



# HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON  
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

## PUTTING ANGER IN ITS PLACE

*Martha frequently confided in her best friend Janice. She later found out that Janice had shared some of her personal information with another friend of theirs. Martha would not accept Janice's apology and she has not spoken to Janice in over six months. Martha decided that she will never confide in another girlfriend again.*

*A friend organized a big surprise party for Don's birthday. Don's brother Jim was invited but did not attend due to an out of town trip that had been planned for months. Don was very upset with Jim for not attending his party and a year later Don is hanging on to his anger stating that "he doesn't get angry - he gets even." Don sees Jim at other family functions but has not attended any that Jim has invited him to.*

*Jenna was in her second year of law school when her mother fell critically ill requiring her assistance at home to care for her younger brothers. It is ten years later and while Jenna is a successful business person, she privately blames her mother for the fact that she did not become a lawyer. Jenna finds that she is easily angered, and blows up at her mother over seemingly little things.*

Life presents unfortunate experiences, some of which have the potential to permanently alter relationships or to dramatically change the course of our lives. It is normal to feel disappointed and angry when things do not unfold as we would expect or like, however, holding on to anger over something that occurred in our past can interfere with our present. EAP Counsellor Carol Holub describes that holding on to anger or resentment is like 'carrying a free-loading tenant in our mind.' She explains that 'resentment takes up emotional energy and allows negativity to creep into our present relationships and activities.'

## COMMON INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH ANGER

We run the risk of holding on to anger when we ineffectively deal with our anger in the present. Unfortunately, many people have not had the opportunity to develop positive and constructive strategies for handling anger. Instead, they turn to ineffective strategies such as:

- ▲ **AVOIDANCE** - avoiding feelings of anger by not talking about what angers them or trying to push angry thoughts out of their

minds.

- ▲ **PUNISHING OTHERS** - dealing with anger indirectly through 'punishing' the person they are angry with. Punishment can take many forms such as sulking, holding a grudge, or not talking to the person (the 'silent treatment'). Don chose to deal with his anger in an indirect way by 'getting even'.
- ▲ **ATTACKING** - is a direct approach but counter-productive as anger is expressed using an aggressive tone or accusatory remarks.

## DEALING WITH ANGER CONSTRUCTIVELY

Dealing with anger constructively involves communicating our feelings honestly and in a way that will not intentionally hurt the other person. For example, if Don had chosen to deal with his anger in a direct and constructive way he may have approached Jim by saying: 'When you did not attend my birthday party, I felt hurt and angry. I thought you did not care enough about me to attend my party.' Don takes ownership for his feelings by using 'I' statements and focusing on how Jim's actions affected him. He does not attack Jim by yelling or making accusations. Don's communication style opens up the opportunity for Don and Jim to talk about, and possibly resolve their situation. It creates an opportunity for Jim to tell Don that he does care for him and to explain the circumstances under which he made his decision not to attend the party.

## WHEN THERE ISN'T A HAPPY ENDING...

There are times that even when we use a positive approach to dealing with anger, we may not get the results that we would like. Our positive efforts may not resolve the situation or restore the relationship. Although this may be disappointing, speaking our real feelings can give us the peace of mind that comes from acting true to our self and doing all that we could.

## LETTING GO OF ANGER AND MOVING ON

Letting go of anger is a process that first involves acknowledging that 'if I am not ready...or if I can't do anything... or if I choose not to do anything directly about my anger, then I can work through my anger so that it does not continue to have a hold on me.' When we feel anger, it is stimulated by what we are thinking about at that moment. Usually our thoughts are very provoking such as... 'How could he or she have done this to me?' or 'What a ridiculous decision.' When we work through anger, our goal is to find other

interpretations or conclusions so that our feelings of anger will be diminished when we think about the situation.

## THE PROCESS OF WORKING THROUGH AND LETTING GO OF ANGER

- ▲ Begin by playing over the situation from start to finish with the goal of thoroughly understanding what really happened. When we are angry about a situation, our focus is often on one small piece or a "snapshot" of a much larger motion picture.

A narrow focus limits our capacity to understand and therefore work through our anger. One way that we can expand our understanding is to talk or write about the situation in detail as though someone other than our self was explaining what went on.

- ▲ Gain further understanding of the situation by asking yourself - "What are my real feelings about this situation?" Anger is an intense emotion. It often overshadows other feelings such as hurt, embarrassment, shame or guilt that we may be experiencing simultaneously. Having any of these feelings in response to something that has occurred in our lives is very normal and natural.

In Jenna's situation, she may have felt angry about how her mother's illness occurred. She may have felt shame or guilt for wanting someone else to care for her brothers while her mother was critically ill.

There are times when some of the anger that we are experiencing is anger at our self for our mistakes or omissions. Jenna may have been angry at herself for not making the efforts to resume law school at some point over the past 10 years.

- ▲ Take a very close look at your own involvement - "Is there any way that I may have contributed to this situation?" Intense anger has a way of blinding us from seeing our own mistakes in a situation. In the case of Martha, perhaps she assumed that Janice would hold everything she shared with her in confidence without ever requesting this of her.
- ▲ Observe weaknesses in yourself and others - one of the givens in life is that we all have strengths and we all have weaknesses. Recognizing the weaknesses of others involved in the incident can assist us in understanding how and why someone said or did something that angered us.
- ▲ Ask yourself - "Is there a way that I can constructively deal with my feelings at this time?" - Even though time has gone by, it can be beneficial to address the situation directly by honestly and respectfully communicating your feelings to the person involved. It can be very helpful to talk this over with a friend or family member first, for support and for another perspective.

Many times dealing directly with the matter is not possible as the person involved is not accessible, may not be receptive or they may no longer be living. We can gain similar benefits by writing down our feelings as though we were talking to the person directly - write a letter but do not send it. Although this

will not change the outcome of the situation, it commonly contributes to a sense of completion.

- ▲ Think about how this experience has affected your views about life or people and ask - "Do I need to change my views?" As a result of her situation with Janice, Martha decides that she will no longer confide in her girlfriends. This extreme view takes away from the closeness of her friendships.
- ▲ Drawing New Conclusions, Letting Go and Moving On

Now that you have taken steps to broaden your understanding of the situation, you are prepared to make different conclusions about the situation, allowing you to let go of anger and move on.

## MARTHA'S NEW CONCLUSION:

'I trusted Janice and unfortunately that trust is shaken. I recognize that Janice made a mistake and we all make mistakes. Part of my anger is at myself for not being clear with Janice that I didn't want my personal information shared with others. I will speak to Janice directly about my feelings and will accept Janice's apology, however I do not feel comfortable resuming the friendship in the way that it was before. Although my relationship with Janice has changed and this is a loss to me, I have learned from this. Confiding in others is important - I will continue to establish trusting friendships - I will not assume that others will hold my information in confidence - I will ask this of them. I have done all I can with this situation - I am ready to let it go and to move on.' Repeat as necessary...

## GETTING HELP WITH LETTING GO

Sometimes situations of anger are not so straightforward or are long standing and may be difficult to sort out on your own. Many people benefit from meeting with a professional EAP counsellor to discuss positive strategies for managing anger and for assistance in working through and letting go of anger. We encourage you to call us for assistance.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

**English Service: 1-800-387-4765**  
**French Service: 1-800-361-5676**  
**General Information: 1-888-814-1328**