

# Crossing the Line: Anger vs. Rage

by Jim Platt

## What Is Anger?

**Anger** is a feeling that we all encounter from time to time, and frequently we experience it as a response to frustration, hurt, disappointment, and threats (real or imagined). The rational expression of anger in response to these concerns can offer several benefits. Most important is the mobilizing of inner resources needed to overcome fear. When we feel angry, we have some confidence in responding to the danger or threat. Fear leads to flight; anger sustains fight.

While rational anger can be constructive in feeling competent to confront a threatening situation, we may react to the threat with more anger than is warranted. A hammer may work very effectively to “make” a square peg fit into a round hole. Unfortunately, the badly bruised peg may no longer be functional. Excess anger has the potential to numb us both emotionally as well as cognitively. Exposure to anger that has escalated to violence can desensitize the individual to violence, allowing him/her to be more accepting of it in the future. It is the failure to recognize and understand our level of anger that may lead to a variety of subsequent problems.

## What Is Rage?

There is research available that suggests that suppressed anger is an underlying ingredient both of anxiety and of depression. Anger that is not expressed can kindle and erupt in a manner that disrupts relationships and can lead to a variety of medical problems. Frequently the underlying anger is related to a perceived loss of control over factors affecting our integrity—our beliefs and how we feel about ourselves. In some cases, the anger has to do with the inability to meet unrealistic expectations (our own or those who have expectations of us). Rage is a shame-based expression of that anger. Rage is the accumulation of unexpressed anger and perceived disrespectful transactions that after multiple “stuffings” finally flow to the surface. When we become enraged, usually there is the belief that someone is deliberately attempting to incite us to become angry. Within this ego-bruised state, we are convinced that trying to be reasonable will prove to be ineffective, and therefore we will need to “even the score” or methodically disarm the offending party.

### How can my anger be better managed?

#### 1) Accept it: “I am angry.”

To deny or suppress anger is counterproductive and dangerous. Allow yourself to experience it and express it respectfully. Irrational expression of anger is a *choice*.

#### 2) Seek to understand it: What is this about?

Is it on the job, at home, everywhere? Is this degree of anger really appropriate to communicate my concern?

#### 3) Devise an action plan: Don't ignore it *do something*.

*Visualize* one or more acceptable solutions.

*Ask yourself:* Do I really want to stay angry or move on? Do I want others to remember me as out of control and disrespectful?

*Remember:* Repressed anger (the precursor to rage) lives on as resentment and blocks the ability to engage in constructive problem-solving.

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## How Is Rage Expressed?

While expressing anger is all about the controlled notification that one feels threatened in some way, rage has little to do with control. Rage denotes a loss of control and is characterized by shouting, engaging in violence (including the destruction of property or threats of violence), manipulating through emotional blackmail, or punishing through social withdrawal (e.g., “shaming”). Raging offers a false sense of empowerment to an individual who feels inadequate and in turn uses the rage to shut down the other individual. From time to time, anyone can have a bad day. However, a persistent pattern of controlling through bullying can leave scars that may never heal.

If you question your ability to self-assess whether your anger has crossed the line to rage, just look directly into the eyes of the other person—you will know the answer to your question. By simply asking, “Has my anger offended you?”, one could offer the most responsible and effective strategy to fully assess the impact, while simultaneously signaling a commitment to improve one’s communication style.

**Please note** that unhealthy progression and display of anger can be related to many factors, including medical ailments. Folks who can identify with the scenarios described in this article are encouraged to seek a complete assessment with a healthcare professional, which would include the Faculty and Employee Assistance Program. Additionally, in the near future, the FEAP will be offering a workshop entitled Anger Management 101. Essentially, the course will be a four-hour, hands-on overview of the mechanics of anger, and a more in depth presentation of the interventions offered above.

Stay tuned for further details.

—Jim Platt