

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 validated. Suppressed or incomplete anger is particularly toxic. It fuels mental health symptoms like anxiety, depression, OCD and eating disorders - even self-harm behaviors and suicidality. Supporting the expression of your child's anger can be an incredibly powerful tool for healing. In fact, by helping your child to off-load anger, you can expect to see a fairly immediate reduction in symptoms. It will also make it less likely that they will act out their anger physically or with aggression.

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

We're human. When someone expresses anger towards us, our automatic reaction is to become defensive. The capacity to remain calm, open and non-defensive in the face of a child's anger is nothing short of a superpower – especially when that anger is directed towards us. Parents have also been taught for generations that anger from children is disrespectful and should not be tolerated. As a result, when our kids are angry, we often feel the need to shut it down. The problem is that children who struggle to express assertive anger are more likely to be bullied or dismiss their needs to avoid conflict. Children 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 a child 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. Children also need to learn how to get angry, and move through anger, in order to navigate some of life's biggest challenges.

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

Imagine that anger is like the air in a balloon. When you validate your child's anger, you slowly let the air out of the balloon. In other words, the child's anger will slowly dissipate and so too will their symptoms. If your child 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 your child with these vulnerable emotions. Doing so will lead to a further reduction in symptoms, among other positive outcomes.

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

If your child is struggling with a mental health issue, including self-harm or suicidality, assume there is suppressed 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 child that it's ok to be angry with you is to help draw out their anger. Some parents have found it helpful to recall instances when 1. their child made attempts to express anger towards them or 2. it made sense for their child to be angry, but they did not express it. Go to your child and validate these experiences of anger. If your child denies having felt anger or dismisses your attempts - stay the course, especially if they tend to shy away from expressing this powerful feeling.

Validation Cheat-sheet:

I don't blame you for feeling anger when _____ because _____ and because _____.

Match your child's tone & volume, while ensuring the content is validating and supportive.

© Mental Health Foundations / Emotion-Focused Family Therapy, 2017

Connecting in Relationships: Emotion Coaching Silence

When a person you care about is closed to attempts for connection, it can be painful for all involved, especially if you interpret their behavior as disrespectful or rejecting. Although they may come across as “wanting space”, be assured that there are strong (and often vulnerable) underlying emotions that need attention. The approach described below may seem contrary to what common sense would suggest but it’s likely to help them to open up, connect and seek/accept support.

Step 1 Validate your loved one’s silence. Convey that you can understand why they are closed to your attempts for connection, and from three perspectives:

- a. Validate from your loved one’s perspective: *“I can imagine why you’d not want to speak to me **because** it can be really uncomfortable to talk to others about vulnerable feelings.”*
- b. Validate from the perspective of the relationship: *“I can understand why it would be hard for you to talk to me about your feelings **because** we haven’t always been in the habit of talking about the tough stuff.”*
- c. Validate from your own perspective*: *“I can imagine why you would be silent **because** I haven’t always been understanding or accepting of your feelings in the past.”* *This perspective is likely to be the most powerful.

Step 2 Validate the emotional states (anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, hopelessness) that you believe may underlie the silence / resistance to open up. Remember: making guesses is often better than asking questions.

“I can imagine that underneath the silence, you might be feeling angry because... because . . . , because . . .”

“I can also imagine that underneath the resistance, you might feel sadness because . . . because . . . because . . .” (Repeat with fear, loneliness, hopelessness...)

Step 3 Now, you may wish to communicate to your loved one: _____ (name of loved one), I want you to know that (a) “that there is space for you to build trust...”, (b) “that you can take your time...”, and that (c) “there is no pressure to engage with me in this moment...”. You may also communicate that (d) “I will be there for you no matter what...”.

Meeting silence in this way conveys understanding and respect, and this goes a long way toward maintaining connection, even encouraging your loved one to eventually open up. In fact, we’ve found that it is difficult for many to remain silent or disconnected when met with this type of unconditional support.