
Keeping Your Cool: The Strategies And Benefits Of Anger Management

There are fairly good statistics on the number of people who suffer from anxiety, depression, and other emotional problems as well as the personal and economic costs associated with them. We do not, however, have reliable statistics on anger, though the incidence of 'Road Rage' and other threatening public outbursts would indicate that it is an issue to contend with. Furthermore, while anxious or depressed individuals often seek out professional help, angry people rarely do. Our society often identifies anger as a normal, healthy emotion that should be expressed, not held in. It is considered a normal and expected response to a wide variety of events.

Some research in the past few years, however, has suggested that anger presents a serious threat to one's health; and my own professional opinion is that anger of all kinds is detrimental to mental well-being.

Held In or Let Out, Anger is Harmful

The conventional wisdom is that anger, if used constructively and expressed rather than held in, is a healthy emotion. But while it may sometimes look good and play well with our friends, anger is now known to be quite detrimental to us physically and psychologically.

Medical Concerns

Almost everyone remembers when the research about Type A personalities was made public. It showed that men who were controlling, workaholic, and intense are more likely than others to suffer from heart disease and other stress-related illness. In the October 27, 1997 issue of Archives of Internal Medicine, a top medical journal, a report by Duke University research team filled in an important piece of previously missing information about Type A personalities. The team's question was, 'What specific personality characteristic causes physical illness?' The answer it found: Anger. The Duke University study showed that cognitive/behavioral stress reduction sessions lowered the level of both anger and anxiety in patients with chronic heart problems, and that their physical improvement was related specifically to a reduction in their anger.

Furthermore, while it is generally agreed that holding anger in causes stress and physical illness, recent research shows that people who express anger often actually experience more physical symptoms and illness than those who hold their anger in.

Psychological Concerns

As a cognitive/behaviorist, I do not subscribe to the Freudian definition of depression as 'anger turned inward.' However, I do believe that anger can be psychologically debilitating. People often see themselves as a being strongest and most assertive when they are angry. Actually, the opposite is true.

To be angry means that you have to see yourself as a victim—someone or something did something to you. You believe that you were treated unfairly, or that someone is not behaving properly toward you, or that traffic is making you late, and so on. Anger is often made more intense by feeling helpless, as well as victimized. Helplessness can result in depression and demoralization (the feeling that life has defeated you.) And repeated anger damages our relationship with those closest to us. Anger toward others takes the form of criticism and can eventually erode the quality of a relationship.

The Mechanisms of Anger

Almost all instances of anger result from expecting and demanding one thing and getting something else. People, especially those who tend to be controlling, enter most situations with a list of expectations. The longer and more unrealistic the list of expectations and demands, the less likely they are to be met. We all know that the universe does not cooperate with our plans, but emotionally we behave as if we expect it to. For example, we get into our car, get stuck in traffic, and become angry. Or while waiting for a friend who is late, we get more and more angry.

My favorite story about anger involves a group of government office workers who were in one of my stress reduction courses. They were a very angry group. Why? Among a long list of grievances was the fact that the thermostat at their office did not work. It had not worked for four years, and attempts to repair it had all failed. For four years, some of these individuals were angry every day as soon as they got to work. In discussions, it became clear what was happening. On their way to work, in their car, on the bus, these people were repeatedly saying to themselves, 'I hope the thermostat is working.' 'Today is going to be hot, so that thermostat better be working.' As soon as they entered the building they would ask, be told that the thermostat was not working, and immediately become angry. This sequence of events is the same, no matter what the anger-producing situation. More often than not, anger is generated in repeated, predictable circumstances.

How is Anger Encouraged?

Provided their behavior is not too aggressive, angry people generally receive secondary gains from those around them. These social and personal factors reinforce the tendency to get angry.

We typically become angry when we believe that we have been treated wrongly or unfairly. As the 'wronged party,' we feel that we are entitled to receive sympathy and even encouragement for our anger, and we often do. Being supportive, our friends and relatives will say that we are right, that the other person is wrong, and that we are perfectly justified in our anger. This is a positive reinforcement for most of us.

Anger is also rewarded when others, in an effort to avoid unpleasantness or confrontation, give in to us when we display anger. It is a convincing scenario, 'I do not get what I am entitled to unless I get angry.' In addition, many people use anger as a queue to spur them on to action. This is common in unassertive people, who are usually reluctant to speak up to defend even their legitimate rights, unless they are angry. These individuals see anger as something that helps them determine when to take action when they believe they are being taken advantage of.

Learning to Be Less Angry

How can we learn to be less angry? One way is to change our expectations. I used this approach with my group of disgruntled office workers. My instructions were simple to understand, but required effort and practice:

'On your way to work tomorrow, I want you to say to yourself that you are expecting the thermostat not to work. You are expecting that, because it has never worked in the past. Say these sentences several times on the way to work. Do not say anything else to yourself about the thermostat.'

With the government office workers (and others I have worked with), changing expectations eliminated their anger.

In general, if you prepare in advance, anger can be eliminated from much of your life. Think about what you are likely to have to deal with when you visit your parents, drive to work, go to the bank, and so forth. Do not hope for the best or expect the worst. Expect what you are likely to get, based on your past experience. Say to yourself, for example, 'I'm expecting that there may be a long line at the bank and not enough tellers.'

People fail to adjust their expectations in response to their experience because they believe (a) what they are expecting and demanding is reasonable and/or (b) that not to get angry is means accepting a situation that is not acceptable. I would almost never argue with (a). Most people's expectations are reasonable; but to continue insisting that they must be met when experience indicates otherwise is irrational. It is reasonable not to be blamed for things you did not do, but to expect and demand that you not be does not make as much sense.

However, I do take exception to (b). The goal should be not get angry. If you can correct a situation by acceptable means, you should do so. Keep in mind that you must have realistic expectations about your attempts to correct situations that involve other people's behavior or factors not under your control. Complaining to the Bank Manager should be done with an expectation that no matter what is said, there probably won't be an increase in the number of tellers on duty. What you can do is change banks or take other actions within your control if you find the situation unacceptable. But getting angry is not necessary or desirable, and is even unhealthy.

Stop telling yourself that it is awful or terrible that you have to wait on line, get caught in traffic, get treated unfairly, receive inferior service at a restaurant, etc.; they are merely unavoidable, if unfortunate, facts of life.