

The Validation of Anger

Anger is one of the basic emotions experienced by all. For an emotion to run its course, it needs to be expressed and accepted. Suppressed or incomplete anger is particularly toxic. It can fuel symptoms of anxiety, depression, OCD and eating disorders - even self-harm behaviors and suicidality. Supporting the expression of your loved one's anger can be an incredibly powerful tool for healing. In fact, by helping your loved one to express anger, you can expect to see a fairly immediate reduction in symptoms. It will also make it less likely that they will act out with verbal or physical aggression.

If it's so important, why is it so hard to validate my loved one's anger?

The capacity to remain calm, open and non-defensive in the face of another's anger is nothing short of a super-power – especially when that anger is directed towards us. In fact, our automatic reaction is to become defensive. Parents have also been taught for generations that anger from children is disrespectful and should not be tolerated. As a result, when our children are angry, no matter their age, we often feel the need to shut it down. The problem is that people who struggle to express assertive anger are more likely to dismiss their needs to avoid conflict. Loved ones who are explosive can also benefit from validation to help calm their “brainstorm” and find more appropriate ways of communicating that all is not well. Typically, when someone begins to yell or use provocative language, it usually means they do not feel heard, and reflects a need for validation and connection. In fact, navigating anger together can promote a deepening of the relationship. Your loved one also needs to learn how to get angry, and move through anger, in order to navigate some of life's biggest challenges.

My loved one is always angry. Won't I be reinforcing this pattern?

Imagine that anger is like the air in a balloon. When you validate your loved one's anger, you slowly let the air out of the balloon. In other words, their anger will slowly dissipate and so too will their symptoms. If your loved one is quick to anger, and angers often, you may discover that their anger serves to cover up deeper feelings of pain - including fear, loneliness, sadness or shame. Validating the anger will allow you to support them with these vulnerable emotions. Doing so will lead to a further reduction in symptoms, among other positive outcomes.

My loved one doesn't seem angry at all. Are you sure this will work?

If your loved one is struggling with a mental health issue, assume there is unexpressed anger. You should also assume that they are afraid to be angry with you in case it negatively affects your relationship. The best way to “prove” to your loved one that it's ok to be angry with you is to help draw out their anger by recalling and validating instances when 1. they made attempts to express anger towards you or 2. it made sense for them to feel angry, but they did not express it. If they dismiss your attempts – let them know that it would be normal to feel angry in those instances, and validate their possible experiences, especially if they tend to shy away from expressing this powerful feeling.

“I don't blame you for feeling anger when _____ because _____ and because _____.”
Be sure to match your loved one's tone and volume, while ensuring the content is validating and supportive.

