

## HEEDING ANGER (ii) Creating Space to Self-discover and to Choose

Uncontrolled anger has been likened to a land mine. It is apt if we think of the trail of destruction an unexpected 'explosion' leaves behind. Neither the one who stepped on it nor the one who blew up saw it coming. No one planned for it. No one is happier after it happens. We want cordial relationships. But 'explosions' often just happen.

There is usually a stimulus, an external thing, which we react to. It can be something we hear, see, taste, feel, smell or touch. It triggers something in us and we explode.

Mrs Tan comes home from work. The TV in the living room is switched on. No one is watching it. She hears her son on his handphone in his room. She complains about the wastage. The husband replies, "It's a small thing." She blows up. She yells at him. Hasn't she been telling them umpteen times about reducing electricity wastage? Why don't they get it? In a fury, she marches to her son's room, bangs on the door and insists that he switches off the TV immediately.

Just like Mrs Tan, our uncontrolled anger is usually disproportionate to the issue. We may or may not realise that. She could have reacted differently. We may or may not think so. After all, she is not wrong to demand a change towards a good habit. She has good reasons to be angry. Did she choose to respond that way? Not really. She had limited control. Do we, like her, feel tired of the pattern, the



predictable tension hovering around the dinner table, the cold-war, the ping-pong game of blame that follow? These outbursts eat away at our relationships. Are we looking for other ways to express our anger?

If we are not, we may put this article away.

If we are, we may want to learn from Victor Frankl, the author of 'Man's Search for Meaning'. He observed that there lies between stimulus and response, a space. '*In that space*' he has observed, '*is our power to choose our response*'. He went on to add that '*In that response lies our growth and freedom*'.

Very often, there is simply no space between the stimulus and our outbursts. The one with uncontrolled anger has no way of holding it down. Anger often takes on a life of its own. We are often at its mercy.

The 'space' that Victor Frankl refers to *has to be created*. Let's call this the space to choose. We must

want to create that space. This desire comes first from recognising that our outbursts are a result of what goes on in our inner world, about which we are usually clueless. If there is any chance for us to choose to behave differently, we must acknowledge the need to discover and uncover what is in us so that we can re-program the way we express our anger.

Besides this space to choose, we need to create another space. Let's call this other one the space to self-discover.

After Mrs Tan's last anger episode, she could choose to either move away from it, and remain clueless, helpless and resigned to 'That's just me' or, she could choose to make a conscious decision to step back, give herself the chance to pause and look within herself. When she chooses to do the latter, she creates for herself the space to self-discover.

It does not mean that all is well after she has made this decision. There might still be the intermittent out-of-control episodes. But because of her decision to create space for self-discovery, she will gain new insights about herself with each anger episode. She will experience herself and the other person differently with new information she has gleaned. There will come a time when she feels sufficiently empowered to choose not to react mindlessly and not be at anger's mercy. She will then experience the space that Victor Frankl referred to; the space where there is power to choose her response.

## Connect-Point

When people cannot express their feelings in words clearly and accurately, the only emotion that comes through loudly is anger.

The space of self-discovery: Creating space to increase our self-awareness of the feelings, thoughts and accompanying sensations that trigger the 'explosion' is an important start to self-discovery. Mrs Tan must try to recall how she felt when she saw that the TV was on with no-one watching it. She must learn to get in touch with herself. Then will she be able to label the feelings accurately, sense what was happening to her and be acquainted with knowing which part of her body reflected those emotions. There may have been disappointment and frustration.

Her husband's suggestion to keep the matter in perspective when he said, "It's a small thing" may have triggered subconscious thoughts. As the youngest of many children, Mrs Tan may have grown up with beliefs such as 'What I say does not matter' or 'I am not important'. In essence, her core needs for affirmation and validation were unmet. Those beliefs as well as feelings of rejection and isolation would have fuelled that outburst. Gaining awareness of these and how they have affected her current relationships is empowering. Awareness gives us the power to act. She can now choose to make peace with her past, forgive and let go. She can update her sense of self, her thoughts about herself and others. She can also choose to respond differently, cut the rope that tugs at her insecurity, the next time these thoughts get triggered.

To be realistic, it is not easy to make sense of our 'inner chatter' to come to such clarity on our own. Speaking to someone who can process with us these things can jump-start the new journey. Journaling, as in writing freely how one feels and thinks as a form of emotional processing, is also useful.

'Unmet needs' as mentioned, is at the heart of anger. There are core-needs and there are contextual needs. In this context, Mrs Tan probably needs the assurance that she is not the only one bearing the responsibility for reducing wastage in the household. She needs to know



that her concern and the value she holds about minimising wastage is understood, shared and taken seriously. Her perception of these contextual needs being unmet caused her to feel disappointed and frustrated. If Mrs Tan had been clear about her needs, she would have communicated differently. If she did so appropriately, using 'language of life and freedom' (next article), her anger would have produced a very different outcome.

We can only understand what needs of ours have been unmet if we create space to connect with ourselves and self-discover. We cannot expect others to listen well to us when we cannot communicate in ways that others can understand us well. How can we communicate in ways that others can understand us well unless we listen well to ourselves?

The next time you feel anger arising, don't bottle-up, brood or blow up. Create a space to choose. Say instead, "I am too angry to talk. There is a lot going on inside of me. I need space to understand what is happening to me before I come back to you."

Or even if you have blown it, don't let the anger episode just pass. Create a space to listen to what your anger tells you, the space to self-discover. Start small. Don't underestimate small beginnings. It will take you to a better place. Slowly and surely, you will be at the place Victor Frankl talked about - the place of growth and freedom.

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To contact us: Please call 6340 4161 or email [admin@bcare.org.sg](mailto:admin@bcare.org.sg)