

REACH Program: Session 9

Assertiveness: High- Test Anger



Welcome to session 9 of the Reach Anger Management Program. This session will focus on Assertiveness Skills. We will be working today on a script for high-test anger. What does anger look like when it meets the standard that Aristotle discussed—anger at the right person, in the right way, at the right time, in the right degree? Just as pitching a tennis ball at the porch steps is preparation for an actual game which may come later, all the anger management work we have been doing in this program has been preparing us for the work of scripting high-test anger.

Positive Anger

- According to the angry person, over 70% of the consequences of anger are beneficial
- The targets of the anger agree—they also estimate that over 70% of the consequences are beneficial
- Marriages without anger are in more danger of disintegrating than are marriages with anger, with some exceptions



According to research, the angry person reports that over 70% of the consequences of anger are beneficial. The targets of anger agree—the benefits of anger outweigh the liabilities of anger by a 2-1 ratio. The psychologist John Gottman writes that marriages without anger are in more danger of divorce than are marriages with anger, with some exceptions. (A marriage where the anger is filled with contempt is generally in trouble). ***

We know that anger can be a problem, can be destructive. But let's stop for a moment and ask: What might be potentially beneficial in anger? How might anger—the right kind of anger—actually help a relationship survive? How might anger be helpful to a relationship, to an individual, or to a society?

*This research is reported in Kassirer, H., Ed. *Anger Disorders: Definition, Diagnosis, and Treatment*. Washington: Taylor & Francis, 1995.

**Gottman, J. *What Predicts Divorce: The Relationship between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993.

Potential Benefits of Anger

- Protection
- Truth-telling
- Change agent
- Passion
- Clarifier of differences
- Advocate for my needs & values



There are actually quite a few possible benefits to anger—if we can learn to do it right. For example, anger can be a

- Protector. This is a very old role for anger—the protector of oneself and of one's family & tribe*
- Truth-Teller. Anger in a relationship can surface things that haven't been spoken before, things that need to be spoken*
- Change Agent. There's energy in anger. No great social movement—civil rights, women's movement, labor movement, American Revolution—could have happened without anger. The same can be said of any great individual or relationship change.*
- Beginning of Passion. In a relationship, when things have seemed dead, anger can open the door to the other passions—love, sorrow, joy.*
- Clarifier of Differences. In a relationship, we can be under the illusion that our needs are the same until anger rears its head and says, "I don't like pink bedspreads." With anger, we start to realize that there are two of us in the relationship with different needs*
- Advocate for My Values. This is a big issue. Let's take a side-trip and explore this carefully.*

Anger and Value

- Remember the Shoulds: It is impossible to get angry unless I believe I'm right
- Anger is always close to our values—we can read a person's values in his/her anger

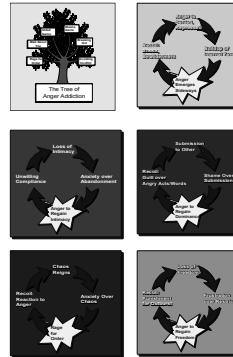


Remember what we noticed when we were discussing the Shoulds: anger always lives near our values. It's impossible to get angry unless we believe we are right. If we can entertain the idea, "maybe I'm wrong about this," we can't stay angry.

If we ask a person what he or she values most in life, we might get a vague, sentimental answer: truth, justice, and the American Way. Comic book stuff. If we want to find out what a person's real driving values are, we need only watch his or her anger. These are not values which we consciously choose. It feels as if they choose us—we are seized by these values, beginning in very early years. Although changes do happen over the years, there is a remarkable stability to the values which orient our lives, and the worth of everything else in a person's life is measured against this guiding value.

Anger as a Dragon Guarding my Values

- In fairy tales, dragons always guard something of value—treasure, golden fleece, a maiden
- In the Vicious Circles, anger tried to create a value: love, respect, order, freedom, etc.



