

Understanding Anger

“Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear – but around in awareness.”

– *James Thurber*

We all get angry. Many people choose not to believe this, but anger is a universal human emotion that can help us survive and solve some of life’s problems – or, conversely, it can create further trouble. Anger is an emotion that can occur when there is a threat to our self-esteem, our bodies, our property, our ways of seeing the world, or our desires. People differ in what makes them angry. Some people will perceive an event as threatening, while others see no threat at all in the same event. Our responses to anger differ as well. Some people are able to experience angry feelings and use them as a way of solving problems. Others turn their anger inward and engage in self-destructive behavior. Other people strike out when they feel angry. And some refuse to acknowledge their anger – or they confuse anger with other emotions such as vulnerability or fear.

When anger occurs, the body goes instantly into a series of mind-body reactions involving hormones, the nervous system, and the muscles. This involves a release of adrenaline that results in shortness of breath, skin flushing, muscle rigidity, and tightening in the jaw, stomach, shoulders and hands. Our thoughts can become fragmented and our eyes may dart from object to object. We become agitated and may even tremble. Our first impulse may be to take action – and this could turn out to be destructive.

Think of anger as a tool for survival. When we perceive a threat, we experience a ***fight or flight response***. That is, we will either struggle to head off the threat or we will flee the situation. Either response can be helpful, depending on the circumstances. Anger is a tool that, when used effectively, can motivate us to solve problems and confront threats in a sensible manner.

Some children are brought up to feel comfortable with their anger. When they feel angry, they have a parent or other adult who helps them experience this emotion, become familiar with it, and contain their responses to it. With the guiding hand of a stable adult, they learn to trust in their anger, to feel secure when anger occurs, and to direct it nondestructively and productively. They accept anger as an emotion that can be used in a positive way. They experience anger fully – but they are able to moderate their responses, a skill they will be able to use throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, many of us, as we grew up, lacked helpful guidance in learning to deal with our anger – which is widely seen as a negative emotion that should be suppressed. A common myth suggests that healthy, happy people do not get angry. Nothing could be further from the truth. How often have we been told never to show our anger? How many people have been made to feel shame for having anger, only then to turn their anger inward and chastise themselves for feeling this normal emotion? If we don’t recognize or experience anger, we cannot learn ways to deal with it in a healthy way. If we turn it inward on ourselves, we will have difficulty using it to deal effectively with problems in the real world. Luckily, even if we learned unproductive ways of handling anger in childhood, we can learn useful methods of dealing with this emotion in adulthood.

Directing Anger Toward Others

Those who were told in childhood to avoid anger may never come to know what their anger is all about. They fear the emergence of angry feelings. When their anger is triggered, they may find themselves suddenly out of control. For those who are unfamiliar with anger, the likelihood of catapulting into rage becomes a real possibility. When things are at their most extreme, people can get hurt, damaging words

can be spoken, and property can be destroyed. When people rage, they often want to overwhelm the other person who made them angry – but they fail to understand that the consequences of raging will generally backfire on them. They lose credibility and respect in the long run, and there may even be legal consequences.

Anger directed toward others can express itself in various forms of behavior, such as –

- Verbally abusing, berating, and lecturing other people
- Holding grudges
- Manipulating others to get what you want
- Using sarcasm to show your superiority
- Harboring vengeful thoughts
- Refusing to see your part in a problem and placing the blame on another person or situation
- Using the silent treatment
- Using unfair tactics on others and catching them off guard (passive aggression)
- Displacing anger onto those who are weaker, but not the real cause of the anger

The way we handle anger in adulthood has much to do with the strategies we learned in our earlier years. Some people feel that venting their anger will dissipate it, but research argues against this myth. Venting anger unproductively usually just increases the probability of getting angrier.

Directing Anger Inward

Many people feel ashamed for having anger. If our self-esteem has been damaged, we are ripe candidates for blaming ourselves when we are angry. Women may be particularly susceptible because of cultural expectations to be nice. We may learn to direct our anger toward ourselves rather than attributing it to a perceived threat out in the world. We may berate ourselves and engage in self-destructive behavior as a consequence. Anger directed toward ourselves can manifest itself in –

- Physically harming ourselves
- Blaming ourselves for problems, even when we are not really the cause of the problem
- Refusing to feel any emotions, numbing out
- Running away from problems and never addressing them
- Abusing drugs, alcohol, food, or participating in other forms of addiction
- Engaging in dangerous behavior, such as reckless driving or thrill-seeking behavior
- Feeling uncomfortable spending time alone
- Holding on to anger and allowing it to store up

“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”

– *Indira Gandhi*

Some Suggestions for Taking a Positive Approach Toward Anger

- The most important thing one can do to manage anger is to **get to know this emotion** – and to know it well. Ask yourself the following questions. What triggers my anger? Are there any themes in these triggers (for example, feeling condemned, feeling controlled by others, feeling rejected)? What happens in my body when I’m angry? What are my thoughts when I feel angry? What actions do I feel compelled to take? When you know your anger, you can have a more controlled response to it. This puts you into the position of having more choices in how you handle angry situations. A trained therapist can help you understand the themes associated with your anger.

