

ANGER: Understanding & Curating Our Anger

I believe we all want to live happy lives, and every one of us is trying our best to do just that.

However, sometimes our anger causes us and others harm that takes us off track, causes damage, and is regretted. As a psychologist helping clients chart fulfilling a life, I wrote this two-part article to help my clients build understanding about anger, and how to manage it to reduce its harm, to help them keep on their track.

I hope it helps you to do the same.

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Part 1: Understanding Our Anger

Emotions emerge in us at lightning speed. Emotions drive us all – all day, every day. These emotions guide the decisions we make and the actions we take - every minute, every second of our lives.

Much of what we do is motivated by a desire to hold on to good feelings and avoid bad feelings. And some emotions, like anger, can feel very bad, uncomfortable, sometimes leading us to do self-defeating destructive things as we try to cope with the painful emotions – actions we often regret.

Life of course would be quite dull without emotions, although clearly more highs and less lows is our universal hope. But unfortunately, emotions are innate, and we can't just de-select, turn off emotions, like anger, that we don't like. Doing so, risks turning off all emotion (ie emotional detachment), which would suck all the joy from life too. Instead, we need to learn to handle our uncomfortable emotions - we need to curate emotions like anger by facing them, learning about them, and dealing with them.

We all experience many times over in our relationships (with partners, family, friends and work colleagues) when interactions about something, often quite trivial somethings, erupt into overblown conflict, leading us (and likely them too) to blow-up to hurt the other, perhaps shouting things to put them down, perhaps disconnecting from them, perhaps smashing things, regrettably sometimes injuring the very people we love and protect.

None of us are immune to such angry over-reactions to our emotions. In fact, its human-bred, with our emotional formwork having been passed to us at a young age from our family of origin.

Our emotions are purposeful - innate biological reactions, which have a very clear evolutionary function to signal that something important in our life needs to be checked-out and probably fixed.

To illustrate this purpose, consider when someone close dies. Typically, we feel 'sad', which signals we have lost something important – often becoming disconnected from “someone”, like through their death. Our sadness typically stimulates a relieving grieving response (e.g. crying), and it also attracts a natural caring and connecting response from others. Actions like these normally help us feel reassured and resolve our grief in time, which allows us to move on.

Every emotion has purpose. 'Fear' provokes us to take actions to keep us safe. 'Love' encourages us to get connected with others for both personal protection and also to procreate.

We humans are often uncomfortable handling emotions – our own and others. And frankly we would all benefit much from being better skilled at identifying and naming our emotions, understanding the function of our emotions, and more openly talking about our emotions. Psychologists encourage us to do just that as an essential part of healing from our worries and stresses, and any reader wanting to study more on this would do no better than to read “Atlas of the Heart” by Brene Brown in which she provides clarity on 87 emotions.

ANGER is of course just one of these emotions - one of the many normal, healthy and useful human emotions that naturally gets triggered in all of us. The purpose of this specific emotion is to get us primed and ready to protect ourselves against those that might hurt us, often because we feel they are attacking us or frustrating us by getting in the way of us getting something we want.

Anger is also noticed when many other emotions are experienced, such as shame, sadness, fear, guilt, disappointment, worry, embarrassment, jealousy, hurt, anxiety, confusion, humiliation, helplessness, with research showing we often use anger to cover up these other painful underlying emotions that we fear surfacing – akin to a dog barking to scare others to keep away.

Anger causes us to be defensive, which can be expressed aggressively (eg shaking fists) but also passively (eg avoidance). Of course, anger can range in intensity between mild irritation to rage. And we all differ in our sensitivity to anger, and our ability to cope with it – some of us are just more hot-headed than others.

And we all know that sometimes, if anger is not curated, if we don't manage and calm our anger, it causes harm.

Actually, anger itself is not causing the problem for us – feeling emotions, like anger, is not in our control and it is unavoidable. BUT, how we react when we feel anger, how we handle it when it arises in us, can be our problem, and this IS within our control – something for us to learn to curate, to defuse it so that it doesn't cause damage to lives – our own and others.

To learn how to curate our anger, it is helpful to know that our emotional reactions, like anger, are the product of millions of years of human evolution – innate reactions in us that evolved to help our ancestors survive through primitive times, especially when life-threats lay in waiting behind every rock and tree. Thankfully for us, our own kin survived through those dangers 😊

When anger gets triggered, an automatic innate threat-alarm is set off inside us, created by the brain. Our brains have been programmed to protect us, and the brain uses our 5 senses to scan the world 24/7 for threats. When it senses a threat, it cunningly makes a toxic chemical mix of the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, and injects it through our bodies at nano speed causing us great physical discomforts (e.g. feeling nausea, muscles tense, teeth clench, heart pounding, breath quick & shallow, etc) that often scares us into taking urgent, immediate action, as if our lives depended on it, to remove the threat, to remove the discomfort. Cortisol decreases our hormone serotonin, which is the common mood lifting chemical in anti-depressant medications - no wonder we feel crap!

Fight Flight Freeze reaction (FFF) is what we have come to call this inbuilt reaction that occurs in all of us. FFF has served humans well over the centuries – it has led our species to survive. Without us getting aroused into action, we would do nothing in times of danger, which would in time inevitably lead to extinction. So, we must be thankful for FFF which activates our entire nervous system to singularly focus on surviving. And it's worth recognising that when your brain floods you with this stress hormone chemical mix, it is doing so in the service of protecting you – doing exactly what it is designed to do to help you survive those threats. So.....thank you brain!

But what the brain doesn't yet accept is the world has changed, and unlike our ancestors, we fortunately live in less primitive times where life threats are relatively uncommon and less frequent for most of us.

Despite this, our FFF reaction continues to be set off daily (sometimes hourly) by our brain as the brain struggles to accurately assess the severity of today's threats – it distorts threats. And, it commonly amplifies fear, because it wants us to get alarmed so we act to survive the threat – and, in so doing, it often (most likely 99% of the time) is sending us false alarms that flood us with FFF.

The consequence? When FFF flooded, our ability to handle our life problems is seriously eroded as we get emotionally charged, become fog-head, distracted, and REACT automatically, instantly, unconsciously to problems, with the thinking problem solving part of our brain that ordinarily helps us work through and RESPOND thoughtfully to our problems, getting turned off. Often we get triggered and take unnecessary protective actions by what are essentially false alarms – actions that cause us physical and psychological harm, and that we often regret.

That said, whilst getting unnecessarily triggered by a false alarm, this FFF threat-reflex reaction is actually a "Eureka nugget", as it alerts us to things in our life which we consider important, that we worry are not going as we expected or hoped.

When anger appears it can distract us from our course, leading us to take impulsive actions that are sometimes harmful and regretted. In 'Atlas of the Heart', Brene Brown provided this wonderful additional 'Eureka nugget' when revealing that anger can be "a life-sucking companion" when she wrote: "Holding on to it [anger] will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection".

Anger is also a process – it rarely just explodes out of nowhere, although it often occurs at lightening speed. What I mean is that anger builds up, often outside of awareness, and it then follows a predictable cycle:

- It starts with a TRIGGER (eg. Cut off while driving)

