



# Anger: The Turbulent Emotion

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When Buddy gets angry, he explodes. He yells at his wife and children. Sometimes he throws things. Once he took a swing at a fellow worker and knocked him down.

Debbie, on the other hand, keeps her anger hidden inside. She claims that she seldom gets angry. She does, however, experience headaches, some stomach problems, and an inability to sleep well. Her body reveals the stress caused by her anger.

David is angry at his family situation, but he does not seem to be able to resolve it. Instead, he stays at work long hours and he drinks too much. He does not talk about his problems directly, but makes cutting remarks about his wife in public.

These three people express their anger differently. None of them manage it constructively. Thus, anger is a negative experience for them and for those around them. In reality, like most of our emotions, anger is neither good or bad. It is just a feeling we have because we are human. How we express that feeling may be appropriate or inappropriate, but the feeling of anger itself is neutral.

Anger is an emotional arousal which prepares the body for action. It helps us to cope with hurtful, frustrating, and frightening experiences. It is a normal and necessary part of being alive.

## Types of Anger

Anger can be a very complicated emotion. It can wear many different faces. There are four basic types of anger.

1. **Depression:** While anger is not the only cause of depression, many people who are depressed are probably angry. Some of us are unable, or do not choose, to express our anger outwardly. Rather than just go away, however, the anger is often turned inward; we become angry with ourselves. Because that anger is trapped inside, we become like machines, shaking ourselves to death. We feel hopeless, alone, sad, and frustrated.
2. **Modified Anger:** Modified anger is misdirected anger. This form of anger uses other people to vent our feelings toward when we are really angry with particular people or situations. An example of this form of anger is when a woman complains to a neighbor about her husband's behavior instead of talking with him about it.
3. **Indirect Anger:** This type of anger is when we act out instead of dealing with the real cause of our anger. This is seen in the person who slams doors, breaks things, or pouts.
4. **Violence:** Aggressive behavior is perhaps the most common way of expressing anger in our society. Aggression is almost always intended to threaten or hurt someone else. It is often mixed with bitterness, meanness, or ridicule. The motive of aggression is to force someone else to behave according to our wishes. Violence, the most destructive form of aggression, never produces long-term positive results. Because of the link between anger and aggression, anger is usually perceived as being negative.

## Perversions of Anger

If we see anger as a negative or unacceptable feeling, we may try to change it in some way to make it more acceptable. There are several things we often try to do with our anger to change it.

- **Put It Down** — Normally, putting down angry feelings is an automatic response for some people. These people have practiced so long and so well at suppressing anger that they become completely unaware of having any angry feelings at all. It all happens on an unconscious level. Such persons may be characterized by statements like, “I just never get angry” or “There’s just nothing important enough to get angry about.”
- **Put It Off** — The idea here is that if we delay our anger long enough, maybe it will go away. It does not go away! It stays stored up inside us. In delaying anger we put off problems, conflicts, decisions, responsibility, and doing whatever has to be done. We feel that if it does not go away, at least there may come a time when it will be safer to feel, to express, and to do.
- **Put It On** — This process involves removing our anger from the person, place, thing, or event that we are really angry at and putting it on a “safer” or less threatening person, place, thing, or event. For example, anger may be transferred from a frightening boss and put on members of our family. Stored up feelings of anger toward our parents may be projected toward our husband or wife.
- **Water It Down** — Upon feeling anger, we immediately water it down to make it less powerful. We try to offer logical explanations as to why anger is inappropriate. This is an attempt to prove to ourselves and others that we are not angry. We might make statements such as, “You do not get angry at children!” or “What gives you the idea that I am irritated? I have not even raised my voice.”
- **Freeze It** — Using a combination of the other perversions, we freeze our anger by submerging and deadening all our feelings as much as possible. We choose not to feel anything — no joy, no pain, no guilt, no love. When we remove ourselves from our feelings we literally begin destroying ourselves. An emotional infection sets in. We cannot relate if we cannot feel. And we cannot exist if we cannot relate.

## Expressions of Anger

Experiencing anger is okay. It is one of many feelings which are a part of us. The emotion of anger does not make us bad people. Whether we acknowledge our anger for what it is or try to pervert it will largely determine how we express it. Our expressions of anger may be appropriate or inappropriate. They may be positive or negative in their outcome. Whatever expression we choose, we have to do something with our anger. If we suppress it, either consciously or unconsciously, it will likely have a negative effect on our well-being. Likewise, if we openly express our anger in inappropriate ways we probably will hurt ourselves or others. Unfortunately, many of us have learned only negative ways of resolving our feelings of anger.

We may choose to suppress our anger so that we may appear pleasant and cordial most of the time. We may put off disclosing our feelings of anger until a lot of small feelings build up. As the pressure of the suppressed anger increases over time, we reach a point where we can withhold our feelings no longer and we explode. We spew out our anger and rage indiscriminately at people and at life in general. After the explosion we may calm down for a long period of time until the pressure builds up for another explosion. Using this style of expressing our anger can be very damaging in our relationships with others because our explosion is so out of proportion to the immediate circumstances.