In fairy tales and adventure stories, dragons always guard something of value—treasure, the golden fleece, a maiden. The hot breath of our anger is also an attempt to defend something of value—our core values.

We have encountered many of these core values already when we talked about the Vicious Circles—anger serving the values of Order, Love, Freedom, Respect, and Peace. The values weren't the problem. The problem was that when anger in its crude-oil form is used to try to create these values, it backfires. Instead of creating Love, I created alienation and distance. Instead of creating Freedom, I created incarceration.

Getting What My Anger Wants

- How can I get what I truly want without having it blow up in my face? When I ask this question, I am forming a partnership with my anger—it's no longer the enemy.



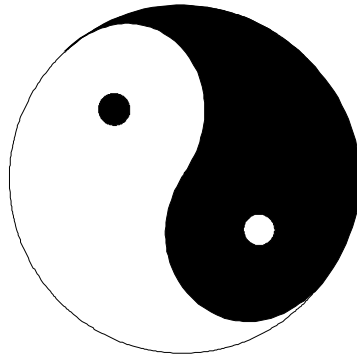
The dragon is a very interesting symbol around the world. In the western world, it is generally seen as an evil serpent which must be killed. We have ancient stories of Perseus and St. George fighting the dragon, and also modern stories in movies like Alien where the dragon is evil and must be killed. In China, however, the dragon is seen differently. It is seen as the power of lightening and rain, the spirit of the waters, governing the rivers and fertility of the earth. The dragon is seen as a powerful force that gives good luck when it appears. It's celebrated in street festivals and boat races at important times of the year, in order to bring its power to humans.

I think that anger is a little like the dragon, which can be seen in very different ways. Sometimes anger is like the evil monster, wreaking havoc in our lives, something we need to work to eliminate, like St. George eliminated the dragon. When it comes out in its raw-material form, it is often this force we need to stop.

Lightening, as it appears in nature, is a destructive force to be avoided. But if we can learn the technology of managing electricity, this same force can become a positive energy which powers our toasters, telephones, and lights. Anger is like this lightening—destructive in its raw form, but possessing significant positive potential. Anger is something to be honored. If we can manage it, we can partner with it, and it can become a driving force in our lives.

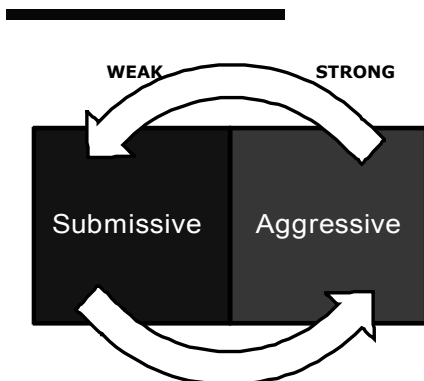
But how do we master the technology of anger-control? How can we transform the raw energy of lightening into electrical current? The answer is assertiveness.

Yin-Yang



We discussed earlier the Chinese belief that the world is made up of the interaction of two forces—yin and yang. Yin represents the yielding, receptive, dark, and passive part of things. Yang represents the lightening—the creative, strong, firm, and active part. Last week we discussed the yin-aspect of communication skills, including listening and its difference from submission. This week we will discuss the strong, active, yang-energy: assertiveness.

Submissive-Aggressive Cycle



- Submissive & Aggressive are two reactions
- Part of universal polarity of yin and yang, weak and strong
- Frequent alternation between submissive & aggressive
- Poor boundaries



We come into the world as reactors. When difficult things happen to us, we are programmed by the primitive amygdala to make a quick decision: do I react in a strong or weak way? Should I get angry or anxious? Should I be aggressive or submissive? Each choice is a very quick reaction, and the conscious thought of the neo-cortex doesn't come into play. This is a world without ethics, where might makes right. Darwin rules: everything is a struggle for survival. There is no sense of personal boundary in either aggression or submission. If I am aggressive, I violate your boundary physically or emotionally. If I am submissive, you violate mine.

