

Does Anger Have a Place in an Ag Legacy?

By John Hewlett, UW Ranch/Farm Management Specialist

Gene 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.

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.

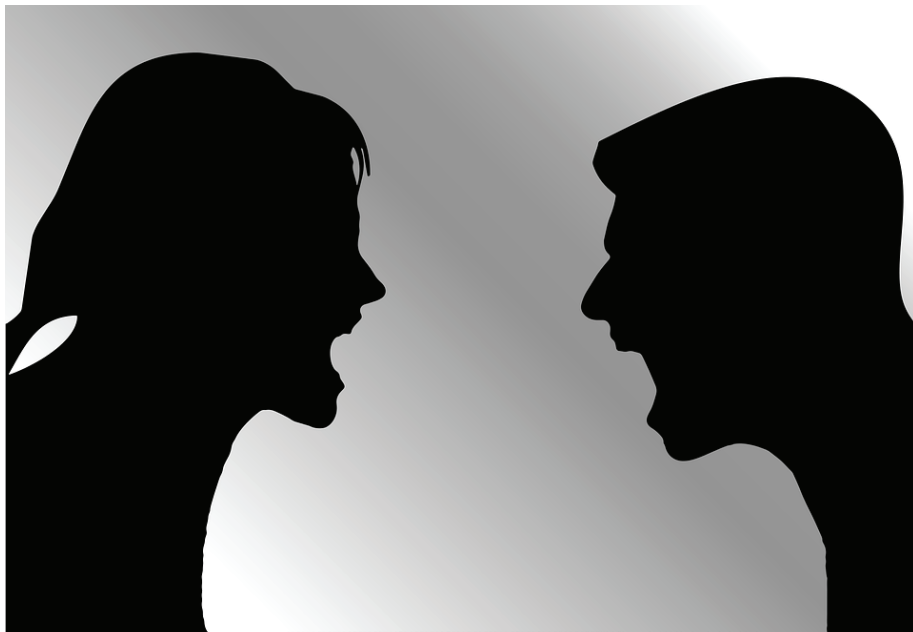
Once we've established how we are interpreting a situation, then we can begin to move forward with an intentional goal of deciding what we want to do with it. We might decide that, now is not a good time for me to become angry, so I need to take a few deep breaths. I might need to think about something 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-

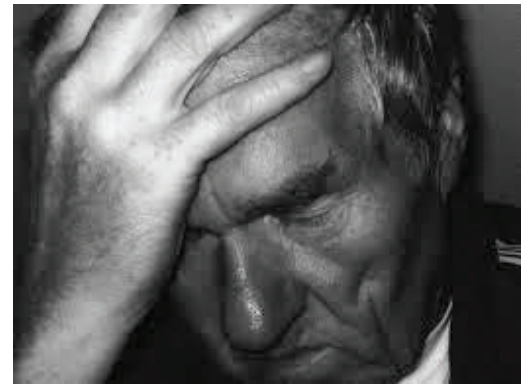
late to someone that you care deeply about and wanted to help. If you could go back and whisper into the ear of that vulnerable version of you in that situation, what support or encouragement might you offer to help yourself be at your best in that moment?



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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Ag Legacy Newsletter:

Contributing Authors -

Caleb Carter, calebcarter069@gmail.com

John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

Editing/Layout - John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

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