

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS HAVE TAUGHT ME

ANGER

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

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There has been much debate, over the years, about whether anger is good or bad. All sorts of remedies have been offered by those who see anger as destructive.

- Try counting to ten.
- Think before you speak.
- Nice girls don't get angry; pretty is as pretty does.
- Stay away from people who make you mad.
- You don't hate your sister; you love your sister.
- You're not angry; you're just upset (anger is a sin).

The problem in employing these "solutions" is that you, more often than not, end up repressing/stuffing your anger. Anger is not a problem. No one has ever gone to jail for being angry. No one has been hurt physically because of anger. No family has ever gotten a divorce because of anger. It is what you do with your anger that gets you into trouble. Feelings are not good or bad, they just are.

Freud was the first therapist to observe that: "Depression is anger turned inward." He championed the concept of venting, expressing feelings as strongly as they are felt.

Before him, others have observed how dangerous the repression of feelings can be. Confucius, 551-479 B.C., is reported to have said, "To repress a feeling is to give it unlimited power." The result of the repression of feelings can lead to the build up—blow up syndrome where you can kill someone, or to depression, where you can kill yourself.

The Apostle Paul, 2000 years ago, when writing to the church at Ephesus, tells them to *quit lying* (about being angry) *and be angry*. [The biggest lie I often hear in church is, "I'M NOT ANGRY; I JUST UPSET."] Then Paul goes on to say, *Do not keep your anger inside* (repress it) *and let the sun set on your anger because you will give the devil an opportunity to work in your life*. Ephesians 4:25-27

Another person to observe the danger of the repression of anger was the poet William Blake, in the 1700's, he wrote,

A POISON TREE

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

As the poem goes on, he watered his anger in fears and tears and grew it both day and night. He then sets a trap and kills the guy!

Going back to Freud's observation, "Depression is anger turned inward." This concept comes straight out of Freud's paper, "Mourning and Melancholia." To this day, no one has been able to successfully refute that the majority of depression (84%) is anger turned inward and many have tried (16% of depression can be attributed to organic causes).

Depression has been characterized by many in the medical field as "a chemical imbalance," and it is. But then so is happiness. The chemical is Serotonin. Too little and you will feel depressed; if you have too much, you will feel very happy. Saying that depression is a chemical imbalance says nothing. The question is, how do you create the chemical imbalance?

In Meier and Minirth books, Happiness is a Choice and Introduction to Psychology and Counseling, they say, "When a person holds in her rage, the brain's supply of two key chemicals—serotonin and norepinephrine—is depleted, and symptoms of depression result."

During the 18th and 19th centuries, sex was the most repressed feeling in the English speaking world. In the 20th and 21st centuries, anger became the most repressed feeling because it became associated with verbal and physical violence such as in the Wild West and in Eastern Gangs.

However, bad things can happen when feelings are repressed. Repressed feelings do not go up in the air and just disappear. Feelings that are repressed **will come out** in one of four ways.

1. Physical or Conversion symptoms such as headaches, neck aches, stomach problems, high blood pressure, etc.
2. Emotional symptoms such as nightmares, night sweats, paranoia, anxiety, etc.
3. Acting Out such as punching holes in the wall, throwing dishes, domestic abuse, child and elder abuse, getting pregnant, chopping wood, slamming

the door, etc. In fact, I once had a client tell me that she had gotten so angry that she cleaned the whole house!

4. Verbal expression of feelings can be done in two ways, Indirectly and Directly. Indirect expression usually creates more problems. The indirect expression of anger works like putting out fire with gasoline! It is what most people think about when they think about anger. On the other hand, the direct expression of anger is much easier to listen to and tends to bring people together.

The indirect expression of anger is done with putdowns, name calling, threats, sarcasm, guilt trips, demanding and controlling statements. It is filled with messages of how the other person is and what they feel, "You are stupid, lazy and irresponsible. You don't love me. You don't care about me or the children or you would have."

The direct expression of anger is an **internal report of what you are experiencing inside**. "I am angry because I love you and care about you. And, I got so scared because I didn't know where you were and I was afraid that you might have been hurt." Or even stronger feelings can be expressed without being threatening. "I am so angry and confused that I could spit nails. This is the fifth time you have told me to do something and when I am half way through, you change your mind. How do you want me to respond when I get so confused?"

