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Sene and Suzanne were married and had seven children. Five of those were adopted at an early age and fit right in with their siblings. Raised on a Wyoming ranch, the family had a strong work ethic and learned to rely on one another's strengths and compensate for some of the weaknesses too. Gene and Suzanne were focused on making sure the adopted kids were treated

like equal members of the family, so never shared details about the adoptions. Problems came up when Gene suffered his fifth stroke. He and Suzanne felt it might be time to prepare the family for their passing, after all Gene turned 79 last month and they hadn't yet shared the adoption secret. Information was shared and the family seemed to take things in stride. Unfortunately, two months later both Gene and Suzanne were involved in an auto accident, leaving the family to get along without them. Within a week the adopted kids had banded together and entered Gene and Suzanne's house and took away family heirlooms and other items meaningful to them. The reaction of the other two siblings was immediate and angry. The offense cut deep and they wanted the others to know how hurt they felt. Ten years



later and the court cases are still playing out. Worse, it seems the anger gets hotter with each passing month with no end in sight. The threats, bullying, warnings and intimidations only increase with the passing of time. Does anger have a place in Gene and Suzanne's legacy?

An•ger /' aNGger/ noun

A strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility. (Oxford Languages, Dec. 2020)

What is anger? *Psychology Today* describes anger as one of the basic human emotions, as elemental as happiness, sadness, anxiety, or disgust. Anger is related to the fight, flight, or freeze response of the nervous system; it prepares humans to fight. But fighting doesn't necessarily mean throwing punches; it might motivate persons to combat injustice by changing laws or enforcing new behavioral norms.

Anger: Three Kinds

Your Life Counts outlines three types of anger that help shape how we react in a situation that makes us angry. These are: Passive Aggression, Open Aggression, and Assertive Anger:

• **Passive Aggression** - Many of us do not like to admit that we are angry, because we don't like confrontation – this is called passive aggression. This comes out in things like becoming silent when you are angry, sulking, procrastinating, and pretending everything is fine.

- **Open Aggression** When a person responds by lashing out, becoming physically or verbally aggressive, and potentially hurting themselves or others. This response is shown by fighting, bullying, blackmailing, accusing, shouting, bickering, sarcasm and criticism.
- Assertive Anger The healthy way to deal with anger is through a controlled and confident approach, talking and listening, and open to help in dealing with the situation. This assertive anger can help relationships to grow. It means thinking before you speak, being confident in how you say it, yet open and flexible to the other side. It means being patient; not raising your voice; communicating how you are feeling emotionally, and really trying to understand what others are feeling. When you deal with anger assertively, you demonstrate that you are mature and care about your relationships and yourself.

Forgiveness is always important; if a person has apologized for making you angry or if you realize that the situation isn't worth it, be open to forgive and willing to be forgiven, as well as forgive yourself! See the Ag Legacy newsletter "Should Forgiveness Have A Place in Your Ag Legacy?" (Dec. 2019) for more on forgiveness.

Why Anger?

We might reasonably ask, why do we need anger? Ryan Martin a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay says, "Anger is associated with a bunch of consequences - everything from physical aggression and physi-

cal fights, verbal fights, property damage, cardiovascular disorders, other negative emotions, and substance abuse problems." When people experience anger in great intensity too often, they are also likely to experience interpersonal or physiological problems.

Many people misunderstand anger. It is this built-in emotion, much like sadness, much like fear, and much like a lot of our other emotions, it's something that is universal. Martin has a lot of conversations with people about their anger, and through those conversations he has learned that many people see anger as a problem. Anger may interfere in our life, it can damage relationships, it may even be scary.



Martin describes anger a little differently. He says, "Anger is a powerful and healthy force in your life. It's good that you feel it. You need to feel it." People can do all sorts of things when they're angry. We also know that anger can be a motivator where it encourages people to act in positive, pro-social ways. It really exists in us to alert us to injustice and then to energize us to respond to that injustice. Although we tend to think of anger as an irrational response and that people who get angry are unhinged, we should keep in mind that we also need it. Martin relates that anger tells us when something feels wrong or unjust or unfair. Emotions exist in us to alert us to things: Sadness, which also feels bad in the moment, alerts us to loss; Fear, which feels bad in the moment, alerts us to danger; and Anger alerts us to injustice.

