

ANGER, A NORMAL AND NATURAL HUMAN EMOTION: What It Is And What It Isn't

Just what is the feeling of anger that so many of us experience so much of the time? When does it become something other than the normal and natural emotion that it is actually intended to be? All too often, we equate this feeling of anger with cynicism and hostility, punishing and abusive behavior, and, sometimes, even physical violence. In reality, anger is very different from these other attitudes and behaviors, which are actually toxic distortions and perversions of what anger the emotion is intended to be. Let's illustrate this idea through the example discussed below.

It's 6:30 on a Saturday night. Kent has gone to the grocery store to pick up a few items that he needs for a party at his home that will be starting at 7:00. He grabs a cart and quickly gathers the necessary goodies. He's glad he has only gotten ten items because it means he can go through the express lane. He is already feeling rushed and he really doesn't want to be late. It is mostly his friends who will be coming over and his wife has already made it very clear to him in the past that she does not want to be there alone to greet them when they arrive.

Then he gets to the check-out lines. And things start to go very wrong. The store is absolutely packed with people. The express lane is as long as all the others. And what's worse, there is a woman in the express lane who has a whole cartful of groceries. Kent starts muttering to himself: *"This is absolutely nuts. Why do there have to be so many people here right now? What the hell is wrong with that stupid jerk ahead of me...Can't she read? How can she be so damn rude and inconsiderate to me and everyone else? No one should be able to get away with something like this! Why doesn't the damn store enforce the rules they have about this?"* His heart begins to pound. He is breathing heavily. He starts to perspire. His mouth is dry. His face gets tight. His hands begin to shake. He starts to fidget and shift his weight from one leg to the other.

By the time he gets to the cashier, it's 6:50. He knows he will never make it home on time. His negative thoughts continue unabated: *"Damn it, Sarah is really going to be pissed off at me now. That means the party and the rest of the weekend will be ruined. She has no right to keep me on such a short leash. This isn't my fault but she'll think it is just like she always does. Why does she have to be so damn uptight every time we have people over? After all, they are her friends too. She had better watch it when I get home. I am so tired of dealing with her crap."*

He doesn't respond to the cashier's *"hello."* He is angry at her too. He views her as a big part of the reason he is now running so late. She should have done something about the woman in front of him who had so many items in her cart and wasn't following the store's policy. As she rings up his groceries, he continues to simmer. Finally, as he is paying for his items, he throws his money on the counter and blurts out: *"What's the matter with you people?... Can't you do anything right?...I'm never coming back to your damn store again...I just don't have time for anymore of this kind of bullshit in my life."*

Kent started out by feeling excited about the party he was giving (a “positive” stressor in his life) and also a bit rushed (which can be a stressor as well). But now he’s furious at everyone and everything and has a good chance of going home and taking his negativity and disrespectful anger out on his wife and children and having a miserable time at the party he was feeling so good about earlier in the day. What happened to him?

Anger begins as a physical experience. All strong emotions---anger, fear, surprise, excitement---trigger powerful hormones like adrenaline and cortisol that are released into the body. They produce very real physiological changes. This is the instinctual and automatic “fight or flight” stress response. It occurs in both humans and animals and causes us to want to strike out or run away (with a few other options for some people as well). This response was critical to our prehistoric ancestors’ survival. They had to deal with very real and ongoing threats to their lives and to their very survival. But it is often not very helpful for us at this point in our history. When we are angry with someone now, we cannot just hit that person or run away from the situation. What is important to us today is figuring out how we wish to respond to those hormones that are simply part of our make-up and are coursing through our bodies when we do escalate.

Kent experienced this physical arousal even prior to entering the store. He was looking forward to the party and to having his friends over. He had been busy all day cleaning the house and preparing for the get-together. He was already feeling frustrated with himself about not having gotten some grocery items he had needed for the party earlier in the week. He knew he was “cutting it close” in terms of getting back to the house on time to greet people when they arrived. In addition, he knew that his wife had clear and, from his perspective, very “rigid” expectations about how their parties are supposed to go. He always worries about her “attitude” when they entertain because they have frequently had fights about various issues related to social gatherings in the past.

