

Working with Anger

It is no surprise that anger is routinely pathologized in western culture. Anger developed as a means of motivating attack, a way of defending turf. In our culture and others, anger spills over into destructive aggression and violence. We hear more and more about road rage, air rage, school bullying, and fatal attacks over minor disagreements. Clearly anger is dangerous, clearly it needs to be stopped, clearly we need to eliminate it.

Or do we?

Why is it that so many people are overcome with anger and lash out in violence? Could it be that our rejection of anger somehow promotes its expression as aggression?

Carl Jung argued that characteristics that we cannot accept in ourselves, which we deny to be a part of ourselves, control us. Putting them out of sight takes them off the leash, and lets them run wild behind our backs. We tell our children *“Don’t be angry”*, but we don’t tell them how to remove anger from their minds. No surprise there. We don’t really have a strategy to offer. Result: The anger remains and is overlaid with shame or guilt, which only magnify the anger.

One way of looking at aggression is that it is a strategy to release anger. We feel angry, and believe this is an intolerable state. We have to change it, but how? Perhaps if we give in to temptation, if we lash out with tongue or fists, the pressure will ease. Sure enough, it does, for a few seconds, only to be replaced with shame or guilt. Then to get rid of *these* feelings we engage in endless justification. *“She deserved it, she stole my bagel and dropped it deliberately!”* The anger, now justified, returns and escalates.

Intolerance of our own anger causes us to do almost anything to overcome it, but this only magnifies the anger in the end. Anger snowballs into rage.

The popular idea of anger is that it *needs* to be discharged. We can get rid of it by yelling, screaming, and stamping our feet. Curiously, no one suggests that loudly crying out our fear will make us courageous, that declaring our love will end it, or that rehearsing our sadness will make us happy.

In fact, it *can* be important to be able to understand, experience, and express our anger effectively. And it can be helpful, particularly in therapy, for an individual who has blocked out anger to experience and express it in its full intensity. Nevertheless, the research does not support the idea that the loud expression of anger releases it or causes it to fade. Indeed, acting anger out seems only to magnify it.

One way of working with anger is to become aware of your thoughts as you experience the feeling, and track how these thoughts feed back and reinforce the anger.

Imagine, for example, that your spouse were to drive off, unannounced, on a Saturday to run errands using the only working vehicle in the family, when you had plans to run some errands of your own. You might be irritated.

Imagine that you then inventoried your spouse's every inconsiderate act, and began to view your spouse as an inconsiderate and selfish being. The anger would likely increase.

What if you then imagined your spouse chuckling at the thought of you sitting at home frustrated, or angrily lashing out should you mention the problem? The anger might increase still more.

By the time your spouse got home you might be in an all-out rage. By that time, however, you wouldn't be angry about the vehicle anymore. Your anger would be about a series of remembered slights and your fantasy about your spouse's motivation and thoughts. For one absent-minded act your spouse might be put on trial for every lapse in the entire relationship.

This is the type of sequence many people go through when they are angry. By the time they are worked up, they aren't really angry about what happened anymore; they have made themselves angry about a sequence of thoughts following their initial irritation.

How could anger be dealt with in a more useful fashion? There are many strategies. Here are a few:

- **Take time out.** Anger can be the product of a complicated web of thinking, and the stress associated with anger can make it hard to think through – especially when you are still in the situation. Take time for a walk (which allows you to get some perspective and burn off some of the stress).
- **Identify the threat.** Ask yourself what you are really angry about. Anger is a response to feeling threatened. What is the threat to you, exactly? Are you responding to the here-and-now situation, or to a fantasy about what the situation might mean (the relationship is over, I'll lose my job over this)? Remind yourself to focus on the event, not the fantasy.
- **Look for opposing evidence.** Anger may tempt you to label the person ("*she's a slob*") or overgeneralize ("*he never thinks of what I might need*"). Your mind will then search out and find evidence confirming your theory, escalating your anger. Look for evidence that goes *against* your theory. Remind yourself about the times when she *has* cleaned up, when he *did* behave considerately. This exercise can serve to de-escalate the anger.

- **Explore the issue.** If the event calls a larger issue into question (*“He seems to do this repeatedly; maybe I need to rethink this relationship”*), take out pen and paper and explore your thoughts regarding the issue – rather than just spiraling upward into rage. What is the question, exactly? *“Do I want to be with him, considering everything?”* Identify the all of the considerations, pro and con.
- **Cope.** Decide what really needs to be done about the situation at hand. Even if the problem seems to be part of an overall pattern, you need to focus on the immediate in order to start unraveling the pattern. Perhaps you want to start a discussion about the issue, state your position, or take a stand. Fine. These ideas should be thought through, however, otherwise you are likely to be just blowing off steam rather than solving the problem.
- **Breathe.** When you are angry, your stress response is switched on. Calm it down by doing some slow, deep breathing using the muscles of the diaphragm (which will make your stomach protrude each time you inhale). Count to five breaths. At the end, see if you are calmer. If not, do another five.
- **Get help.** If anger is a significant problem for you, consider seeking help for it. Anger management groups are offered in many communities, and there are good books devoted entirely to anger and aggression (such as *The Anger Control Workbook* by McKay and Rogers).

Whichever route you try, recognize that the goal is not to stamp out all of your anger. The goal is anger *management*, not anger *elimination*. The only thing to be eliminated is pointless, destructive aggression.

If anger is a concern for you, which of the above suggestions applies best to your situation? How could you begin to apply it?
