

## Session Five

### Managing Anger

#### Understanding Anger

Anger is a universal and natural emotion. It has been described as an unpleasant and uncomfortable feeling resulting from the behavior of others. Imam Khumayni in his collection of forty hadith says the following about anger:

*Anger, in fact, is an inner psychic movement due to which a state of agitation is produced in the heart's blood, arousing a desire for vengeance. And when this agitation becomes more violent, it intensifies the fire of anger. A violent commotion of the blood seizes the heart, filling the arteries and the brain with a flurry of dark smoke, on account of which the mind and the intellect lose control and become powerless.*

The emotion of anger is accompanied by:

- a) angry thoughts of being frustrated or wronged etc.
- b) physiological symptoms such as a flushed face, increased blood pressure
- c) behavior that is a direct result of the anger such as yelling, sulking etc.

Anger is wrong when it is out of control and immoderate. To a certain extent it is necessary in order to defend oneself and to maintain order in life. Without any anger, man would be passive completely and would not react in any form to a wrong that may take place. Allah in His wisdom has created the emotion of anger in man so he can defend himself and defend what is right and moral for himself and others. However when he loses control of his anger and rages beyond what is appropriate, his behavior has harmful repercussions. Islam seeks to prevent this by warning man of the need to control his anger. Imam as-Sadiq (a) is reported to have said: *Anger is the key to all vices.* Another hadith says: *There is no strength like that of controlling anger.*

Anger is a secondary emotion, usually preceded by pain or fear. It creates mental and emotional pains and fears. The angry response is the human defense against the threat of that pain or fear. Anger varies in its characteristics across individuals. These characteristics include:

- a) Its frequency: how often a person gets angry.
- b) Intensity: it ranges from mild to very strong rage
- c) Duration : how long a person stays angry
- d) Threshold: it takes a lot to anger someone, while some people anger very easily
- e) Expression: people express their anger in different ways

#### What triggers Anger

People are not angry unless something provokes their anger. Understanding what factors provoke our anger will help us avoid those situations or at least decrease their impact. Many factors of anger can be listed, but we will suffice with three primary causes of anger and four secondary causes.

**Primary Causes**

1. Love and concern. Those who are in a close and loving relationship with someone are most vulnerable to becoming angry with them. Because we care, we will react strongly to messages we do not like. This may be true for a spouse whose words or behaviors show a temporary lack of affection and consideration. It could also be true for a child whose behavior does not reflect our ideals of good children. Because we care, we are concerned and this concern may sometimes be expressed through anger. Care and affection carries with it the fear of not being reciprocated, or the fear of being a failure. If we did not care we would be indifferent and not show any reaction.

2. Self-diminishment: It is very painful to feel rejected, humiliated and unappreciated. Such feelings are a strong cause of anger. We lash out because anger temporarily numbs the pain of being rejected. We try to bolster ourselves through the power of anger, and it neutralizes our feelings of inadequacy at least for the time being. We must remember though that these feelings of self-diminishment are often created by our own imagination. They are not really what the other person thinks or feels, but what we have projected onto them.

3. Unrealistic expectations: A lot of anger is from high expectations of others. We expect a certain form of behavior and are annoyed when it is not forthcoming. To accept reality, and realize that all human beings have flaws would help ease the intensity of anger. We must understand that we too have faults and should be gentle with the faults of others. Allah likes those who are merciful to others and do not treat them harshly.

**Secondary Factors:**

Anger is also intensified by the presence of the following factors. These are not direct triggers of the anger, but aggravate the emotion and make control and management of anger very difficult.

1. Stressful lifestyle: Today's modern lifestyle is very stressful for many people. There seems to be too much to do and not enough time to do it all. Pressures of time, finance, work, families etc. all build together to create a very edgy person who is always rushed and frustrated. This in turn saps his mental and emotional strength, making him vulnerable to the powerful emotion of anger. In order to avoid this we have to step back and make a decision not to lead life in a constant rush. Allah has created us for a purpose, and the purpose of life will not be achieved by getting into a race with others to achieve more and more of this world.

2. Worry and Anxiety : Life has many difficulties for most people, and to worry constantly about them drains emotional strength. Although it is inevitable that we worry about major issues or problems in our life, we should try to minimize the anxiety and take things more easily. When we have done all we can to change a particular situation, we should leave the matter to Allah. Trusting in Allah to help us, and set things right for us, after we have done all we could, is a great reliever of worry. A hadith says: *The root of*

*the strength of the heart is in trust of Allah, and Whoever trusts in Allah will not be overcome.* Many similar hadith remind us of the immense emotional strength in trusting Allah. This strength can help us manage and control anger when it arises.

