

A Message from the Calm to the Angry

Written by Bryan Caplan.

Dear Angry Person,

I can tell that you're angry at me again. I think I understand your complaint, though I have trouble understanding why this specific issue is upsetting you on this specific day. But based on past experience, asking for clarification will only make you angrier, without helping me avoid your future anger. As usual, then, I plan to appease you.

But in the silence of my mind, I've got a question for you. In all the years we've known each other, how many times have I expressed anger at you? By my count, the answer is ... zero. Question: Do you think that's because your behavior is above reproach? Do you imagine I'm entirely satisfied with the way you've treated me? Well, I'm not. Your emotional abuse aside, you've failed to meet my expectations more than once.

So why haven't I ever raised my voice at you? Indeed, why do I normally act as if everything you do is unobjectionable? Seven main reasons.

1. Nobody's perfect. I take a moderate amount of bad behavior for granted and count myself lucky it's not worse.
2. Assessing behavior is surprisingly ambiguous. Real life is not a math exam. While bad behavior plainly exists, even decent people frequently see the world differently – an insight that inspired game theorists to develop the notion of trembling-hands equilibria. In such an environment, interpreting people's actions charitably is advisable – especially people with a long, admirable track record.
3. While getting angry often changes behavior for the better, getting angry also often changes behavior for the worse. Net effect? Unclear.
4. Getting angry is far from the only way to change behavior for the better. So in the subset of situations where anger is an effective motivator, you still have to ask: Does it motivate better than these alternatives? The answer, once again, is unclear.
5. Even when anger is the best short-run strategy, it damages long-run relationships. And I value these long-run relationships more than I value winning any specific dispute.
6. Getting angry clouds your thinking, leading to intellectual and moral error. And two of my chief life goals are being right and acting rightly.
7. All else aside, getting angry is aversive for me. I don't "love to hate" anything or anyone.

I wish to live in harmony with others, especially people I know personally.

As I rattle off these points in my head, I nervously visualize you getting angrier. So as usual, I'm not going to tell you what I'm really thinking. Still, after making full allowance for reason number two, here's a harsh truth: when you kill the messenger, your ignorance is culpable. Your obliviousness to my concerns is a vice. Calm People like me deserve better.

Sincerely,

Calm Person

Originally published at EconLib.org.