

A LINE ON LIFE

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Anger and Violence *

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With the tragedy that occurred at Columbine High school, more people are concerned with anger and violence. Actual violent behavior is very hard to predict. However, here are some cues from the American Psychological Association (APA) that can help.

Those who act violently have trouble controlling their feelings. Often they have been hurt by others. They use violence or threats of violence to make others fear them. They think this will solve their problems or earn them respect. This isn't true. Violent people lose the respect of others. They are typically isolated or disliked, leaving them still feeling angry and frustrated.

There are immediate warning signs that violence is likely. Here are some of them.

- Loss of temper on a daily basis
- Frequent physical fighting
- Significant vandalism or property damage
- Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- Increase in risk-taking behavior
- Detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- Announcing threats or plans to hurt others
- Enjoying hurting animals
- Carrying a weapon.

Other signs may accumulate over a period of time to indicate potential violence.

- A history of violent or aggressive behavior
- Serious drug or alcohol use
- Gang membership or a strong desire to be in a gang
- Access or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- Withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- Feeling rejected or alone
- Having been a victim of bullying
- Poor school performance
- History of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority

- Feeling constantly disrespected
- Failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others.

The more of these signs that you notice, the higher is the potential for violence. When you see many of these signs in someone, you can help. (Merely hoping that someone else will help is not effective.)

First of all, consider your own safety. If possible, don't spend time alone with those who exhibit these warning signs. Tell some adult you trust and respect about your concerns and ask for help — a family member, teacher, coach, clergy, guidance counselor, psychologist, school resource officer or friend.

If you think you are a potential victim of violence, carrying a weapon or becoming violent yourself will make the situation worse. Get someone in authority to protect you, or seek an experienced professional for help. *Don't go it alone!*

If you recognize the warning signs in *yourself*, you can get help. Admitting that you are concerned about hurting others is the first step. Next, you need to talk to a trusted adult like those mentioned previously. If needed, they can refer you to a licensed mental health professional who can help.

With emotional arousal, a rush of adrenaline causes your heart to beat faster, your voice to become louder, and your muscles to tense. To reduce these symptoms, there are several things you can do.

- Concentrate on your breathing, taking slow, deep breaths.
- Imagine yourself anywhere that makes you feel calm and peaceful, like a beach or lake.
- Try other thoughts or actions that have helped you to relax in the past.
- Keep telling yourself things like, "*Calm down*," "*I don't need to prove myself*," or "*I'm not going to let that person get to me*."

Even when you are very upset, violence is not a good option.

All of us feel angry or frustrated when we have been deceived or betrayed. This doesn't mean you need to become violent. These strong emotions are hard to control, but you still can do it. There are some skills you can learn to control your own anger without violence.

- **Learn to talk about your feelings.** You may be afraid to talk. You might not be able to find the right words to describe what is happening to you. However, a trusted friend or adult can help you on a one-to-one basis.
- **Express yourself calmly.** Although it hard to do at first, express criticism, disappointment, anger or displeasure without losing your temper or fighting. Before you respond, ask yourself if your response is reasonable and safe.
- **Listen to others.** Listen carefully when someone is giving you negative feedback. Try not to get upset. Try to understand the other person's point of view.
- **Negotiate.** Try to work out your problems with others. Look for nonviolent solutions or compromises. Although you might not get all you want from a compromise, it will be more satisfactory for everyone involved than threats or violence.

- **Consider the consequences.** Think before you act. Try to find explanations for what provoked you that are positive or neutral. Try to defeat the problem rather than the other person. Remind yourself of the benefits of controlling your anger and the negative consequences of losing control.

All of us have emotions. Some are pleasant, and others feel terrible. We may not be able to control the emotions we feel, but we can control what we do about them. You — and only you — have the power to control your behavior. Don't let your emotions control you.

* Adapted from the pamphlet, *Warning Signs of Teen Violence*, that can be found online at apa.org. The complete pamphlet can be viewed there or obtained free from the APA.