3. Lack of mental and emotional satisfaction : Human beings need to lead a balanced life, satisfying their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. When we ignore a certain aspect of life, the need is unmet and the resulting dissatisfaction with life can often make us vulnerable to anger. Those who avoid marriage and raising a family in favor of freedom and careers, for example, are not fulfilling basic human needs. Similarly those who ignore religion and spirituality find themselves missing something in life. They may not admit it but they lack the peace which comes with believing in God and religion. Religion provides a lot of meaning and value to life, and puts everyday things into perspective.

4. Unfulfilling relationships: Close relationships are a great boost to emotional strength. They increase self esteem, make life feel good and create enthusiasm and happiness which spills over into other aspects of life. Close relationships could include relationships with a spouse, a child, a family member or a friend. When people do not feel close with those around them and do not enjoy satisfying relationships with them, they become sad and prone to anger. This is because they are missing the emotional satisfaction of being close to another human being.

### **Diffusing Anger**

Although most of us get angry from time to time, the important challenge is to be able to manage one's anger. The idea of venting anger to decrease it, is only a myth. When anger is vented harshly, it begins a cycle of repeated angry encounters. This is because anger begets anger, and when a person lashes out in anger he is most likely to receive anger in return. On the other hand, suppressing anger completely is also not healthy. It may have harmful physical and emotional effects. The trick then is to walk a fine line in between. Anger needs to be expressed, but it must be controlled before it is expressed. Only then can it serve a useful purpose in changing what we are uncomfortable with.

A powerful way to diffuse anger even before it arises is to anticipate its occurrence. Although this may not always be true, sometimes one can predict a situation which may create edginess and which could possibly lead to an angry outburst. For example a spouse knows that certain times during the day, or during the week, are not good times for the other spouse. Tension and stress during that time makes the partner more vulnerable to anger. It is thus possible to be mentally prepared and try to avoid it, or decrease its impact. This preparedness gives mental strength to enable better control and management of anger.

Once anger is aroused it is best to control it in its initial stages. To fan the flames of anger by thinking more angry thoughts, and bringing in other matters to aggravate the situation,

makes the situation very volatile. Imam Khumayni in the above mentioned article on anger says:

*Among the practical remedies the important ones involve withholding the self in the initial stages of anger. This is because it is ignited little by little, becoming more intense until its furnace is set burning fiercely and its flame becomes violent and furious. When that happens it gets completely out of control and shuts off the lights of one's faith and intellect. . . . therefore one should be on one's guard so as to disassociate oneself by some means before its fierceness mounts and its fire becomes more violent.*

There are many ways which can help us manage our anger once it is already aroused. Some of them include:

1. Thinking of Allah and His patience with human beings. The Holy Prophet (s) was once talking to Imam Ali (a) and he said: *O Ali; do not get angry. And if you do then sit and think about the power of the Lord over His servants, and His forbearance with them.* Reminding oneself of what God likes, and the values He would like us to have can deter us from expressing our anger too harshly.
2. Changing the body's physiology. According to the Holy Prophet (s) one who is very angry should change his body position. He should sit if he was standing, and stand if he was sitting. It also helps to take deep breaths, lower the voice deliberately, and splash water on the face.
3. Taking time out to cool off. An angry person should remind himself that he is not in a reasonable state and cannot deal with the situation very well. The best thing to do is take time to cool the anger and then deal with the situation. This allows the smoke of the anger to clear from the mind and it can then think clearly again. If possible one should leave the place where the anger was provoked. He should also try to distract himself with some physical or mental activity.

To manage and control anger is a great skill which does not come easily. It is a life long struggle and only constant effort and analysis can help one in the battle to control anger. Even with a lot of effort it is easy to slip sometimes and repeat outbursts which we know will have negative consequences. However with continuous thinking and trying, we can reduce such outbursts and minimize their negative impact. When we try sincerely, and pray for success, Allah in His Mercy and Kindness will help us achieve the difficult goal of managing our anger wisely.

#### Hadith al Qudsi (Words of Allah not in the Qur'an)

When My servant remembers me when he is angry, I will remember him on the Day of Judgment among the whole of my creation, and I will not destroy him among those whom I destroy.

O Musa, control you anger over those who are under your authority, and I will restrain my anger from you.