

Responding to Anger

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

When a friend begins to angrily talk about someone else, you likely feel torn. On the one hand, you know that under the anger, your friend is feeling some version of hurt, scared, and/or sad and so you want to offer support. On the other hand, your own integrity and care for others comes up when you hear harsh judgments. You don't want your willingness to listen to be construed as agreeing with judgments of others or the situation and you don't want encourage violent speech.

The most helpful place to start is with self-connection. Ask yourself if you have the resources to be a grounded empathic listener or if your own reactivity has already started to show up? Let the other person know which is true, for example:

- "I have the space to hear you and offer empathy." OR
- "I notice I am not really able to present right now."

It's useful to make the distinction that you are offering to listen with empathy and not just volunteering to be a receptacle for someone's venting. Venting is reactivity, it isn't helpful for the other person and has a negative impact on you. When someone is expressing freely with the intention to find compassion, you can be patient while hearing judgemental words and labels knowing that they will be translated later in the conversation into feelings and needs.

Keep in mind that it is not the feeling of anger itself that necessarily presents a challenge, but rather whether or not the other person lets anger escalate and express itself in ways that don't work for you.

Even after you agree to listen, you can set boundaries regarding that listening. For example, interrupting a list of judgmental statements you might say:

- "What's important to you in this?" OR
- "I can't stay present for those kinds of judgments of others, but I do want to hear what you want in this situation." OR
- "It's painful for me to hear those judgments of the other person. Would you be willing to just talk about your experience or what you want to change in the situation?" OR
- "I'm getting overwhelmed, I need to take a break."

If you are not able to set boundaries, then you are likely to start defending the the person your friend is angry with or attempt to talk your friend down from their judgments. You might say things like:

- "Oh come on, they aren't all bad." OR
- "They are just human and make mistakes." OR
- "You are blowing this out of proportion." OR
- "Just try to see their side for a minute."

Trying to talk someone out of their judgments or pushing them to have empathy for the other person before connecting with their own feelings and needs is a sure recipe for escalating reactivity. If you are not able to hear the other person's judgments as a tragic expression of feelings and needs, then it is time for you to set a boundary or simply exit the conversation.

Someone caught in reactivity around anger might attempt to get you to agree with their perspective of the situation. This strategy is called collusion. It is a tragic strategy that is likely attempting to meet needs for support, acceptance, and empathy. In fact, collusion is not a demonstration of empathy, but merely a demonstration of adding reactivity to more reactivity.

In the case of being pressured to agree, it's important to stand in your own integrity and honesty.

Perhaps it might sound something like this:

- "Your experience is valid whether I agree with your perspective or not."
- "I'm happy to share my take on things once you really have a sense of being heard, but while you are still angry, I don't think sharing my take will be helpful."
- "It makes sense to me that you would be angry and that what they did didn't meet your needs for"
- "I wasn't there and I don't know the whole situation, so it doesn't make sense for me to form an opinion."
- I don't find opinions very interesting. What I'm interested in is your needs and how to support you.
- I don't see how me agreeing with judgments about them is helpful. I'd rather focus on supporting you and getting your needs met."
- "I care about you and am willing to offer empathy."
- "Is there another way I can show you that I care about you and support you other than agreeing?"

It's true that sometimes people get very attached to meeting their needs through getting agreement.

In the little and big picture, this idea that we can't care about each other and be connected unless we agree, has led to incredible violence and suffering. When you stand in your integrity to find another way to connect, it's much bigger than that moment between you and your friend. It's supporting a paradigm shift in which differences are no longer a threat, but rather, cause for curiosity and celebration.

Practice

Take a moment now to reflect on the last time someone wanted to share angrily about another. What was your first impulse: to move away, to calm them down, to argue, to set a boundary, or to offer empathy? What would support in stay connected with yourself in that moment?