



Anger Management

Although anger and its derivative feelings such as frustration, irritation, etc. are completely valid emotions, they are often just the “tip of the emotional iceberg.” Years of study in this area show that when someone is most consciously aware of experiencing anger, s/he is also experiencing a complex series of other emotions including guilt, fear, shame, sadness, confusion, isolation, and/or anxiety at a deeper level “underneath” the anger. Experiencing these types of feelings is often painful and involves feeling vulnerable. Powerful social norms guide people – and men in particular – to see vulnerability as being equal to weakness, and therefore unacceptable. In many cases, the person in the room who looks the angriest is also very likely to be the one who’s in the most pain. It’s a little counter-intuitive, but **in order to learn how to better manage anger, you need to first learn to connect with and manage the more difficult feelings and thoughts that accompany it.**

Anger Is Seductive

Here are several reasons why so many people automatically shift to anger when they get upset:

1. **Externalizing** – When someone is very angry, s/he is usually focused outside of him/herself. Doing so helps to distract from the more overwhelming *internal* feelings of shame, fear, sadness, etc. that the person is also experiencing.
2. **Moral High Ground** – An angry person generally believes that s/he is 100% right about whatever is triggering them. In hindsight, this belief is often not entirely accurate, but *when we become highly physiologically flooded, our attentional bandwidth shrinks and we become less able to see the broader picture* in a balanced way. So basically, the less information we’re factoring in, the easier it is to stick to our guns.
3. **Artificial Sense of Control** – When a person is acting angrily, other people around her/him commonly feel distressed and may either engage in an aggressive escalating conflict, or simply withdraw and allow the person to do what s/he wants. Both of these reactions by other people can serve as powerful reinforcers which can result in continuing to revert to angry behavior even when s/he really doesn’t want to. Of course, *angry behavior largely reflects a lack of control even if the person feels empowered by the end result.*

Popping The Emotional Hood

So, what to do with anger? A key first step to managing anger involves realizing that you (no, you’re not the exception to this rule :) will periodically experience a wide range of painful emotions like sadness, worry, jealousy, loneliness, guilt, and shame. Doing so doesn’t make you weak, it just means that you’re human and could use some support. When you get mad, rather than explode or withdraw, take the time to sit back and ask yourself, “What am I experiencing right now OTHER THAN anger, irritation, frustration, etc.?” You can only control your emotions when you really know what those feelings are – and you make it OK that you have them.

The information above is pretty logical, but remember:

- Stuffing or denying your difficulties only builds up pressure over time – you need a relief valve.
- Simply learning to access your deeper vulnerable feelings is tough if you’re not used to it.
- Sitting with – and talking about – your feelings is like flexing a mental muscle in that it takes strength and practice.

You absolutely can learn to have less anger in your life – but in order to manage yourself more effectively, you will have to take some risks and do things differently than you have been.