

WOMAN NEWS™

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Illustrations by Elizabeth Lada

Shout it out

Despite double standard,
don't let your anger
drive you mad

By **Marya Smith**
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Women who openly express anger are maligned by endless pejoratives — words like nag, bitch and shrew — but there are no terrible names like that for men," says Carolyn Schuham, a Chicago psychotherapist who counsels couples. "The taboos are so strong that women often don't know when they're angry."

Particularly when they feel a relationship is at risk, therapists say, women are reluctant to claim their own anger.

"Women are taught to live on others' terms and to put themselves last," says Mitch Messer, a family

counselor and director of The Anger Clinic, in Chicago. "So rather than say 'I'm angry,' women will say, 'I'm hurt.' They really believe it because they are trained to deny the validity of their own emotions."

"Anger is very active, and women are supposed to be passive," says Cynthia Ashton, a psychotherapist who leads anger workshops for women in Wisconsin and Chicago.

"Anger can be a constructive or a destructive force. It's powerful, and we're afraid of feeling our own power. Anger feels dangerous to women."

Yet "anger is inevitable," Schuham says, "and it accumulates when we ignore it."

In fact, women can pay a steep price when they keep a lid on their anger. Unaddressed anger, many therapists agree, can be a major component of depression, eating disorders, substance abuse or chronic physical complaints such as backache and headache.

Unfortunately, the direct expression of anger through confrontation doesn't always bring relief to women either.

"Typically, men blow up, and it's over," says Randy McGraw, a mental health counselor and program director of Life Enrichment and Educational Services, in Deerfield. "In contrast, anger tends to sit with women even if they blow up."

"Although women now feel permission to recognize legitimate anger," says Dr. Harriet Lerner, author of "The Dance of Anger" (HarperCollins, \$13) and psychologist at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kan., "when they vent anger they end up feeling helpless and powerless."

Schuham says that "both repressed and overexpressed anger make people very unhappy"

Many women can identify with this "Damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma.

For example, Linda, a 52-year-old Wisconsin resident, says: "Many times I'm asked to do

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H A R N E S S I N G F U R Y

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Anger

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On the other hand, Betty, 43, a graphic designer in Chicago's northwest suburbs, says: "I'm not a meek and quiet woman who holds it in. When things get stressful at work, I can vent real well, but then later I think, 'That's too much,' and I beat up on myself."

Linda and Betty's methods are the two ways women have traditionally dealt with anger, Lerner says.

"The nice woman gives in, accommodates as culturally prescribed and is essentially deselfed," she says. "The bitch gets angry and gets nowhere by letting it all hang out."

These self-defeating cycles can be broken. Lerner recommends learning new "skills to maximize the chances that you'll be heard. This is very different from sweeping things under the rug and not being who you are in a relationship."

Indeed, relationships are often at the heart of women's concerns about expressing anger. Research has shown that women place a high value on their connections with others. In addition, keeping relationships in harmony has been a traditional female role.

"What looks like passive submission may be a woman's active choice to safeguard the familiarity and security of the relationship," says Lerner.

Altogether, fear of losing a relationship exerts a powerful check on women and the expression of their anger.

"Just enough women who assert themselves do lose people so we see it as a risk," says Ashton. "Yet if we didn't get angry, we wouldn't know when we are being mistreated. Anger is a kind of life force, and we can learn to respond to it in a positive way. It can move you from one place to the next."

Schuham says women often repress their anger in a relationship because they "feel powerless to change the situation." When this happens, a woman essentially gives up on her own needs. Yet Schuham warns, "The more we compromise ourselves, the more we have resentment, and repressed anger comes out in unhealthy ways."

Lerner calls this process "deselfing." She says, "Problems with anger occur when women choose between having a relationship and having a self."

Yet women can have both, she says.

"It's important to speak up when an issue is important to you. You don't have to address every injustice, but it's a mistake to stay silent if the cost is to feel bitter or resentful. We women betray ourselves when we fail to take a stand on issues."

Changing old patterns takes thought and even practice.

"Plan what you're going to say," Lerner suggests. "Confrontation may do more harm than good when we're trying to do too much too fast or when we use anger to try to change, convince or convert another person rather than to clarify our own self."

Ashton concurs. "We often spin our wheels trying to change the other person because we don't feel powerful enough to change ourselves."

"It doesn't matter where we start, only that we start," Lerner says. "Any change we make in one arena will have a ripple effect in all areas of our lives. For example, changing how we deal with anger with our parents will reverberate in our marriage. But it's best to start with small issues to avoid being discouraged."

"My advice is, 'Don't strike while the iron is hot.' Instead, it is helpful to say, 'I need a timeout,' and use it to figure out the real issue. Ask yourself: 'Where do I stand? What do I want to accomplish? How can I best put this, but not at my own expense?' Seeking temporary space or a timeout is not the same as cold withdrawal or emotional cutoff."

Schuham agrees. "We have to become good self-observers. In calmer times, not in the heat of an argument, ask yourself: 'What am I contributing to this cycle? What observable fact is making me angry? What is really going on here?' Anger is telling you something, so pay attention."

"The healthiest response to anger is to be absolutely direct in your questions and requests of the person you're having problems with," Schuham says. "It also helps to write about your anger, either directly to the person or just to express your feelings to yourself."

"Physical release is another good way. Say you're angry at your boss and you feel you can't deal directly with those feelings right now. Go into the bathroom and jump up and down, then breathe deeply, and you'll find you can think more clearly. Or if you're a runner, pretend the sidewalk is the person you are angry with."

Some women are attending anger seminars and clinics to learn new ways to listen to their anger and to deal with it in constructive ways.

"I work in a deadline environment," says Betty, "and I noticed that my anger became more pronounced in the last five years. The workshop techniques have helped me gain perspective before I reach my flash point. Even at home, my 10-year-old daughter says I take more time now to think before I react."

"I wanted to hear practical things to do in response to anger," Linda says. "Now when something happens, I run through what I learned at the workshop, and think, 'OK, I have some options here.' For example, I've learned that I can head off anger by setting boundaries. It's about looking at things more honestly."

It is not always easy to relearn responses to anger.

"When I suggest that women just look a person in the face and say, 'I don't like it when you speak to me that way, and from now on I want you to speak to me respectfully,' many say, 'I could never do that,'" Ashton says. "To be that clear and direct is a very powerful feeling, but many women are reluctant to do that."

Many women hope to empower their daughters as well as themselves by teaching them new ways to deal with anger.

Linda invited her daughter to attend an anger workshop with her because "women haven't had models in dealing with anger in positive ways," the mother says.

"One of the workshop exercises was to check off messages we had received about anger growing up, and when I asked my daughter later about her list, it was the very same as mine. I had passed on the same messages to her."

Her daughter, Alice, a freelance cartoonist, says: "My mother influenced me by what she didn't do: She never expressed her feelings, and that's how I turned out. Then my first year in college I got so depressed it affected my health and I went into therapy. I discovered so much builtup anger. I was furious at my parents because they had never encouraged me to express myself."

"[At the workshop] I realized how women my mother's age were never taught it's OK to speak up. It was great to be with other women talking about a subject that was taboo when I was growing up."

"It's important for a young girl to know that anger is a legitimate feeling and that there are healthy responses to it," Schuham says.

"Your daughter is watching you and how you manage anger and conflict in your own life," Lerner says. "If the only way you manage differences with your brother is to cut off from him, that pattern will continue in the next generation. It doesn't matter what you say to your daughter. The examples of our lives are stronger than any sermon."