

Controlling Angry People

By Jack Schafer, Ph.D.

[Anger](#) is a powerful emotion. Remember back to the last time your friend, boss, or colleague became angry with something you said or did. How did you handle the situation? If you are like most people, you defended yourself and launched a counterattack. The verbal exchanges continued to the point where either you or your antagonist walked away vowing to never speak to the other person again. In more dangerous situations, what would you do if you came face-to-face with an angry person who wanted to harm you or someone you care for? Controlling angry people is challenging, but there are several effective [anger management](#) strategies you can use to avoid verbal confrontations and protect yourself or the people you love from angry people.

I developed these strategies during my 25 year [career](#) in law enforcement dealing with angry people on a daily basis. These techniques saved my life on several occasions. The strategies are simple, yet effective techniques to control angry people. However, as with all skills, mastery requires practice.

Fight/Flight Response

Anger triggers the fight/flight response, which mentally and physically prepares the body for survival. During the flight/flight response, the body automatically responds to a threat without conscious thought. As the threat increases, a person's ability to reason diminishes. Angry people experience the same phenomenon because anger is a reaction to a real or perceived threat. Angry people talk and act without thinking. The level of [cognitive](#) impairment depends on the intensity of the anger. The more angry people become, the less likely they are to logically process information. Angry people are not open to solutions when they are angry because their ability to think clearly is impaired.

Fight/Flight Recovery

The body takes about 20 minutes to return to normal after a full fight/flight response. In other words, angry people need time to calm down before they can think clearly again. Angry people will not completely comprehend any explanations, solutions, or problem solving options until their body returns to normal again. Allowing for this refractory period is a critical part of any anger management strategy. The important thing to remember is that you must remain calm in the face of anger. If you remain calm, your cortex will send a signal to your limbic system to dampen the fight/flight response allowing you to develop well thought out survival strategies. When the fight/flight mechanism is fully engaged, it takes about 20 minutes to regain the ability to fully process information again. Therefore, the first strategy for breaking the Anger Cycle is "Never try to rationally engage angry people." Anger must be vented before offering problem solving solutions.

Breaking the Anger Cycle

Breaking the anger cycle allows people to vent their anger and provides them with a course of action which they have a hard time refusing. Three component parts comprise breaking the Anger Cycle: empathic statements, venting, and presumptive statements.

Empathic Statements

Empathic statements capture a person's verbal message, physical status, or emotional feeling, and using parallel language reflects that verbal message, physical status, or emotional feeling back to that person. The basic formula for constructing empathic statements is "So you..." This basic formula keeps the focus on the other person and away from you. We naturally tend to say something to the effect, "I understand how you feel." The other person automatically thinks, "No, you don't know how I feel because you are not me." The unique features about empathic statements are they do not fuel anger, and you do not have to agree with the angry person, you merely reflect their message back to them. With [practice](#), mastering the construction of empathic statements becomes second [nature](#).

The following exchange between an angry customer and a sales manager demonstrates the basic empathic statement.

CUSTOMER: The salesperson just sat there talking on the telephone and ignored me.

SALES MANAGER: So you felt the salesperson ignored you when you needed help.

The sales manager captured the essence of the customer's complaint and used similar language to reflect the same message back to the customer. The reflected message lets the customer know that the sales manager is concerned about the problem without adding fuel to the customer's anger.

When the basic formula to construct empathic statements is mastered you can construct more sophisticated empathic statements by dropping the "So you.." To people who are not angry, empathic statement might seem patronizing, but this is not the case for two reasons. First, the angry people's fight/flight response is engaged and they not logically processing information; they are on automatic response. Second, people naturally think that the others should listen to them and they do not see personalized attention as unusual.

Venting

Venting is a critical component to breaking the Anger Cycle because venting reduces frustration. Empathic statements portray the target of the anger as non-threatening, which reduces the impact of the angry person's flight/fight response. Once angry people vent their frustrations, they become more open to solutions because they think more clearly when they are not angry. Venting is not a singular event, but, rather, a series of events. The initial venting is typically the strongest. This allows angry people to "burn off" most of their anger at the onset of the exchange. Subsequent venting becomes increasingly less intense,

unless fuel is added to reignite the anger. This is especially true if angry people are allowed to expend most of their anger during the initial venting.

A natural pause occurs after each venting event. During this pause, you should construct an empathic statement. Since empathic statements encourage venting, the angry person will likely continue venting, although with less intensity. After the next natural pause, you should construct another empathic statement. You should continue constructing empathic statements until the customer's anger is spent. The following example illustrates the combined use of empathic statements, and venting.