Note, in this scenario there is no name calling, threats, demanding or controlling elements in the direct expression of feelings. Most of the indirect expression of anger is for the purpose of manipulation. This is an important distinction to make. Being angry has never resulted in anyone going to jail; it is what you do with your anger that gets you into trouble. People who believe that anger is bad do not understand the difference between the direct and indirect expression of feelings.

In Psychology Today, an article by Nando Pelusi, *Anger, Pain and Depression* (November 2003) explores the connection between anger and depression. He suggests ways of keeping your anger from turning into depression. I would like to expand on his suggestions:

- Identify anger and acknowledge it. Anger is one of those emotions whose expression is sometimes subject to taboos so that people can grow up unable to recognize it; they feel its physical discomfort but can't label it, "I'm not angry I'm just upset!"
- Build a lexicon for your internal states. Anger comes in degrees from little amounts of anger that tend to build such as: annoyed, upset, irritated, frustrated, disgusted, and mad. As the little angers continue to build, you reach the much stronger ones such as: hurt, hostile, livid, fury, hate and rage. No one starts with hate or rage. A label improves your ability to understand your feelings.

- Your anger is a signal. It is not something to be escaped from or repressed. It is something to be accepted as a sign that you need to either change your expectations or to express your anger.
- Make yourself aware of the three purposes of your anger: 1) To keep someone out of your life, 2) To manipulate and 3) To feel better, venting. Be sure to distinguish purpose from passion. Things that have a positive purpose seek betterment, growth, love, enhancement, and fulfillment. Things that have a negative purpose are motivated by a sense of powerlessness. Are you enraged about an inequity or unfairness?
- Give up your obsession about being right. Instead, the question you should be asking yourself is this, "Is what I'm doing going to get me what I want ***in the long run?***"
- See that the opposite of love is not hate or even anger, it is not caring. You get angriest most at the people you love the most.
- Uproot mistaken beliefs that underlie your responses. Very often, anger is the result of beliefs that lead you to place unreasonable expectations, such as, people should drive like I think they should drive, not as they drive, or that life must be fair. Unfairness exists. The belief that you are entitled to fairness results from the mistaken idea that other people should love you like your mother did. If you believe all people should treat you like your mother, you will certainly find lots to be angry about. Insisting that life must be fair is not only irrational; it will cause you to collect "evidence" of injustices done to you. Even if you are experiencing nothing more than your fair share of unfairness, such a belief can create the illusion of powerlessness and anger which can lead to depression.
- Notice your own complaints about how people/the world is not living up to your expectations. These are the you shoulds you have for others. With you shoulds, you will hassle others. It's really a manipulative strategy. With I shoulds, not living up to your expectations for yourself, you hassle you. It drags you down into feelings of powerlessness, passivity and inertia. Every time you have an "I should" for yourself that you do not do, there is a little anger at yourself, which results in guilt. ***When you feel guilty you will set yourself up to be punished.*** What better way can you punish yourself other than be depressed (I don't deserve to be happy). A rule of thumb is that the more "I shoulds" you have, the more depressed you will be.

There are three uses or purposes of anger. **First**, and what is most often thought about when someone is angry at you, is that "they want to get rid of me; they don't love/like me." This is based on the fallacy that the opposite of love is anger and/or hate. In fact you get angry most at the people you love the most. If you cannot get angry at someone, you don't love them. The opposite of love is indifference, not caring.

Of all the times you have been angry at someone, how many of those times was it to get rid of that person forever? For most people, it is zero to once or twice in

their whole life. Not much, when you compare it to the total of time you have been angry.

The **second** use of anger is to manipulate. Have you ever used your anger to manipulate someone? “Don’t ride your tricycle in the street!” Are you trying to get rid of your child or are you trying to manipulate him to keep him safe? Another example of manipulation, “I’m really angry at you. You said that we would have time together this weekend, just the two of us. We never spend time together.” Is this person trying to get rid of their partner or trying to manipulate them into spending time together in order to build a closer relationship? The majority of the anger that you see is used to manipulate people for better or for worse.

The **third** way you can use anger is to feel good. Women tend to use this more often than men. Men could learn a thing or two from women in this area. Women who have had a bad day will often call up their girlfriend and will really let go, “Judy, let me tell you what happened today; it was terrible. It started this morning with. . .” Now, when she calls up her friend is she trying to get rid of her? Is she trying to manipulate Judy? What is she trying to do? Feel better. “Judy you are such a good friend, thanks for listening to me.”

