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Anger

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Abstract

Anger is a universal emotion. Almost everyone experiences its ravages. It seems the more we express anger without concern for its effects, the more anger there is to express! There truly is a different way. By fully allowing ourselves to connect with and experience the sensations of anger while not acting, we find the quickest way out of self-inflicted pain. If, instead of pushing away our anger, we get curious about what we are trying to tell ourselves, we get to the matter at hand in such a way that allows true resolution.

Key words: Anger, resolution, emotion, self-inflicted pain, pain, curious, venting, temper

Anger: what to do

What is it about anger that makes us so badly want to be free of it? Is it the searing inner heat? The feeling out of control? The fear we might actually do harm we will later regret?

On the other hand, what is it that creates the sneaky desire we may have to keep it?

Many, but not all, religious disciplines admonish us to be free of anger. The advice they give for how to rid ourselves of this self-generated, self-defeating trap ranges from philosophical to paradoxically brutal. But perhaps the greatest motivator we have is that to feel angry is just plain uncomfortable. We frighten ourselves with our own vehemence.

Anger is a universal emotion. Almost everyone experiences its ravages. And, so far as I can tell, any attempt to directly rid ourselves of anger (or any other emotion, for that matter) is doomed to failure. Resisting or pushing away any facet of our experience frequently has the rather alarming effect of intensifying its hold on us.

Nor have I noticed relief with the free expression or so-called venting (upon others) techniques which have the dual misfortune of stoking the fire within and potentially causing us to do irreparable harm to self or someone we love. It seems the more we express anger without concern for its effects, the more anger there is to express! There is a (sometimes not so) subtle boost we

get from anger which leads us to overpower what may have been fearful or constraining.

So what is left to do?

Well — there truly is a different way. Odd as it sounds, fully allowing ourselves to connect with and experience the sensations of anger while not acting on it can be the quickest way out of self-inflicted pain. If, instead of pushing away our anger, we get curious about what we are trying to tell ourselves, we get to the matter at hand in such a way that allows true resolution. The FEAD technique¹ is wonderful for this — Face, Embrace, Allow space, invoke Divine grace. When you feel the rise of anger, immediately turn to yourself with curiosity. “Dear One, what is this? I am curious. I want to know. I am absolutely here with you. What is it you need?” What is revealed may or may not be realistic to the logical mind. It still needs attention.

After the fact

What do we do when we’ve lost our temper and said or done things that were hurtful? We regret our action but often don’t know how to undo the damage. And, not knowing what to do, we often castigate ourselves into a hole deeper than where we started before our upset. In addition to lashing out against others, we may also have a voice that goes on and on about our own badness. We become so convinced of these falsehoods of our own concoction that we end up in a quagmire — struggling with guilt, depression and dejection.

Let’s pick the above sequence apart, as it contains many clues that can help us out of our hole and can prevent ongoing damage.

Let’s say we really let somebody have it. The barrage that came out with all the full force of anger was designed to hurt. In that moment, we had no interest in some spiritual idea of “revealing the truth,” Rather than cutting through the hurtful issues that confronted us with the sharp words of our tongue, we added to the mound of problems. We obviously blew it. We’ve begun to see what we may have lost in all this. And now, we want to make it right.

Most of us are anxious about expressing our anger precisely because we know that it can do great harm to ourselves as well as to others. When we want to make amends, we may feel a special vulnerability inside. Often in the mix is a sense of fear that our attempts might not work out. We may have done irreparable damage to someone or something (such as a relationship) we care about. If we’ve responded from anger, we’ve unleashed a powerful force. We may feel confused and a little disoriented. We may be uncertain what we were really so mad about to start with. And what, exactly, that “truth” was that we were trying to get to. What was our deeper self trying to get to with our upset?

Here is a key: if we let ourselves face squarely into what we most fear in this situation, we can open a channel for deeper awareness and healing. Because hatred and anger directed outward reflect a place of pain inside of the self — its occurrence is a powerful clue to look within. The anger is a call for attention. This is an enormously charged fulcrum upon which we can actuate many potentials for change. As I mentioned earlier, there is often pain beneath our anger that has been too terrifying to face yet. The pain is trying to surface now for healing, all wrapped up in the protective garb of anger. Although anger may make us feel powerful while it is surging through our bodies, the vulnerable space beneath it is what most needs attention. As soon as we approach our own self in a way that feels safe, that hurting place can open up.

Personal exploration: The path to freedom

Go deeper into the fear space. Presume the worst you can imagine.

Then ask yourself, “and this means ----?” Specifically, what does this (or might this) mean for you? What are the implications or possible ramifications of the damage you most fear in your life?

Listen to the tone of voice you are using with (and/or against) yourself. What are you saying?

Use [FEAD](#)¹ here. Be kind. Embrace yourself. Be curious. Let your entire intention at first be to find and allow healing of the festering wound within.

