

Anger

Anger is one of the most baffling and cunning emotions that people try to get a handle on in our world today. It is the most enigmatic of all emotions, the most daunting, and the most awe-inspiring. Some people recoil from anger, and wish it would just disappear off the face of the earth. They fear their own anger, or fear being the recipient of someone else's anger. Conversely, other people gravitate towards anger, and delight in it, whether it is their own anger or someone else's. They feel momentarily invigorated and empowered by it, and enjoy seeing the fear that it instills in others.

Some people are happily addicted to their anger, and would never leave home without it. Others would like nothing more than to let their anger go, yet feel helpless in their own efforts to do so. Men tend to channel their anger outwards, while women tend to direct their anger inwards. Children often grow up full of anger, and choose to either bury it inside or vent it outside onto others. And so the transmission of anger goes on from generation to generation, along with its puzzling legacy, leaving people to question in their hearts year after year, just what is anger anyway?!!

In my work as a Marriage and Family therapist, I have come to the realization that anger is a normal adaptive emotion that is not in and of itself a problem. It is the behavioral response to anger that determines whether or not it will serve us well or become problematic. In many instances, anger can be a helpful signal telling us that something is wrong. In turn, it compels us to make necessary changes in our lives. Anger also empowers us to challenge injustice. Moreover, anger serves to protect us by mobilizing us to take action when we are truly in danger.

Anger becomes maladaptive, however, when we allow it to turn into aggression. Anger with aggression, or rage, sometimes hurts people irreparably. It can permanently scar a relationship, and sever the trust between people. Moreover, when it is too easily triggered, or too prolonged, it can impact one's concentration, mood, self-esteem, work and social life as well.

Chronic anger can have serious consequences on our health as well, resulting in hypertension, increased cholesterol levels, damaged or blocked arteries, aggravated heart disease, increased susceptibility to infection (due to depressed immune system), and longer recovery time from major traumas to the body. When acted out, anger can result in physical violence inflicted on others, and when internalized inwards, anger can result in depression, and may lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as alcohol or substance misuse.

Anger originally evolved in the distant past to help us protect ourselves from physical threats in our environment, such as saber toothed tigers and other

predatory animals. Even though few of us are exposed to such threats nowadays, people today never the less feel threatened in countless other ways.

For example, we may feel a need to protect our exclusive rights to our mate, or we may feel a need to respond to a perceived unfairness or injustice. Or we may perceive disrespectful treatment of our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and needs. Moreover, we may also perceive a threat to the continuation, or success of something to which we are strongly committed, e.g. one's lifestyle or status in the community. Our anger may also be stimulated when we perceive provocation, suspicion, or hostility. In this instance, we may engage in a preemptive strike and attack first before the other person does.

Another common situation that can cause angry feelings to become problematic is when we fail to adapt to changes in our environment, or in someone's attitude towards us. For example, anger can be triggered when we experience an abrupt change in our living environment, or when a meaningful relationship ends. These changes make us insecure until we have found a way to integrate it comfortably within our frames of reference. In the meantime, our perceptual faculties are working overtime to help us make sense of our changed environment as fast as possible.

When we face experiences like the ones listed above, we often feel afraid and/or hurt, and/or very frustrated. We also tend to feel powerless, helpless, and out of control. These are all primary emotions that we all experience from time to time. These primary emotions tend to make us feel frail, and exceedingly vulnerable to others. When these unpleasant feelings go unacknowledged and are not worked through, we tend to call upon our anger to rescue us from experiencing them all together. Anger is a secondary emotion that has a way of making us feel more empowered. We feel stronger because anger literally triggers biological responses within us that lead to internal feelings of energy and warmth, and infuse us with an urge to shout and move quickly and forcefully.

These biological changes include an increase in the production of cortisol in the body, and an increase in the supply of testosterone in men. The body's fight or flight response is activated, resulting in a releasing of endorphins, the body's opioids, and increased secretions of adrenaline, the body's natural stimulants. This heightened state of arousal that we experience in our bodies, and its accompanying infusion of cortisol, testosterone, endorphins, and adrenaline make us feel more alive, and more emboldened.

When we feel enraged, we also often experience noticeable changes in our bodies that happen to simultaneously scare away whomever is threatening us. For example, when we are enraged, our breathing becomes more rapid, and our eyes open widely with dilated pupils. Our facial color reddens, or may even turn pale, and our voice becomes louder and our speech quicker. Finally, our movements become quicker and our muscles tense. For example, our face may

contort, our fists and jaws may clench, and our shoulders contract and appear hunched.

It is precisely because rage makes us feel more powerful, and look more threatening, that a lot of people prefer engaging this secondary emotion to feeling the more vulnerable primary emotions. I want to reiterate again, however, that while rage can be useful as a short-term emergency reaction, it does us a huge disservice when it becomes an enduring, long-term personality trait and lifestyle characteristic. Again, it then jeopardizes our health, destroys the relationships that matter most to us, worsens our mood, and withers our self-esteem.

Fortunately there are ways to manage and even let go of anger for those who wish to do so. These ways include reminding yourself of what you ultimately hoping to achieve when expressing your anger, countering inflammatory thoughts with more positive self-talk, working through and healing from the primary emotions that your anger may be masking, and owning the thoughts, feelings, and judgments that you may be unconsciously projecting onto others.

In addition, people working to manage and/or let go of their anger can learn to pay greater attention to the bodily sensations that signal to them that they are upset in the first place. These bodily sensations act a lot like alarm clocks, calling on us to wake up and take active measures to get our needs met before exploding outwards or imploding inwardly. Finally, people can learn behavioral strategies to manage their anger, like taking time-outs, deep breathing, meditating, and exercising.