Anger Has Meaning

We should understand that if we are angry it must mean something. If we consider the real basic reasons why we get angry, one of the most basic reasons is when our goals are blocked. Achieving goals is pretty important to human beings. We can think of anger as one of the mechanisms that allows to power through those frustrations and break through it to obtain our goal.

Martin also suggests that if we think about situations where we are likely to become angry, we can tease out some common themes. For example, we get angry in situations that are unpleasant, that feel unfair, where our goals are blocked, circumstances that could have been avoided and that leave us feeling powerless. But you can also tell that anger is probably not the only thing we're feeling in these situations. It is important to note that anger doesn't happen in

a vacuum. We can feel angry at the same time that we're feeling scared or sad or feeling a host of other emotions. Perhaps most interesting, is when we study this further we discover that these provocations are not making us mad--at least, not on their own. We know that because if they were, we would all get angry over the same things and we don't. The reasons I get angry are different than the reasons you get angry. So there must be something else going on. That something else is how we interpret the provocation.

Interpreting Anger

The next question we might ask ourselves is, "What should we do when



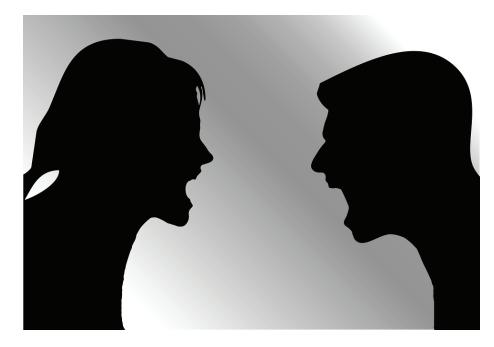
we start to recognize ourselves responding to a provocation?" How should we respond? Martin encourages people to search for insight to gain the upper hand in these situations. When you notice what's happening to you, think about why it's happening. Oftentimes, people will externalize that. They'll blame the thing saying, "Well, this thing is making me mad." That's good as a start. The next step should be to ask, "How am I interpreting the thing." Is that making it worse? That is the level where we can often identify the factors that are leading us to blow things up into a much bigger situation or maybe we're being too demanding or maybe we've labeled a person in a way that's unfair.

Once we've established how we are interpreting a situation, then we can begin to move forward with an intentional goal of deciding what we want to do with it. We might decide that, now is not a good time for me to become angry, so I need to take a few deep breaths. I might need to think about something else for a few minutes. Sometimes, we might need to acknowledge that, this is a thing I can't fix and I need to find a way to go on and accept this. Acceptance is one of the most complicated psychological processes when it comes to anger because sometimes it works and is associated with positive outcomes. Sometimes, acceptance ends up being more like suppression and is really just someone pretending the situation doesn't bother them anymore. That's not really a healthy way to address the situation.

Anger and Compassion

Russell Kolts is a clinical psychologist who specializes in compassion-focused therapy. Kolts describes anger as a wonderful sign and a terrible strategy. Most of the time anger is really good at helping us identify things that we need to attend to, things that are troubling us, that bother us, or are potential threats. The problem starts when the typical responses that are motivated by anger can lead us to saying or doing things that cause problems in our relationships or in the workplace or whatever context we find ourselves in.

Kolts describes an exercise that may help. Bring to mind a situation in which you recently struggled. As you look back on that struggling version of yourself in that situation, try to look back with compassion the way you would re-



late to someone that you care deeply about and wanted to help. If you could go back and whisper into the ear of that vulnerable version of you in that situation, what support or encouragement might you offer to help yourself be at your best in that moment?

He suggests that it is compassionate to notice that I'm really angry right now. I'm really struggling. This is really hard. Anger tries to convince us that we must act right now. However, we are not required to believe it. We can take a moment, we can work to balance our emotions first and then we can work with the situation. He describes that as true strength and compassion.

Anger and Legacy

How might Suzanne and Gene have handled their situation differently? Obviously, we can't predict how everything will go after we pass from this life. However, there are steps we can take to prepare for that event. Paperwork can be completed, family members can be informed, our wishes can be recorded, and the legal documents can be signed. Perhaps more importantly, our preparations can help clear the air and make sure anger does not have a foothold in our legacy.



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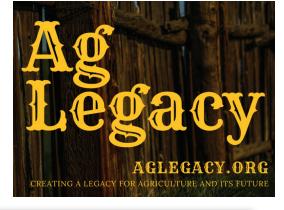
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