

ANGER MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH

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Anger Management and Conflict
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November 6, 1996

Everybody feels anger from time to time. People have been documented feeling anger since biblical times when God was considered angry. Babies even exhibit signs that are interpreted as anger, such as crying or screaming. Anger is not in any way unique to people. Animals also have the ability to feel and express anger.

In our personal lives we get angry over at least one thing on almost a daily basis, whether it be on the job, with a spouse or loved one, or perhaps with a figure of authority. Many psychologists have written about anger, discussing the relationship between anger and fear. Each of the individuals that comprise humanity possesses at least one phobia, in the same way that each is capable of possessing anger. The negativity that is associated with phobias often spills over into our feelings about anger. We begin to think negatively about anger since we associate it with fear.

Plato was the first to suggest that anger was a disbalance. According to Dr. Willard Gaylin, a prominent psychologist, anger is still seen as a disbalance by many of today's psychologists. Since Plato, anger has suffered a bad reputation. We only have to imagine a domestic abuse scene to immediately condemn anger in all of its manifestations.

There is a reason why anger is viewed in a negative light. Nobody likes it when someone is angry with them. We tend to avoid the wrath of those around us. This is one reason we see anger as negative. Another reason may lie closer to Plato's concept of imbalance. The negative perception of anger is evident in the American Heritage Dictionary's definitions of the word anger (1):

1. A feeling of extreme displeasure, hostility, indignation, or someone or something; rage; wrath; ire.
2. (Obsolete) Trouble; pain; affliction.

To say, "I'm getting angry", is to invoke fear in another, usually, that fear originates from a perception that the utterer of the phrase is about to take some sort of dramatic action. Dr. Gaylin speaks for these emotions, rage is a response to a perceived assault that effects the body in interesting ways. Skeletal muscles are tensed; the autonomic system moves to increase the supply of adrenaline and redistribute the blood flow of the body; certain muscles are contracted and opposing ones relaxed. (2)

Apparently, anger is viewed negatively for a reason that is closer to Plato's concept of imbalance. It is also closer to the American Heritage's definition of being sick. The authors of *When Anger Hurts: Anger in Modern Life* explain the complications that chronic anger can create. Doctors have long suspected that anger increases the blood rate. Many scientists now point out that norepinephrine, the drug that is secreted during anger, increases blood pressure as well. Anger and abnormally high blood pressure are correlated; and high blood pressure leads to many forms of heart disease. In a recent study 1,623 patients were interviewed an average of four days after they had suffered a heart attack following an outburst of anger. The study showed that the risk of suffering a heart attack is doubled after an outburst of anger. (3) The psychologist Franz Alexander's hypothesized in 1839 that hypertensives lack basic assertive skills. Psychological studies have repeatedly backed Alexander's assertion theory ever since. (4)

High blood pressure is said to be caused by uncontrolled anger, which in turn is caused by a lack of assertion. If we bottle up our anger now, then we will feel it later. Eventually our arteries will grow weak and we will remain tense, living daily with treacherous moods and health. The alternative is to shout out our anger at the world and let it manifest itself any way that it pleases. Of course, taking our anger out at the world can have even more deleterious effects. People just don't like it when we demonstrate our anger. Many of us are taught at an early age to bury our anger inside, where it causes stress, both emotionally and physically. For example, in grade school, children have to stay after class or are sent to the principle when they express feelings of anger. Poorly managed anger is the cause of many serious physical, social and emotional problems, from heart disease to neighborhood violence. The Institute for Mental Health Initiatives (IMHI) believes

that by teaching people the skills to manage their anger constructively, they will become empowered with the ability to understand their own and other's feelings and resolve conflict in a non-violent manner. The IMHI believes the best way to achieve this goal is to train teachers, counselors, social workers, health professional, community leaders and others in constructive anger management skills so that they can help others by conducting workshops in their own settings. (3)

Anger is not physically healthy. Bottled up, it can lead to drug-induced escapism or to ignorance of our surroundings. Venting anger carelessly can also be dangerous. It is no wonder that anger has been viewed as negative. Since we live in a stressful society, we have no choice but to find ways of venting anger positively. East Asian religion has given the West meditation, which is known to slow the heartbeat and calm the nerves. Other Eastern techniques of reducing stress include acupuncture, and the Japanese bathhouse. In the United States we have psychology, also, a number of exercises have been developed to control and eventually reduce stress and anger. One basic technique is called deep breathing: Lie down on your back, placing one hand on your chest and another on your abdomen. Take deep breaths, inhaling slowly through the nose. Feel the abdomen raise and scan the body for tension. Let the tension go as you encounter it. After five to ten minutes the body is less tense. It is suggested that this exercise be done once or twice a day for two to three weeks to get useful results. (4)

