

Dealing With the Contagious Nature of Anger

You know the old story. A guy gets yelled at by his boss. He gets in his car and “flips off” a woman in another car. Upset, she goes home and yells at her partner who kicks the dog, who bites the son, who yells at the daughter, who breaks the TV and that makes both parents mad and so it goes...

Recent anger and stress research indicates that how you handle your anger at work really does affect your family life and how you handle anger at home really does affect your work performance. In a sense, you expose your family to anger from the workplace and you can infect your coworkers with anger from home. Yes, anger really is contagious.



Family researchers have found that anger and frustration from work influences family interactions in one of two ways: (1) overt expressions of anger such as fighting and yelling (and, for parents, inconsistent and more frequent use of discipline) and (2) emotional withdrawal.

This second type of anger can be harder to recognize and— if you’re on the receiving end—harder to deal with. Emotional withdrawal can take many forms, from letting TV sports become more important than those you live with to simply

becoming less available to family members for support, guidance, nurture and intimacy. Being less available to your spouse and children may cause them to feel abandoned and resentful— allowing the anger infection to fester and grow.

Conversely, when you’re having fights at home over money, relationship or parenting issues, the anger can affect your relationships with your colleagues and your work productivity. You might become either outwardly irritable or emotionally withdrawn at work, or a bit of both.

Most of us have had to deal with a passively angry co-worker who seems suddenly unapproachable or who sits and fumes during staff meetings and spreads anger throughout the room without even speaking. Many studies have shown that emotional withdrawal can take the form of poor performance on both daily tasks and long-term projects. In other words, your anger can make you the less-than-optimal employee or the weak link in the work team.

Research also provides some good solutions for dealing with work/family anger. Some proven tactics that can keep you from infecting others with your anger include:

Rituals: Develop some clear rituals that separate work from home. I often use music, cranked up on the iPod on the way to and from work. You can also use nature as a means of transitioning: drive by a favorite park, flower garden or fishing spot and stop at for a minute to adjust your

attitude. Or just enjoy being alone, turning your mind to pleasant topics during the drive. Some folks schedule a few minutes when they first get home to gripe about work with their loved ones before moving on to family time.

Exercise: Nearly any form of exercise that increases the flow of oxygen in your body, from shooting hoops to yoga has been shown to have a stress-lowering effect. Help your family understand that a few minutes at the gym can mean a much better evening for all, and help your boss understand that walking at lunch (rather than having a working lunch) makes you more productive. Some people find walking or biking to and from work a terrific way to let go of the stress of one environment and come fresh and enthusiastic to the other.

Debriefing: You know that friend, that one you can call up and really “gritch” to when you’ve had a bad day? Well, research shows that a few minutes of phone time with him or her can be an effective tool to use to deal with work/family stress. Be careful not to abuse this steam-vent by always having the same ranting conversation or by basing your friendship on negativity.

“Veg”-time: Make sure each member of your family, including you, schedules some time to just do nothing. Watch TV. Play the banjo. Stare out the window. Gather your thoughts and let the pressure roll off. Encourage your partner and your children to take some downtime, too. The same is true of your work-team. Make sure that you make time for humor, fellowship, and a little goofing off to help shake the stress.

Reduce bad habits: Anger can produce harmful behavior patterns that ultimately make the stress worse. Be careful not to use alcohol, overeating, overspending, constant negativity, or other indulgences, as ways to deal with your anger. These self-destructive habits are easy to develop and can be hard to break.

Like any other skill, learning to manage anger takes time, practice, and sometimes some outside help. Work/family stress can get out of hand, and when it does, consider turning to a marriage and family therapist for helping you and your family get through stressful times. Finding a work/life balance for your stress and anger is one of the most important aspects of a successful career. You’ve got a lot riding on it.

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