Reactive vs. Responsive

- Quick, active
- Changes according to circumstance
- From Amygdala: Primitive brain
- Darwinian survival of fittest
- Aggressive & Submissive
- Slow, considered
- Principle-centered, an overall plan
- From Cerebral cortex: Complex planning center
- Higher ethical principles
- Perceptive/Receptive & Assertive



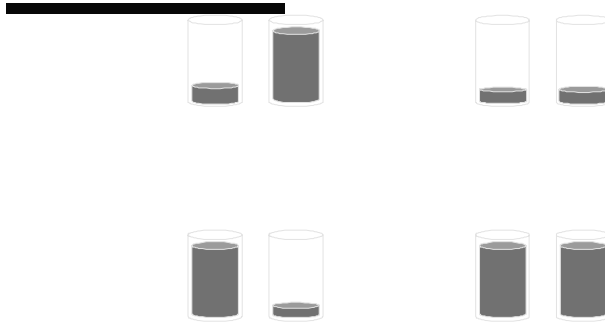
We generally think of the words react and respond as synonyms, but their meanings are quite different. When I react, I answer the action of another with an action, as would be appropriate in the Darwinian world of power. Even submission is an action which communicates that I surrender, you're the boss.

The word respond comes from a Greek word sponde, meaning an offering of wine to the Gods to seal a peace treaty. It means a promise. From the same root comes the words responsibility and sponsor. We talk about a "considered response," which means that responses are built slowly, involving thought and meditation. When I respond, I relate in a principle-centered way, out of a larger purpose and a sense of for what is right—not just by reflex. A response emerges from the cerebral cortex, the thinking and planning center of the brain, not from the primitive amygdala.

To make peace means that give my word, and work to keep it. To make peace between countries, the two sides agree to respect each other's boundaries. When an agreement is made, actions will not be determined by the momentary sense of who is the strongest. To respond involves responsibility.

On the basketball court, this means playing according to a master plan, not just playing by impulse. At sea, this is guiding a boat by the stars, and not by the caprice of the winds. In a home, this means parenting according to a vision of what is valuable and important, not just reacting to what the kids do, a different decree for every day and every mood.

Communication Skills



Here are the communication skills again. Remember, I use assertiveness when my need level is high—I've got something that needs to be said. I'm going to try to say in a way that doesn't backfire. Remember, as we noticed in the Vicious Circles, anger often backfires and I don't get what I want. I get angry in the interests of freedom, but I lose freedom as a result of my anger. When I try to be assertive, I try to distill the crude-oil, to get the dangerous impurities out of the anger, leaving only the valuable essence which the anger is trying to attain. Assertiveness is high-test anger.

Assertiveness

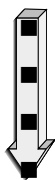
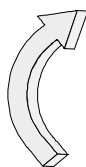
- Clear boundaries
- Clear choices
- Non-blaming
- Respectful



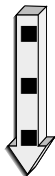
OK, how do we build this assertiveness? First, there are four characteristics of assertiveness:

- It sets clear boundaries. In a relationship marked by aggression or submission, the boundaries are unclear. When I'm aggressive, I'm violating someone else's boundaries. When I'm submissive, I'm allowing my own to be violated.*
- Assertiveness offers clear choices—not double-binds, not manipulations, not coercions*
- Assertiveness is non-blaming. It is part of responsibility-thinking*
- Assertiveness is respectful. The way things are said is respectful, without the negative labeling (insults, put-downs, etc.) The other person's basic rights as a human aren't violated.*

Recipe for Responding Assertively



When you . . . (give data)
I felt . . . (list feelings)
because . . . (how this affects you)
(Stop to listen . . .)



My want is. . (proposed solution)
because . . . (rationale)
(Stop to listen . . .)



This is a recipe for an assertive response. As we mentioned before, it takes building, and this is a useful blueprint for the construction process.

