

UNDERSTANDING ANGER

Julie Righter, MD, CGP, CGPP

IMPORTANT NOTE

If you are not familiar with the TA model of the human personality, please note that certain words have very specific definitions. When capitalized, the terms Adult and Free Child are being used to denote ego states in the specific TA sense. Briefly, the Adult ego state is the one in which we are logical and rational; it has nothing to do with being an adult, children gradually develop an Adult ego state. It is in the Free Child ego state that we are in touch with our physical bodies (e.g. have orgasms) and experience our authentic emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, joy); it has nothing to do with being a child or being childish (immature).

No emotion causes more problems than anger. Most people equate anger with acting out. But behaviour and feelings are two entirely separate things.

Problems arise when people try to bypass the feeling of anger, a natural process designed for self-protection. Not even taking a moment to feel it, they jump to their preferred habit of either suppressing or raging. Both are unhealthy, but why do we 'go wrong', learning these unhealthy habits? Major anger is usually felt toward people with whom we have a close, sustained relationship, such as a parent, partner or boss. When we start to notice anger coming up inside, we immediately feel guilty, because we also have positive feelings toward this same person. If we stay with the anger and don't block it, we will experience fantasies of lashing out. This is completely normal because it has its origin in our evolution: anger is the reaction to threat, the 'fight' emotion. Our ancestors often had to defend themselves physically. But we are 'civilized' so we don't like to think of ourselves as 'violent' and these images scare us. We immediately start to berate ourselves for thinking such 'awful thoughts'. Now we are in a state of conflict, we are aware of feeling angry and of an energy rising, but we feel guilty and scared. The result is a state of intense agitation and uneasiness.

It is very natural to try to escape from discomfort. One way of accomplishing this is by suppressing the cause of the discomfort, namely the feeling of anger. Alternatively, we might discharge the energy that has built up in bursts of lashing out, verbally or physically. People often say after doing this "that felt good!"

What's wrong with dealing with anger in either of these ways?

Crowding angry feelings out of awareness leads people into positions where they are unable to assert themselves effectively. This results in being overlooked, sometimes overtly taken advantage of. When this happens, anger is evoked, and the person redoubles his efforts to suppress this uncomfortable feeling. This sets the stage for yet another episode of unmet needs or disrespectful treatment, generating still more anger. A vicious cycle is thus established: more and more anger is generated by the very efforts being made to get rid of it.

At the psychological level chronic suppression turns into depression, a stuck state of misery in which we are shut down, feeling little, no anger but no joy either. Some experts believe it can also lead to serious illness; many examples can be found in a recent book called *When the Body Says No*, by Dr. Gabor Mate, a Vancouver Physician Psychotherapist.

Lashing out is like a bandaid, it provides momentary relief, but how do we feel afterwards? Often it comes as an outburst toward an innocent party, leaving us feeling guilty, and eventually, damaging valuable relationships. When we lash out at the person who hurt us, we are doing what was done to us; revenge is sweet but only momentarily, afterwards we usually feel bad about ourselves, having behaved in a way that we object to.

Most important, the original anger does not go away, but stays inside, and will continue to seek expression over a lifetime, probably requiring increasing efforts on our part to keep it under control. Feelings are 'energy packages'; just watch someone talking on the phone, observe all their facial expressions and body movements. All this activity clearly has nothing to do with communication. What you're seeing is energy being discharged. These 'energy packages' do not simply evaporate over time.

Looking deeper we find more bad news: if we have problems feeling and dealing with our anger, we are likely to have similar problems with all our emotions. Unresolved grief, inability to experience joy, 'addiction' to excitement as in compulsive gambling, are just a few examples of the consequences of emotions not being worked through properly.

We all think we know what someone looks like when they're angry, but we are wrong. So what does 'healthy anger' look like? Surprisingly, it does not 'look like' anything much, since the full visceral experience of anger hardly shows at all, it takes place entirely 'inside' the person. There is a surge of energy, a sudden increase in feeling of physical strength and mental clarity. The facial expression is intense but not angry looking, the body is still and relaxed. Heart rate slows, breathing is slow and deep, the voice low in pitch. The person describes feeling warm and very calm, strong and purposeful, perceptions crystal clear. It only lasts for a few minutes then subsides. At the end of such experiences, people report feeling calm, centred, and peaceful. Dr. Habib Davanloo, Professor of Psychiatry at McGill University, has collected thousands of videotaped therapy psychotherapy sessions which document this pattern clearly. Most people have the opposite picture in their minds. Rapid shallow breathing, palpitations, a high voice and tight muscles are signs of tension, not healthy anger. When people are experiencing anger fully, they are calm. It may boggle your mind, but the fact is, the more intensely and fully one feels anger in one's body, the more relaxed one appears, and the less likely one is to lose control over one's impulses.