There is nothing we can do to completely stop these stress hormones from circulating through our bodies at times like these. That is part of our “hard-wiring” as human beings. This physiological response can arise when we are startled, when we feel fearful or threatened, when we believe that our expectations are not being “properly” met or that things around us seem “out of control,” and when we feel a sense of insecurity, uncertainty, self-doubt, or shame. But there is plenty we can do to make sure that what happened with Kent in this situation above does not happen to us in our everyday interactions with others. Let’s look at anger and how it differs from what Kent eventually experienced and expressed in the grocery store (and perhaps later at home with his partner as well).

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ANGER is a normal and natural human **EMOTION** that arises from our interpretation and labeling of the physical stress arousal that we all experience at times. You cannot eliminate anger from

your life, as much as many people say they would like to do this. Your anger is a fact of life and a part of the human condition.

In reality, anger has a number of important and useful aspects and is appropriate whenever it is handled effectively and respectfully. First of all, anger is a “warning signal” that helps you understand when something is going on around you or within you that needs to be attended to. Anger could arise from a “core hurt” from your childhood or the more recent past that is being activated by a person or situation in the present. For example, if you were ridiculed or put down by parents or peers in your childhood, you may be especially prone to reacting very strongly as an adult if someone says something that is critical or disrespectful to you or to those you care about in the present. Anger could also be a sign that your wants, needs, rights, or core values are not being adequately addressed in a current situation (which is what Kent seemed to feel about the woman in front of him in the check-out line who had too many items and about the cashier who wasn’t “enforcing” the store rules). Finally, anger could arise if you’ve compromised yourself in some important way or if an injustice has been done to you or to others who are important to you (which may be another part of Kent’s volatile escalation in this situation).

Anger can actually be a helpful source of discovery to help clarify and define who you really are and a means to help educate others about the differences between you and them. It can be an important part of being assertive and taking care of yourself by setting clear personal limits and maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself and by enabling you to effectively cope with difficult people and situations (and there are plenty of these in our lives). It can also serve as an energizer and a catalyst to assist you in motivating yourself to accomplish what you need to do. In addition, your anger can even be a “gift” to others, although this is often extremely difficult for many angry people (or the “targets” of their anger) to fathom. If you think about it, actually sharing your anger and the other feelings that anger often hides from us in a open, direct, effective, and respectful way allows you to become vulnerable and invites others into a potentially constructive dialogue with you about the situations or issue that triggered your anger in the first place. This process may actually “open a door” to new information about yourself and others and to increased trust and emotional intimacy in your relationships.

Learning to deal with your anger in a productive way is critical because it takes an enormous toll (on us and others) to try to deny and suppress it. This potentially creates even more internal tension and can often lead to both emotional symptoms (e.g. becoming anxious and depressed) and physical ones (headaches, stomach upset, chest pain).

It makes sense that Kent felt frustrated and angry about the situation in the grocery store. People are not supposed to take forty items through the express lane. The key in this situation, however, was to try to find a more positive and useful way to address it. He might have spoken up and been assertive with the customer ahead of him or with the cashier about his concerns. If neither of them cared much about how he felt, he might have, at that time or even later, lodged a complaint with the store manager about his experience. He might have used his anger at this point to figure out how to handle the pre-party preparations more effectively in the future (e.g. making sure that he had everything he needed a day or two before the event was supposed to occur). Finally, he might have sat down with his wife at another

time and brainstormed some better ways to deal with her feelings prior to entertaining so they were actually working together as a team when they gave a party rather than creating more stress and anxiety for one another. But this just isn't what happened on this particular occasion.

If anger, that normal and natural human emotion, is not addressed and dealt with effectively, it can easily morph into the unproductive, damaging, and toxic attitudes and behaviors in the next two steps that are discussed below.