- Our thinking influences the feelings we have about certain situations. Examine **the automatic hostile thoughts** you have about these situations. For example, when a friend ignores you, do you automatically begin to have negative thoughts about this person? These negative thoughts can ignite a process of angry feelings. But you can ward off these feelings if you **change the negative thoughts to more positive ones**. Perhaps your friend was having a bad day or didn't know that you were trying to make contact. Take a more compassionate, forgiving, and trusting approach toward the world. This can give us a sense of empowerment – where we are in control, not our anger. Even if we are insulted or rejected, isn't it better to see what the problem is, take a flexible attitude toward the situation, and solve the problem rationally? When we examine the thoughts that lead to angry feelings, we can prevent ourselves from sliding into an angry response.

- Anger, used productively, is a problem-solving tool. Once we have learned to contain our anger and change our negative anger-provoking thoughts, we can then **use an assertive position to deal with problems**. Assertion is logical and non-emotional. There is no uncontrolled anger in a truly assertive response. Rather than having an angry blowout with your friend, simply tell her that you felt frustrated and rejected when she failed to return your phone call. Then you will hear her side of it, and communication about the problem can begin. Assertion is a way of defining your boundaries. You can let others know who you are and what you expect (although this does not mean that they will necessarily do what you want). In using assertive techniques, you solve the problem rather than letting it fester into destructive anger.

- It is **better to be connected than right**. Striving to be right has caused many wars – and few wars have produced real winners. Most people involved in a dispute believe that they are right and the other is wrong – and both sides can usually muster up the evidence to support their case. Rather than falling into anger and taking an adversarial position when there is conflict, try using **good communication skills** to solve the problem. Learn how to listen to the other party. Speak in terms of “I-statements” rather than blaming others and putting them on the defensive. Don't bombard the other person with a litany of past grievances – just address the issue at hand. Good communication skills can be learned in a therapeutic setting.

- Finally, there are a number of other methods for dealing constructively with anger. For example, if you have anxiety associated with anger, get some **physical exercise** to dissipate the anxiety. Take some calming **deep breaths**. Or **write out your angry feelings** (write in a journal, or compose a letter or email – *but do not send it!*). If an angry situation is getting out of control, **leave the situation** – give yourself some time to cool off. And above all, **don't take action** when you are angry (repeat to yourself privately in an angry situation “Don't take action. Don't take action.”). Tell yourself, “I'm a loving and good person who has integrity – and I'm going to stay that way.”

An Exercise for Exploring Anger

Do this exercise once a day for a month or so. It only takes a few minutes. This exercise encourages you to explore your anger so that you can take a more contained approach toward it.

Find a quiet time and place with no distractions (turn off the TV and background music). Close your eyes and visualize someone you are angry with. Feel the anger welling up inside you. Make the anger swell. Now observe your body's reaction to the anger you are feeling. Observe your thoughts during your anger. Feel your state of being angry and realize that you are now in touch with a normal human emotion. Then, when your anger has built to a peak, deliberately let it go. Release your breath slowly and calm yourself. (This trains the brain to let go of anger.) In time you will realize that you feel comfortable with your anger. It's simply a normal emotion that helps us deal with life's problems. *(Note: since anger is such a powerful emotion for some people, it is strongly recommended that this exercise be done under the guidance of a trained psychotherapist.)*

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Controlling the Escalation of Anger

When anger goes out of control the consequences can be devastating and irreparable. When people have a destructive angry episode, there is a series of steps involved in the escalation of the interaction. We should aim to stop the escalation before it spirals completely out of control. We can learn to break into this chain of behavior at any point to prevent anger from reaching a destructive level, although the interventions are more effective at the earlier stages of the sequence.

First there is a **triggering event**. All of us have different events that can trigger anger, but in most cases the event is something that makes us feel threatened.

Next the **we interpret the event**. It is our interpretation of the event that can send us instantaneously into an angry state. If the event taps into our unresolved issues regarding rejection, humiliation or being controlled or abused, we are likely to interpret it as a threat. If we rely on rigid patterns of thinking involving "shoulds," "musts," and "oughts," we are likely to justify our anger. In order to break the chain of anger at this point we need to go immediately into a more flexible mode of thinking so that we can interpret the event in a positive light and with compassion.

Third, we quickly have a **physical reaction** to anger with a rush of adrenaline that causes stress, quick movements, fragmented thoughts, and a need to take action. To intervene at this point, we should breathe deeply, work on calming ourselves and refuse to take destructive action. If necessary, it may help to leave the situation entirely to calm down.

Then, we go into a stage of **automatic negative thoughts** which increases our perception of being harmed and justifies our physical reaction. These thoughts usually involve self-righteous beliefs and a desire for vengeance. There is often little logic associated with these thoughts. We engage in name-calling, threats to the other person, self-justifying statements, assumptions that we are being threatened, and catastrophizing. At this point, observe your thoughts and statements – and simply refuse to engage in this stage of the process. Breathe deeply, count to ten and avoid saying anything inflammatory.

"Speak when you are angry and you make the best speech you will ever regret."

– Ambrose Bierce