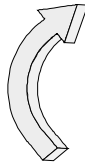
Usually, assertiveness begins with anger. The affect may be strong, and I may feel tempted to do or say something aggressive—something that would show disrespect, which would violate someone's physical or psychological boundaries. This is the raw material of assertiveness, the emotional condition we must work with in order to attain assertiveness.

Contain the anger, using the tools we have developed so far. Call time-out to ponder and rebuild the thinking brain. Relax physically. Ask yourself what feelings of discomfort occurred first, what inflammatory thoughts are transforming the discomfort to anger. An anger record will provide pieces we can use directly in the assertive response, as we shall see.

Let's do some building:

- 1) "When you . . ." (Give the data, the sense-observations of the behavior of the other person, the information without the judgments, that which is least likely to be disputed by anyone).*
- 2) "I felt . . ." (Tell your feelings, including anger, but also including the feelings of discomfort that started the anger)*
- 3) "Because . . ." (Discuss the effect of the behavior on you. Here is a place to include some of your thoughts)*
- 4) Stop to listen. (This is not a lecture, not an opportunity to steamroll another person. Keep your assertive statement brief, in small, digestible chunks.)*

Recipe for Responding Assertively



When you . . . (give data)

I felt . . . (list feelings)

because. . . (how this affects you)

(Stop to listen . . .)



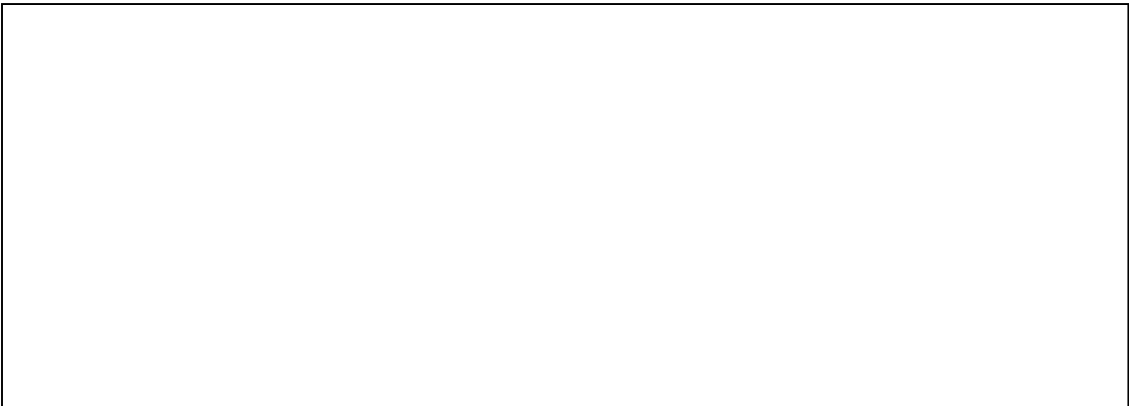
My want is. . . (proposed solution)

(Stop to listen . . .)



Let's try building some assertive statements. Open your workbook to the worksheet called the Assertive Statements worksheet. Read the situations on the page, write down examples of submissive or aggressive reactions, then build an assertive statement for each example. When you are finished with the exercise, click the mouse button.

PROPERTIES Allow user to leave interaction: Show 'Next Slide' Button: Completion Button Label:	After viewing all the steps Show upon completion Next Slide	 Properties...	 Edit in Engage
--	---	---	---



End of Session 9



We are nearly finished with our ten sessions. Next week is our last week. I hope it is becoming clear that anger is not the enemy. We are not trying to eliminate anger from our lives. This would be a bad idea, even if it were possible. As I mentioned before, the goal of anger management is not the elimination of anger any more than the goal of money management is the elimination of money. The goal of money management is the wise and conscious use of money, and the goal of anger management is similar—the wise and considered, use of anger. Anger not in its raw form, but re-worked and made into a considered response of assertiveness.