THE NEXT STEP: WHEN ANGER BECOMES A SET OF NEGATIVE, PUNISHING, AND SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS AND ATTITUDES

If anger heads in the wrong direction, as it did for Kent in the store and as it often does for many of us in a variety of situations, you can end up hurting both yourself and others. When you hang onto your anger, allow it to build and fester within you, and continue to interpret your experience or other people in a negative, blaming, and unproductive way, you create **CYNICISM, HOSTILITY, DISGUST, and CONTEMPT**, which can ultimately lead to a **SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT**.

These are **ATTITUDES** that consist of mistrusting the motives of other people and focusing on and brooding about others' real or imagined injustices toward you. They also involve a belief that "the world owes me" respect, approval, fairness, and the like (in the end, it is unrealistic to expect that you will necessarily get these at all times in your life). These attitudes create the mindset that you are completely justified in blaming people and external situations for your anger as a result of not getting what you have an "absolute right" to expect in your life. With this mindset, you continually set yourself up to look for and expect other people to be incompetent and inadequate; to be inconsiderate, unfair, and untrustworthy; and to go out of their way to hurt or mistreat you, take advantage of you, or "cross" you in some fashion. These attitudes can also involve critical, demeaning, and judgmental thoughts about yourself, your mistakes, and your own problems (although angry people frequently don't focus on this aspect of their negative thought process; they are primarily focused "outward" and tend to blame others).

Cynicism, hostility, disgust, contempt, and entitlement create the sense that you are powerless and a "victim" in the living of your life. They also scream out at you that the situation is "hopeless" and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it, which is never helpful to you in effectively addressing and resolving concerns and issues that do arise in your life. This creates a situation where you may try to do anything that you can to **CONTROL** the people and situations around you in an ineffective attempt to feel some sense of safety and power in your life, especially when this desire become intense and overwhelming, which is never helpful for you or anyone else. The best way to look for these attitudes at work within you is to notice your negative thoughts or what is called "negative self-talk:" the words, phrases, and sentences that made up the muttering that Kent was doing when he was standing in line at the store. When he thought to himself about "*the stupid jerk ahead of me,*" "*the damn store and its policy,*" how angry his wife was going to be with him about his being late, and how the party and the weekend would be ruined, he was engaging in this negative self-talk process.

Everyone has negative thoughts at times. But, when they become a regular and ongoing part of your daily life, you are constantly fueling your stress response and increasing the intensity of and prolonging the anger that you do experience. It makes it much more difficult to intervene in your anger effectively when you are continually pumping more and more stress hormones into your system through the negative self-talk that is occurring within you. This is why it is so absolutely critical to notice the very early signs that you are beginning to allow your anger to escalate. It is significantly easier to intervene in an escalation if you slow down and tune into yourself and notice what is going on with your thoughts and feelings in an ongoing way.

Chronic hostility and cynicism always exact an enormous toll on you both emotionally and physically. In fact, research indicates that cynical and hostile people are more prone to engage in a number of very risky behaviors (e.g. eating too much, drinking too much alcohol, using too much caffeine, and smoking); are at higher risk of developing life-threatening illnesses than their less hostile counterparts; and tend to drive others away or not perceive the support they could be getting and thus may be depriving themselves of the health-enhancing and stress-buffering benefits of social support and emotional connection (which can actually destroy the potentially helpful relationships that they do have and want to have with others in their lives).

THE FINAL DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORAL OUTCOME: AGGRESSION OR WITHDRAWAL

Eventually, if these attitudes become your way of looking at other people and the world around you, they then contribute directly to the actual violation of another person's rights or boundaries through **AGGRESSION** or **WITHDRAWAL**. These are **BEHAVIORS** and **ACTIONS** directed toward others to try to address the distorted and toxic anger that you have created with the cynical and hostile attitudes and mindset that you have allowed to build within you.

