to make you so angry?" Our goal is to start a dialogue. The other person may not be aware of their anger, or be unable to express it appropriately. By setting an example of rationality and giving them permission to be angry, you may encourage them to begin a dialogue. At the very least they will know that you know what is going on.

Goal Four Mischief is Characterized by Withdrawal from the Tasks of Love, Work and Friendship. This is very serious. Living with intense fear of failure, these people withdraw from the tasks and responsibilities of life until you give up on them. Then they can blame you for their failure. They often feel depressed; we feel **helpless and discouraged**.

We beg, cry, plead, threaten...nothing works. Our new response is to **tell the truth and set limits**. Say something like, "I am feeling very discouraged; I have tried everything and feel like giving up. But I don't give up on anyone. It is up to you to (perform) (stop drinking) (get a job), etc. If you do not, there will be consequences, but I do not give on anyone." This may be the first time anyone told him he had some responsibility for his life. Up to now, no one ever told him it was his choice.

Most of our mischief makers has come to this state because they have been raised by good parents with the best of intentions. However, Good Intentions are a particular type of mischief that often do damage to an individual's self respect. But that's another story....

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