Anger, Protest, and Assertion · About 4 minutes

When Someone Is Angry With You

You can hear an impact without accepting every accusation or surrendering your limits.

When someone is angry with you, the mind can go looking for a defense before they finish. Their anger might concern something you did. You may also hear a claim you remember differently.

All of that can be true in the same encounter. The challenge is to acknowledge the part you recognize without using the disputed part to dismiss everything else.

Ellis, in this fictional scene, agrees to relieve Noor at a community hall's welcome desk. He forgets. Noor stays late and misses an appointment. When he arrives, she says, “You left me here because you think my time doesn't count.”

Ellis can own the missed shift without claiming a belief he does not hold: “I said I would take over and didn't arrive. You had to stay and missed your appointment. I'm sorry. I forgot; I didn't decide your time was less important.”

His intention belongs in the account. So does the effect. Neither cancels the other.

Noor might say the missed appointment is not the main issue. She is tired of being the automatic backup whenever someone fails to show. If Ellis keeps offering to help reschedule the appointment, he may miss that larger concern. A practical offer is most useful when it responds to what actually needs attention.

Ellis may already know enough to begin. He can spare Noor the work of explaining everything from the beginning. He can acknowledge the shift he missed and consider how to make future coverage dependable, rather than waiting for her anger to become easier to hear.

He may also feel ashamed. Research distinguishes behavior-focused guilt from a negative judgment of the whole self.[2] “I'm a terrible person” can draw the conversation toward reassuring Ellis while Noor remains affected. Support for his distress can come from elsewhere; she does not owe it as part of raising the problem.

Anger can express a legitimate grievance. Threats and intimidation are conduct that require their own response. The APA distinguishes the emotion of anger from aggression intended to harm.[1] Accountability does not require staying available for an unsafe or unwanted exchange. You can end it without first proving why the other person behaved that way.

Where conversation is possible, try to keep the account specific: what did you agree to, what did you do, and what happened to the other person? Disagree with inaccurate accusations without withdrawing accurate acknowledgment. Leave room for information that changes your understanding of the impact.

This time the voice is across the room, and there is something we may need to hear in it.

Ellis can listen for the part that concerns something they did. What happens after this conversation will tell the other person whether it was heard.

Companion reading · Your Anger Deserves a Voice

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Anger, Protest, and Assertion (public introduction; full modules require access).

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Sources and further reading

[1] American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Anger. APA Topics in Psychology. Source.

[2] Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. Annual Review of Psychology, 58, 345–372. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145 Source.

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