Remember that this is exploration for freedom. Your freedom. You might consider asking for help from a professional if the self-examination seems just too daunting.

The healing potential of anger energy is that, when harnessed to the desire for truth, it is a powerful force for good. The thing to remember is that whatever negative, critical attacks we levy against ourselves are the seeds that become future angry outbursts. More than any other place, this is where the anger cycle can most successfully be broken. To the extent that we become safe for ourselves to come home to – to confide in – with our vulnerabilities, we lose the enormous need to change the world around us. This is not to say external change won’t happen. Rather, the changes we are trying to make externally – both in our behavior and our circumstances, come more readily into alignment with peace when we are at peace within.

When we begin to be kind to ourselves, it becomes possible to open in kindness to others. The process becomes self-sustaining. By treating ourselves with compassionate kindness and staying curious about “what just happened”, we are able to be receptive to others in a similar way. We then know, from a deeper place, how and what to say to “the other” to make amends. Because we have cleared our inner space, our words ring with the sincerity of clear intention.

Here’s what I’ve noticed: any emotions or thoughts that remain bottled up, no matter how old — fear, hurt, opinion, truth, love — sooner or later must burst out. And if we’ve been squelching some intimate, essential part of ourselves, or in any way living a lie, it is likely to be a surge of anger that breaks open the cave to let it surface. Let that be. Although ranting and raving are not necessary for the expression of anger, sometimes it is exactly that which forces out the needed words.

Stay as open to yourself and the experience you are having as you can possibly be. When we adopt an attitude of genuine caring for that in us from which the lava of anger has arisen, we provide a different kind of “venting”. In this, we allow room for authentic resolution of whatever inner misalignment is going on to generate such heat in the first place. Sometimes these hidden spaces are like deep tectonic plates shifting to force the issue to surface. This opens us to say exactly the words that we’ve been holding back and that need to be said. It is perhaps an honesty we’ve been too afraid to express because of feared consequences. Or a fear, grief, or loneliness so great we haven’t dared to feel it, yet. Often there is pain beneath our feelings of anger that runs so deep that our fear of being destroyed by it keeps us denying, covering up, protecting ourselves.

Processing anger – a case example

Shirley* was seeing me in ongoing therapy sessions to deal with her pronounced distress over the

impending death of her husband of 42 years. Jack had pancreatic cancer, and after a six-month spate of medical tests, procedures and treatments had finally resigned himself to his final fate. My infrequent contacts with Jack left me with the impression that he was actually pretty much at peace with this. Not so for Shirley. Her primary emotion was anger –which only added to her overall distress.

“Why am I so angry, Dr. Iyer? Poor Jack has enough to deal with, without this insanity I’m dumping on him. But, it just seems to come out of the blue. He’ll be putting away the dishes and drop a cup – and next thing I know I’m screaming at him! I just hate myself. I seem to have no control at all!”

The initial visits with Shirley focused on learning and practicing centering meditation techniques. Then we began investigating her intense emotional state. The primary purpose of our visits was creating a safe, open nonjudgmental space in which her full emotional array had permission to fully express itself. I offered an ongoing, curious attention to what any underlying beliefs were fueling the fire. It didn’t take long before Shirley dissolved into a heap of tears, with the crushing grief of her impending loss coming to the surface of awareness. As is so often the case, the initial anger was her psyche’s attempt to push away and avoid the more painful feelings of loss. From here, I have been helping Shirley to open into the deeper healing of acceptance; and finding that which is the ongoing beauty of connection even as forms change to evolve.

None of this can be rushed; but unless and until we sit with the anger in open invitation we never move deeply into the possible healing space.

Shirley’s example is but one. Beneath the initial fire of anger can lie many variations of painful beliefs. Each path of healing for angers will look different, depending on the root of the pain. The point is that we can never get to resolution if we’re stuck either in making ourselves wrong for the anger – or in only expressing it as anger. We need to find the root needing its deepest expression. When our deepest voice has its opportunity for expression, all else falls into a natural state with relatively little effort.

Be curious. Be welcoming of every (denied) part of yourself needing attention. It is not the anger needing attention — that is just the torrent carrying the message. Strive with all your might to hear the voice under or within or at the base of the anger.

When we do this, there is really no need to focus on getting rid of anger. Once that which needs our attention is recognized, the anger seems to evaporate as mist. It was just the vehicle for getting our attention — the lava bringing the message to the surface. The self-perpetuating energy anger points to the desperate need of something needing attention. Once its service is over, anger no longer exists. It really never did exist as an entity, in and of itself, in the first place - independent of that which it was serving.

¹ FEAD: “Face, Embrace, Allow space, invite Divine Grace” is a technique developed by Dr. Iyer. More information can be found at www.maryanniyer.com, or the September, 2010 Volume 10, No. 3 of IJHC.

**‘Shirley’ is a composite of three real patients; combined to share a demonstration while protecting identities.*

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