Another way of suppressing our anger results in a “long, slow burn.” The energy of our anger builds over a period of time. Rather than one big explosion, however, our feelings of anger are smoldering almost all the time. We are indirectly hostile more than we are aware. This hostility shows in our behavior. We may become very sarcastic, withdrawn, and stubborn. We may give people the silent treatment. This style of expression is much like a pressure cooker. The pressure builds within us, but sometimes the safety valves do not work. We not only hurt others, but we may experience any number of health problems ourselves. We may suffer from ulcers, heart attacks, or high blood pressure as a result of our stored up anger. Those of us who use this style of anger management normally take a long time to cool down after an angry outburst.

Some of us feel so threatened by feelings of anger that we avoid conflict at all costs. Usually, we just pretend conflict does not exist. We are much like the ostrich who puts its head in the sand to avoid further contact with anything that is a threat. We may become quiet or uninvolved in situations where conflict is present. Or we may become overly involved in various activities or in our job in order to be unavailable to cope with the conflict.

at hand. This style delays resolving the conflict and may generate other problems in trying to relate to others.

Others of us hold very little of our feelings inside. When we feel anger coming on we normally throw it in the direction of someone else. We give very little warning when our anger will be expressed. Usually anyone close by receives bits and pieces of our explosion. Others tend to stay out of our way and not stir us up. This style of expressing anger is very temperamental. Those of us who use it usually cool down in a hurry and desire that everything return to a normal, happy state. Because of the frequency of our explosions, however, this seldom happens.

### **Working Out Your Anger**

Perhaps the most healthy way to express our anger is simply to process it. This is done by our first viewing anger as a normal, healthy emotion which exists in all individuals and relationships. In this way, we acknowledge that anger is likely to appear occasionally and that it is okay. When we start to experience feelings of anger we attempt to express those feelings in words as soon as possible. The words are expressed calmly and peaceably. We are able to say "I am feeling angry" or "I am getting very angry" in much the same way we say "I feel hungry" or "I am very hungry." If we do this, without attacking, we will likely be able to find out how and why the anger is present.

The old adage of "count to ten" when you get angry is not bad advice. During that brief cooling down period, you might ask yourself a brief series of questions to help you get a clearer perspective on your anger.

#### **What am I feeling?**

Accurate identification of your feelings is the first step in dealing with them. For example, the real feeling may not be anger. It might be fear, insecurity, or worry, which can be perceived as anger.

#### **Why am I feeling this way?**

What situation or behavior has evoked this feeling within you? Is it a threat or a potential threat to your well-being? Try to find the source of your feeling.

#### **What can I do about it?**

Is there anything you can do to change the situation or behavior which evoked your feeling? Is there a way you can look at the situation differently so that you do not feel threatened or irritated by it? If the feeling remains, what is the most appropriate way to express it?

### **What am I going to do about it?**

Knowing what to do and doing it are two different things. By asking this question, however, you are able to realize that you have some choices. Doing something about your feelings of anger, even if you make mistakes sometimes, is better than suppressing them or feeling like a victim.

Your anger is a normal emotion, but not an uncontrollable one. For better health and better relationships try to process your anger in four steps.

1. Admit your anger. Learn to recognize angry feelings when they occur and call them exactly what they are — anger.
2. Restrain your anger. Do not let your angry feelings get out of hand by blaming or belittling someone else. Give yourself some time to gather your thoughts before you say or do anything.
3. Explain your anger. When other persons are involved in your anger, explain in a very calm manner why you are angry.
4. Get a plan of action. Try to do something about the cause of the anger. Either eliminate the cause or learn to deal with it more effectively.

### **Additional Strategies for Resolving Anger**

**Speak Up.** Be assertive and make ample use of your voice, gestures, and strong language. Communicating your needs and your feelings of anger is a healthy way of dissipating that anger. Try to be careful not to attack or belittle others. Assertiveness is a desire to take care of yourself. Aggression is the desire to hurt someone else.

**Live and let live.** Using your anger effectively requires some letting go. It means letting go of blaming other people whom you see as the source of your problems. Letting go also means ridding yourself of the notion that someone else is responsible for your happiness or that you are responsible for others' happiness. It is not your job to change other people or tell them how they should think, feel, or behave. If you find something intolerable about another person, you can live with the constant irritation of that person's behavior, or you can change your attitude and become more tolerable, or perhaps you will find it necessary to disassociate yourself from that person. The only behavior you can effectively change is your own.

**Forgive and forget.** You cannot come to the point of forgiveness and forgetting with a slush fund of built-up anger. Your anger must be experienced, dissipated, and

ended for forgiving and forgetting to take place. According to how you deal with your anger, forgiveness can come fairly quickly or it may take a long period of time. Without forgiving and forgetting wrongdoings and personal hurts, you are likely to experience perpetual emotional pain and chronic misery. Forgiveness is extremely important to mental health and to healthy relationships.

Be patient with yourself and with others as you learn to manage your anger appropriately. Life-long habits seldom change overnight. A better understanding of your anger, however, will allow you to live a healthier, happier life.

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### Suggested Reading List

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