

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ANGER

Your anger can be an ally or an enemy in your life. Anger generally feels painful and uncomfortable when you experience it, but it is an integral part of your humanness and it has been important to our physical and emotional survival as a species. Anger is a fact of life. But being angry does not mean you have to be controlling, hurtful, punishing, explosive, disrespectful, and abusive. Depending on how you use it, your anger can build self-confidence, self-esteem, and enhance relationships with those around you or it can create guilt, shame, and remorse and destroy relationships and intimacy. This section offers some ideas about what anger is and isn't and how you can make your anger a more helpful and productive force in your life.

DEFINING WHAT ANGER IS AND WHAT ANGER ISN'T:

ANGER (THE EMOTION):

- Anger is a normal and natural human **EMOTION** that involves two basic components:
 - The **FIRST** is a **PHYSICAL component**: the internal churning, “revving up,” agitation, and escalation that arise from the very real physiological arousal that we experience related to the “flight or fight” stress response which we are “hard-wired” as human beings to experience. This arousal originates in the oldest part of the brain, the limbic system, which is the “seat” of human emotion and can be triggered:
 - ...when we are startled,
 - ...when we feel fearful or threatened,
 - ...when we believe that our expectations are not being met or that things around us seem to be “out of control,” and
 - ...when we feel a sense of confusion, insecurity, uncertainty, self-doubt, or shame.
 - The **SECOND** is a **COGNITIVE or MENTAL component** and relates to how we interpret and label that physical arousal from the “fight or flight” stress response we all experience. This ability to label, interpret, and make choices is housed in the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that was developed more recently in our history and has a great deal to do with how anger occurs and how angry we get. When this interpretation and the thoughts you are having are negative, cynical, and hostile, you are more likely to get angry, increase the intensity of the anger you feel, stay angry longer, and make poor choices in how you express your anger. If your thoughts are more positive, rational, and realistic you are more likely to calm yourself, come up with more effective strategies to deal with whatever is going on around you, and problem-solve when you need to do this.
- The following example illustrates these two components at work and highlights the power of the cognitive or mental component discussed above:

Imagine, for a moment, that you are driving your car down the right lane of the highway. You are in no particular hurry and are feeling “okay” as you move along to accomplish an errand you need to run. Then, all of a sudden, a mammoth SUV barrels onto the freeway from an entrance ramp and careens by you, almost clipping your right front fender. You are startled and feel threatened and fearful. Adrenaline and cortisol begin to course through your body, a product of the “fight or flight” stress response that you can read more about in the *Understanding Stress* “quick fact” on this website. Your eyes widen, your heart begins pumping faster, you start

to get warm, you grip the steering wheel tightly, and you gasp and then take a few quick breaths. There are at least two primary ways that things can proceed from this point.

The first reaction, if you tend to be an angry person, involves your thought process immediately gravitating in a negative, cynical, and hostile direction which pushes any initial flash of anger that you had in a very dangerous direction. You might think to yourself, *“Who does that guy think he is? What the hell is that jerk doing? That asshole just about rammed into me. He has no right to drive like that. He’s not going to get away with this. I’m going to teach that ‘SOB’ a lesson.”* As you are saying these things to yourself, you likely jam your foot down on the accelerator, speed up to catch the “offender,” pull up alongside their car, shake your fist, “flip them off,” all the while glaring and screaming expletives at them. You have now entered into a full-fledged rage state. Because of your negative interpretation of your physical arousal and your behavioral response to that interpretation, you have just exponentially increased your stress response, leading to even more negativity and anger that feeds on itself and greatly intensifies.

The second reaction, if you tend to be a less angry and volatile person, involves a very different path. You experience the exact same triggering event. You are startled and probably initially feel threatened and fearful as well. An initial flash of anger, frustration, or annoyance may be experienced when you first say to yourself, *“What the heck was that guy doing?”* But, from there, your thought process goes in a very different direction. You don’t leap to a negative, cynical, and hostile interpretation of what has just happened. Instead, you might think to yourself, *“Whew, that was a close call! But I’m okay; the car is okay. I don’t need to take it into the shop to get it fixed. I can get to where I need to go right now. Maybe that guy just didn’t see me or maybe he had some kind of emergency that he had to get to.”* This kind of person slows the car down, takes a few deep breaths, and then proceeds along to get wherever he or she needs to travel. This second reaction, where the driver consciously tries to reframe what just happened in a more positive and constructive manner, actually quickly decreases the potential for more escalation and a build-up of anger. In addition, this driver is much more likely return to a calmer state of being in a relatively shorter period of time.