Freud would have probably called what was done with Judy, venting. Today we call it the Verbal Rule: Feelings expressed verbally, take place, reduce in intensity, and are free to change. This rule is like the law of gravity. However, if you tie a helium balloon to your ink pen and floats away, does that mean the law of gravity has stopped working? In the same way, there are ways of preventing the verbal rule from working. If you connect your anger to changing someone’s behavior, then you will stay angry until they change their behavior or until you change your expectation for them (second use of anger).

The verbal rule is sometimes called the Fifteen Minute Rule. This goes with the concept that feelings need to be expressed as intently as they are felt without the putdowns, sarcasm, threats, etc. Once this is done, you cannot be yelling angry for more than 15 minutes unless someone is there putting you down. “What’s the matter, are you having a little hissy fit?” Try your own experiment. The next time you are very angry, clear everybody out of the house, go into your bedroom and check the time. Then yell, scream, beat on the pillow and see if you can keep it going for more than 15 minutes. If you are still angry, check to see if you are connecting your anger to someone else’s behavior.

There are other ways you can block the Verbal Rule from working. If you believe that anger is bad or sinful and you express your feelings, even if you express them directly, you will probably feel guilty, shut down (stuff your feelings) and end up being even more angry, especially at yourself.

A story that ran on NPR illustrates this concept, **The Woman Who Throws Plates For A Living**. Here is the transcript of the NPR broadcast.

The story of Sarah Lavelly's business began shortly after her husband of 12 years left her cold, alone in a house in New Hampshire. After her husband's departure, Lavelly took up an unusual hobby. Every morning, she would go out her front door and smash his belongings in her long, asphalt driveway.

"It was fabulous," says Lavelly. "I was picking stuff up and holding it up over my head and smashing it straight down on my driveway ... really good."

Lavelly enjoyed the cathartic anger, though some psychologists are now saying that this isn't the most effective approach.

Lavelly decided to move back to California and stay temporarily with her mother. But a couple of days after the move, she woke up one morning yearning again for destruction. Realizing she no longer had a forum for her impulses, she had a *Field of Dreams* moment: She decided that she would build a small store — a refuge for frustrated people old and young who wanted an outlet for their aggression. Today, about 200 customers a week carry their anger to Sarah's Smash Shack in downtown San Diego. For around \$25 a head, Lavelly provides dishware, protective gear and the felt-tipped pens that people use to write on the plates they then violently fling at the walls.

Her website is: <http://www.yelp.com/biz/sarabs-smash-shack-san-diego>

After all the things we know about anger, and with thousands of years of experience and observation, there are still some “researchers” who believe that “Anger is the father of murder.”

Psychology professor Jeffrey Lohr of the University of Arkansas says that decades of research on cathartic anger — the theory that actively expressing your anger can reduce or relieve the feeling — has produced a clear conclusion. “Punching pillows and breaking dishes doesn't reduce subsequent anger expression.” In fact, he says. “The research shows clearly the opposite is true: The more you get angry, the angrier you get.”

Professor Lohr is absolutely right when anger is expressed indirectly with putdowns, threats, sarcasm, etc. or when it is used to try to manipulate someone. This expression of anger will often lead to frustration and more anger. It is important to tell the difference between feelings and judgments. Judgments are debatable, feelings are not. Judgments are external, feelings are an internal report. Since no one knows what you feel other than you, when you talk about what you feel you will never lose another argument. “I feel that you don't love me,” is a judgment camouflaged as a feeling and it is debatable. “I don't feel loved; you may love me or I may not be letting your love in, but I don't feel loved.” When feelings are expressed, they are not debatable.

Experience has shown that expressing anger in direct ways for the purpose of feeling better, does NOT lead to an increase in anger.

For over twenty years, I have been working with anger in my Saturday Huge Group Therapy. In the group, I use a Posey (support) belt and a pillow with a combination of cognitive therapy and Psychodrama. The Group helps people who have experienced trauma in their lives, such as molest, war, abuse (both physical and emotional), rape, divorce and loss to release their anger and fear. They then can build confidence and regain a sense of being a powerful person.

When anger is expressed using the guide lines given above, the expression of anger, as strongly as it is felt, has never resulted in the creation of more anger.

Over the years, I have worked with thousands of people's anger and have seen remarkable change in their lives. If you would like to know more about anger and how to express it in constructive ways, you can read about it in my book, TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE.

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