AGGRESSION involves behaviors acted out with the intention to hurt, demean, humiliate, punish, intimidate, or control others (even if you think to yourself or try to convince others that this is not actually your intention). It is lashing out at others emotionally, verbally, physically, or even sexually. These actions serve as a means to seek revenge for those real or imagined wrongs that you believe others have done to you when your negative thoughts have completely taken you over. They can also serve as a means to forcibly attempt to get your way in a particular situation. At this point, there is often an illusion of power, invincibility, and invulnerability and a strong desire to act out a punishing reprisal on the person or situation that we believe is "offending" us or is "hurtful" to us. And because of our entitled attitude that we absolutely deserve things like respect and fairness at all times, we often feel completely justified in doing whatever we feel like doing at this point. When Kent verbally attacked the clerk at the check-out by throwing his money on the counter, saying contemptuously "*Can't you do anything right?*" and then talking about the "*damn store*" and "*this bullshit,*" he was being aggressive. He might have followed

this up by immediately “dumping his anger” on his wife when he walked in their door to try to protect himself from her “going off on him.”

Hurtful and disrespectful behaviors can also be represented by a **WITHDRAWAL** that is designed to disengage emotionally from difficult and problematic situations. If Kent had tried to hurt and intimidate the cashier by ignoring her with a hostile and ominous silence which communicated to her that he thought she was “bad and “wrong” for letting this situation occur (even though she might not even know what he was angry about), this would have represented a “**punishing withdrawal.**” This type of withdrawal is designed to get back at or get even with someone and includes punitive behaviors like ignoring, sulking, pouting, and “giving the cold shoulder” to partners and others. If he was simply too overwhelmed and confused to say anything at all in the moment, he might have gone into what is called a “**protective withdrawal,**” another type of withdrawal where, due to feeling uncertain about how to respond and feeling “unsafe” in the situation, he becomes passive and “stuffs” and suppresses his anger and any other feelings that might have been part of his experience at the store. This could also have led to his “blowing up” at his wife when he got home or distancing himself from her when he walked in since he might have considered her to be a “safer target” for his overt or covert anger expression.

He might also have resorted to any of these behaviors with his wife when he returned home, especially if she was frustrated at him for being late to the party and he justified this reaction (to himself) by telling himself that she “*wasn’t being fair*” and “*had no right to be angry with me*” (more negative self-talk). Aggression and withdrawal, when used on a consistent and ongoing basis with other people, especially those close to us, will always eventually result in disrespect, a lack of trust and safety, and emotional distance and estrangement in our relationships with them.

What is important to realize here is that you are continually making choices when you get angry. Your anger and where it goes are not beyond your control, even when you have continued to increase your physical arousal with a negative thought process. Keep in mind, however, that, for most people, it is much easier to intervene in an escalation earlier in the process before you have “*added more fuel to the fire.*” How you perceive and react to those hormonal surges from the “fight or flight” stress response, what you think about and do as you are becoming angry, and how willing you are to stay aware of and recognize your anger when it arises will determine whether you remain with your anger as that normal and natural emotion discussed at the beginning of this section. The alternative is to allow your anger to proceed to the unhealthy and unproductive attitudes like cynicism and hostility and to the hurtful and destructive behaviors like aggression and withdrawal which are, in fact, distortions and perversions of anger and far from what anger the emotion is intended to be for us as human beings.

You are the captain of your ship when it comes to handling your anger. Start working today to notice when you are allowing your anger to build and become distorted, perverted, and toxic. Tune into how you are reacting to people and situations around you. Whenever you feel tense, irritated, frustrated, anxious, or angry, stop, “step back,” look at your internal process for a moment, and ask yourself, “***What am I saying to myself right now?***” or “***What am I thinking about at this moment?***” Begin to notice those negative thoughts that fuel your escalation to disrespectful, punishing, hurtful, or explosive

behavior. And then learn to actually do something different and more productive with the thoughts and the anger that you are bound to experience in your day-to-day living