- Anger as an emotion often serves as a “protection” against some sort of emotional or physical pain (e.g against your fear in the example above; against the physical discomfort that you experience when you hit your thumb with a hammer).
- **ANGER, THAT NORMAL AND NATURAL HUMAN EMOTION, IS:**
 - **Appropriate**
...whenever it is handled effectively and respectfully with those around you
 - **A source of discovery**
...since it alerts you that “something is going on” within or around you that needs to be attended to
 - **A “warning signal:”**
...that a “core hurt” from your past has been activated by a person or situation in the present
...that your wants, needs, rights, or core values are not being adequately addressed
...that you’ve compromised yourself in some important way

- ...that an injustice has been done to you or those you care about
- **A tool to help you clarify and define who you really are**
 - ...and how you are different from other people
- **An important part of being assertive and taking care of yourself**
 - ...i.e. by setting clear personal limits and maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself, by sharing important parts of who you are (e.g. thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs), and by enabling you to cope with difficult people and situations
- **A means to educate others about the differences between you and them**
 - ...e.g. about your likes, dislikes, and values
- **A useful release of energy**
 - ... since it takes enormous effort to suppress your anger and the other feelings it often covers; trying to completely deny your anger (“stuffing” it) only creates stress and tension within you which can lead to “blow-ups,” self-destructive behavior, or depression, anxiety, or other emotional issues at a later time
- **A catalyst and a way to tap into your “personal power”**
 - ...that can generate the energy necessary to help motivate you to address and solve your problems, address difficult life issues, and accomplish what you need to do
- **A form of protection (for you and others)**
 - ...since anger often surfaces in a destructive fashion for you and those close to you if it is not addressed directly and effectively
- **A gift to other people**
 - ...since sharing your anger and the other feelings it hides involves taking a risk and allows you to become vulnerable, which can open the door to new information about yourself and others and a constructive dialogue, and can lead to trust and genuine intimacy in your relationships with other people
- If you do not address and handle your anger in an effective and respectful way, however, and instead you allow the anger to build and fester within you, it can lead directly to the negative attitudes and destructive behaviors (the “toxic anger”) that is outlined below.

CYNICISM/HOSTILITY/DISGUST/CONTEMPT/ENTITLEMENT (THE NEGATIVE, PUNISHING, AND SELF-DEFEATING ATTITUDES AND “MIND-SET”):

- These are **ATTITUDES** that consist of expecting the “worst” in situations that occur around you, mistrusting the motives of other people, focusing on and brooding about others’ real or perceived injustices toward you, and believing that the world absolutely “owes” you respect, approval, fairness, and the like.
- They also involve the belief that you are completely justified in blaming the people around you for your anger and your other feelings as a result of not receiving what you believe you have an absolute “right” to expect in your life.
- These negative, pessimistic, distrusting, resentful, and vengeful attitudes lead to viewing the world as an unsafe place and continually looking for and expecting other people to:
 - ...**be incompetent and inadequate**
 - ...**be inconsiderate, unfair, and untrustworthy**
 - ...**go out of their way to hurt or mistreat you, take advantage of you, or “cross” you in some fashion**
- The end result of these attitudes is a voice within you that proclaims loudly and clearly:
 - ...*“Someone is going to try to ‘mess with me’ and I’m going to have to deal with it.”*

- These attitudes can also involve negative, critical, judgmental, and shaming thoughts and brooding and ruminating about yourself, your mistakes, and your problems (although angry people often deny that this is actually happening within them and instead tend to focus only on all the “idiots” that they see around them).
...i.e. this involves being cynical, disgusted, contemptuous, and demeaning with yourself at times
- These attitudes promote the idea that you are completely powerless and a “victim,” that the situation is “hopeless,” and that you have no options, which is never helpful to you in effectively addressing and resolving concerns and issues that arise in your life.
- These attitudes are best represented by your negative thought process (i.e. your negative self-talk or rehearsal). When you regularly engage in negative thinking, you are constantly fueling your stress response and increasing the intensity of and prolonging your anger.
- Chronic cynicism, hostility, disgust, contempt, and entitlement always lead to physical and emotional damage and significant consequences for you and others.
- If these attitudes become your way of living in and looking at the world, they then contribute directly to the violation of another person’s rights or boundaries through the behaviors discussed below.

AGGRESSION/WITHDRAWAL (THE HURTFUL AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS):

- **Aggression** involves **BEHAVIORS** acted out with the intent to **hurt, demean, humiliate, punish, intimidate, or control** others emotionally, verbally, physically, or sexually as a means:
...to gain revenge for those real or imagined “wrongs” that you believe others have done to you and/or
...to get your way in a particular situation (to try to control and dominate a person or situation).
- **Withdrawal** involves **BEHAVIORS** that are designed to disengage emotionally from difficult situations. This can be:
...a **punishing withdrawal** that is used to hurt and “get back” at someone (e.g. withdrawing your affection and attention from another person, sulking and pouting) **OR**
...a **protective withdrawal** when you pull back into yourself if you are feeling uncertain about how to respond and/or you are feeling unsafe (e.g. becoming passive and actually “stuffing” your anger and not letting people know what you think and feel at the time)
A withdrawal may also combine elements of both of these.
- These behaviors, when they are used on an ongoing and consistent basis, will always eventually result in disrespect, a lack of trust and safety, and emotional distance and estrangement in your relationships with others.