CUSTOMER: I didn't appreciate the way that sales person treated me. She was so rude. She acted as if I wasn't even in the store. (Anger)

SALES MANAGER: So you felt as if the sales person ignored you when you needed help. (Basic empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: Yeah, she was talking on the phone and trying to ring me up at the same. I didn't want to hear about her [social life](#). I wanted to make a purchase. (Venting)

SALES MANAGER: The salesperson should not have been talking on the telephone and ringing you up at the same time. (Sophisticated empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: When I talk to salespeople, I want their entire attention.

SALES MANAGER: Salespeople should be attentive to customers. (Sophisticated empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: Yeah. (Sigh)

Nonverbal gestures typically accompany the completion of the venting process. These nonverbal gestures include: slumping of the shoulders, deep exhaling, and sighs. These nonverbal gestures signal spent anger. At this point, you should introduce a presumptive statement.

Presumptive Statements

Presumptive statements direct the angry person to take a course of action that leads toward conflict resolution. Presumptive statements are constructed in such a fashion that angry people have difficulty not following the directed course of action. Constructing Presumptive Statements requires critical listening skills and [practice](#). Notwithstanding, Presumptive Statements can be rejected. The following example demonstrates the acceptance of the presumptive statement.

CUSTOMER: I didn't appreciate the way that sales person treated me. She was so rude. She acted as if I wasn't even in the store. (Anger)

SALES MANAGER: So you felt as if the sales person ignored you when you needed help. (Basic empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: Yeah, she was talking on the phone and trying to ring me up at the same time. I don't want to hear about her social life. I wanted to make a purchase. (Venting)

SALES MANAGER: The salesperson should not have been talking on the telephone and ringing you up at the same time. (Sophisticated empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: It's common courtesy. (Sighing)

SALES MANAGER: I'm sorry you had a bad experience in our store. I will remind the salespeople that they are not suppose to be talking on the telephone during their shift. In fact, I want you to help us meet your shopping expectations by letting us know right away if you have any problems in the future. We rely on customer feedback to keep our high level of customer service. Would you be willing to do that for us? (Presumptive Statement)

CUSTOMER: Of course. I'll let you know if anything like this happens again. Thank you. (Acceptance of the Presumptive Statement)

The customer would have difficulty not agreeing to the sales manager's directed course of action because it addressed the source of the anger. The customer would sound insincere if she did not agree with the sales manager's directed course of action. The presumptive statement in this instance presumes that the customer will continue to do business with the store. This ensures repeat business.

If the person's anger has not been completely vented or fuel was intentionally or unintentionally added to the anger, the likelihood increases that the presumptive statement would be rejected. In the next example, the customer rejected the Presumptive Statement.

CUSTOMER: I didn't appreciate the way that sales person treated me. She was so rude. She acted as if I wasn't even in the store. (Anger)

SALES MANAGER: So you felt as if the sales person ignored you when you needed help. (Empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: Yeah, she was talking on the phone and trying to ring me up at the same time. I don't want to hear about her social life. I wanted to make a purchase. (Venting)

SALES MANAGER: So you think the salesperson should not have been talking on the telephone and ringing you up at the same time. (Empathic statement)

CUSTOMER: Of course I do.

SALES MANAGER: I'm sorry you had a bad experience in our store. I will tell the salespeople not to text while they are working. In fact, I want you to help us meet your shopping expectations by letting us know right away if you have any problems in the future. We rely on customer feedback to keep our high level of customer service. Would you be willing to do that for us? (Presumptive Statement)

CUSTOMER: Nobody ever listens to customers any more. (Rejection of the Presumptive Statement)

The customer rejected the Presumptive Statement even though the sales manager listened to the customer's complaint and offered a solution. The customer did not listen to the sales manager because her flight/fight mechanism was still engaged. The salespeople should reenter the Anger Cycle by constructing another empathic statement. A second Presumptive Statement should be attempted when the customer once again displays cues that indicate spent anger. Sales people should not pursue a resolution until the customer accepts the Presumptive Statement. The acceptance of the Presumptive Statement indicates spent anger and the customer will be more open to a resolution. A paper titled [Controlling Angry Customers](#) presents additional strategies to control angry customers and encourage good will and repeat business.

The techniques presented are simple, yet effective methods to control angry people. Mastering these techniques allow you to maintain control of verbally charged exchanges or prevent verbal assaults from spiraling out of control. These techniques also provide a directed course of action to resolve the conflict while, at the same time, maintain full control of your emotions and behaviors.

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