Redford Williams, a professor of psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center and co-author of *Anger Kills*, has spent more than 20 years studying the impact of the mind and emotions on health. Dr. Williams believes that when normal people are faced with everyday anger, annoyance, irritation, and frustration- and their immediate impulse is to commonly blame somebody or something, sparking fury toward the offender manifesting itself in aggressive action, then getting angry is like taking a small dose of slow-acting poison. According to a study of more than 1,000 people at a Western Electric Factory in Chicago, over a 25 year period, those with high hostility scores were at high risk of dying from coronary disease as well as cancer. There is evidence that the immune system may be weaker in hostile people, according to Dr. Williams. Long-term anger with no forgiveness is deadly. Long term anger can lead to carrying a grudge, which in turn hurts the person harboring the grudge more than the person or object whom the grudge is directed. Hostility can also lead to heart disease and other life-threatening illnesses. (3)

Of course, if a particular issue is a thorn in one's side, it may be best to lash out at the threat. Wisdom is knowing when to lash out. Meditation and its cousin, deep breathing are two methods of contemplation, which Albert Bernstein, the author of *Dinosaur Brains*, calls using the cortex. If we are aware of the oncoming anger, we can vent it positively with these tools. If we are unconscious that we are angry, then there is no way of controlling our externalization of the anger. Albert Bernstein also describes how our brains are constructed quite a bit like those of dinosaurs. We conceptualize more abstract threats such as a coworker moving in on our territory. (5) This sort of anger seems frivolous, but exists because we view reality the way we want. We perceive what is not truly harmful as threatening.

Unfortunately, we are too often unconscious of our own anger. Dr. Hendrie Weisinger, in his book *Anger at Work*, explains that people often have powerful emotional reactions to others, yet are at a loss to explain just why they respond as they did. Plenty of thinking goes on low frequency... an almost subconscious level. (6) Regardless of how we may try to be rational, we detect subtle indicators of our peers' moods. We often react to people based on these subtle indicators that we receive of them. If we ignore the fact that much of our emotion originates from this unconsciousness, then we cannot control it via our more rational cortex. Relaxation techniques allow our brain to process emotions, so

that we can deal with them consciously. Dr. Weisinger also recommends that people outthink anger by watching out for it. Otherwise, we will blow up anger in our own mind, magnifying the significance of negative events. This can lead to misdirected anger. For many individuals, anger is a particularly strong influence, and it is difficult to control it even when it is conscious anger. If any form of relaxation doesn't work, they should try removing themselves from the stressful situation before they get an adrenaline rush or their heart beat rises.

As previously stated, anger is mostly seen as an affliction rather than a remedy. But, is anger positive?: The answer to the question is a conditional yes. Indeed, anger is positive when it is used to assert oneself. When one is being threatened by an adversary, anger can actually be useful. Our bodies are designed to make us feel bigger than life at the sign of threat or provocation. The area of the brain called the amygdala mediates anger experiences, judging events as either aversive or rewarding. A threat code triggers a two-stage fight/flight mobilization in the body. Things that affect our bodily state can make us more emotionally reactive. When Anger Hurts: Quietening the Storm Within documents a situation in which anger can be positive, the authors describe a beneficial use of anger (4): "Iris, a middle-aged woman living in New York, heard footsteps following her as she was returning home alone. She was frightened but then she became angry at the thought of being victimized. She slowed down; when the footsteps came nearer, she whirled around and shouted at the top of her voice, 'Get away from me you son-of-a-bitch or I'll kill you!' The would-be attacker fled." In this case, anger helped in the instance of physical attack. Anger can also be beneficial when one's boundaries are violated. (2) If someone is pushing you to the limit, there must come a point in which you can assert yourself. Without such assertion, others will begin to make excessive demands on you. People that follow that pattern and constantly give into others' demands are told that they need to be more assertive. Anger fosters this self assertion and it helps us display that assertion.

So it appears that we are faced with choosing between two evils. On one hand, we can lash out at the world, thereby hurting others, or we can bottle in our anger, thereby hurting ourselves. Anger in all of its manifestations appears to be negative, with few exceptions, such as the woman that hinders an attack by using anger to scare off the attacker.

Anger does deserve all of its bad reputation. Anger can be very destructive, it can lead to liver, heart and artery damage. The key to living with anger is being conscious of the anger that is within us. Without such knowledge of ourselves, our anger will remain raw and unfiltered. Wisdom lies in knowing when to deny anger and when to vent it, when to direct it, and at what target. Leaving anger alone, leaving it to smolder so to speak, is a dubious method of coping with anger. Aristotle said it best centuries ago, "Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - that is not so easy." (4)

Chronic anger does lead to health problems. Not everyone suffers from anger, but for those that do, it means a multitude of emotional related illnesses. Anger is often accompanied by an imbalance of hormones, as Plato recognized, and no imbalance is healthy in the long run. With consciousness and relaxation, people may be able to achieve dominance over anger, rather than allowing it to have dominance over them.

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