

You Can't Say Yes If You Can't Say No



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From time to time I see clients who say they have an anger management problem. When I ask about it, they tell me stories of frustration.

A middle-aged music teacher with a private practice finds herself enraged at being called by clients after 10:00 pm. A father of five, struggling to make ends meet, reluctantly and under pressure lends his neighbor his snowblower, which breaks before the owner can use it. An eight-year-old lets her nine-year-old sister con her out of her brand new bathing suit. All of these people feel trapped and exploited. The result? You bet! It's anger.

But is it an anger management problem? If there's no destruction or injury involved, then the problem may be the occasion. Anger is a normal human emotion and one that can be honored to the great benefit of the person who is angry and the person being addressed.

In expressing anger, it's important to own the feeling—"I feel angry when you . . ." or "I am angry that . . ."—rather than telling someone else how wrong or misguided he or she was. The trouble with this latter approach ("You have no business doing that!" or "It was wrong of you to . . .") is that it implies that the speaker's judgment is somehow superior to that of the listener. Really none of us knows better than any of the rest of us. None of us is God.

You may object that it's wrong for Jonathan to bully a classmate or for Suzanne to shoplift at Target, that in such cases your anger as a parent or friend is appropriately expressed as an outraged but impersonal (God-like) admonition. But such breaches are not purely interpersonal issues of the sort that concerns us here, because the offenses in question break the law and violate the social contract—the behavioral laws of the land—about which all of us learn from infancy onward.

When the issue is primarily interpersonal, the primary issue is feelings. So when someone's behavior angers you, ask yourself, first, whether this person's actions responded to anything you said or did. If not, perhaps you need to ask yourself a few basic questions. How important was the offense? (Does it pass the twenty-year test? Is it worth dwelling on?) Was the offense just part of someone else's craziness (all you need to do is steer clear)?

How can you make yourself feel better? (Can you take your mind off the incident and reduce your anxiety, which may manifest itself as irritation?) Is it possible that, by becoming upset, you are giving away control of your emotions? By compensating yourself, minimizing the insult, and switching your thoughts to more pleasant matters you can often right your boat without help from anyone.

On other occasions when conflict arises between people, anger may signal the need to revisit expectations and boundaries. I remember a massage therapist who described her rage when a waiting customer one day burst through the waiting room door while another client was stretched out on the therapist's table. My friend exploded; the intruding customer became distraught.

My question for the therapist was: is there a sign on the door? Soon thereafter she put up a notice that read, "Please make yourself comfortable. Someone will be with you shortly." The problem never recurred. The moral of the story? Let people know what you want and expect from them. They will almost always be grateful for the information. They don't want to offend you.

There are other ways of setting limits with other people. Do not allow yourself to be browbeaten or cornered into making concessions with which you are not comfortable. Are you being candid with friends, family, and coworkers? None of us is a good mind reader. We all depend on each other for news bulletins about our feelings.

And yet in many situations we may not know what we want instantly. (I know you want to borrow my diamond earrings, but am I comfortable lending them to you?)

We need time to reflect—and we need to be comfortable asking for it. If you tend to give in just to end a conversation and get the other person off your back, the simple comebacks listed below will help. Practice them while standing in front of the bathroom mirror. When they roll off your tongue easily, they are ready for use.

- No, thank you.
- This is not for me.
- I don't want to.
- I don't like this.

- I'm not comfortable with this.
- I'd rather not have this conversation right now.
- We need to talk about this, but right now I need to think some more.
- You know what? Now that I've had a chance to think it over, I've changed my mind. I'm going to take back what I said before.
- That's as much as I want to say at the moment.
- I'll have to get back to you about that.
- Let me think about it.
- I'll keep that in mind.

The last response comes in particularly handy when people are giving you unwanted advice. It both acknowledges their words and brings the conversation to a close.

Learn to say no. If you never say no, after all, people will be uncertain what you mean by yes. Should they take you at your word? You will feel disappointed and angry with people less often if you set clear limits. Don't invest highly in people who refuse to respect them.

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