

# The Slow Simmer:

How Women Display  
and Deal With Anger

By Barbara E. Fox, Ph.D.



**Oppositional kids? Insensitive  
husbands? Unreasonable bosses?**

**Who doesn't have a reason to be angry?  
But if you're like most women, it's hard to  
be comfortable with feelings you've been  
told (since childhood!) just aren't "nice."**

**N**aughty or nice isn't the issue anymore, with research now weighing heavily toward the fact that keeping anger in is no better than launching an explosion. Both tendencies are considered to be equally destructive modes of expression.

Dr. Sandra Thomas, director of the Center for Nursing Research at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, performed a study of 535 women ages 25 to 66, the majority of whom were married moms who work full-time outside the home. It was the first large-scale look at anger in the lives of middle-class women<sup>1</sup>.

What Dr. Thomas found was that women would be better off both physically and emotionally, if they were

able to use their anger in the way that evolution had intended - as a warning signal. In particular, if actions or words are felt to be threatening to a woman's well being, she needs to think in terms of how to react to them and cope with them. Her first response should be to identify her anger triggers.

Two University of Tennessee nursing doctoral students at the time of the study, Gayle Denham and Kaye Bultemeier, described those triggers in terms of issues of power, justice and responsibility. For instance, women in the study got angry when:

- They were unable to meet their own expectations
- They were unable to change frustrating situations at work
- Their family members, friends or co-workers couldn't live up to their expectations
- They were being treated unfairly or disrespectfully

All of this led Dr. Thomas to suggest that many of the health problems that tend to plague women (depression, headaches, obesity, autoimmune diseases) could, to some extent, result from their inability to manage anger, or unhealthy reactions to it. She likens anger to a squeezed balloon - if it doesn't come out in one way, it will come out in another.

According to a study by Raymond DiGiuseppe, Ph.D. of St. John's University in NY<sup>2</sup>, when compared to men, women were found to stay angry longer and feel more resentful, yet were less likely to express that anger. He found that for women, anger brings on guilt, as well as the fear of failed relationships. His study showed that women work hard to hide the expression of this very universal feeling, and rather than come to a boil, tend to keep anger at a slow simmer.

Men, on the other hand, scored higher in experiencing their anger through physical or verbal aggression, impulsivity, coercion and even revenge, while women tend to have much less outward aggression.



That's not to say that women can't hold a grudge! Dr. DiGiuseppe's study found that more women showed signs of "indirect aggression" such as "writing people off" with the

intention of never speaking to them again, rather than dealing directly with them. Dr. Thomas' research showed that women tended to ruminate about what makes them angry, to view it as unfair, and to place blame.

In their book *The Anger Advantage*, Drs. Deborah Cox and Sally Stabb and Karin Bruckner explain that women are masters at turning anger inward against themselves, and that is

**"Women work hard to hide anger, and rather than come to a boil, tend to keep anger at a slow simmer."**

what results in anxiety or depression. They also tend to reinterpret anger as "hurt." Cox, Stabb and Bruckner found that women who mask their anger tend to be more anxious, tense and may suffer more panic attacks. Next time you feel an anxiety attack coming on, before you assume you are simply the overanxious type, it may be useful to ask yourself if you are really angry at some person or situation and have buried it deep inside rather than risk confrontation.

Does this give us permission to blast a co-worker the next time she gets under our skin? No, says Cardiologist C. Noel Bairey Merz, medical director of Women's Health at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. Dr. Bairey Merz found that going to the extremes of anger was correlated with higher levels of coronary heart disease in women<sup>3</sup>. According to Dr. Margaret Saylor's research at UNC-Charlotte, "yelling, screaming and lashing out" is also correlated with low-self-esteem and depression in women<sup>1</sup>.

So, if avoiding, escaping or repressing anger is as detrimental as exploding, what do we do? The truth is that we deal better with anger if we are willing to feel it, but not allow it to rule our behavior. Trying to control our anger means we are unwilling to experience the very real feelings we have. No matter how angry you are or how often you are angry, you still need to see yourself as an acceptable, ordinary person entitled to feel the whole range of human emotions.

If you can accept that you are angry without judging or criticizing yourself, chances are you'll be able to use your anger to right a wrong or feel more empowered. Scientists at UCLA have also found that when a woman is angry, the part of the brain that processes her emotions gets very active, but when she accepts her feelings, it actually calms down<sup>4</sup>.

And there's more good news. Dr. DiGiuseppe's study shows that anger differences between men and women tends to decrease after about age 50, as anger in general seems to decline with age for both sexes. That could potentially help us understand our partners better in later years!

So the next time you find yourself angry, try talking or writing

So the next time you find yourself angry, try talking or writing about your feelings, or practice techniques of emotional acceptance such as mindfulness meditation. It could very well keep that simmering pot from boiling over.

<sup>1</sup> Jane Brody, "Women and Anger: To Vent or Not to Vent Isn't the Question," The New York Times, December 1, 1993, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). <sup>2</sup> Melissa Dittmann, "Anger Across the Gender Divide," APA Online: Monitor on Psychology, American Psychological Association, March 2003, Volume 34, No. 3, [www.apa.org/monitor/mar03/angeracross.html](http://www.apa.org/monitor/mar03/angeracross.html). <sup>3</sup> "Women's Anger May Affect Heart," Medical News Today, Cedars-Sinai, January 15, 2007, [www.csmc.edu/11336.html](http://www.csmc.edu/11336.html). <sup>4</sup> "Putting Feelings into Words Produces Therapeutic Effects in the Brain," UCLA Science Daily, June 22, 2007, [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070622090727.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/06/070622090727.htm).

*Barbara E. Fox is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Mt. Laurel. She received her Ph.D. from S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo, and has worked in a variety of capacities with diverse populations and age groups. She has a background in special education and is also a certified school psychologist. Read her regular advice column starting in the next issue of Girlfriendz. Contact Dr. Fox at [girlfriendz@girlfriendzmag.com](mailto:girlfriendz@girlfriendzmag.com).*

