



ANGER

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The Bad. Do you find yourself feeling angry much of the time? Do you blow up over small slights or inconveniences? Do others consider you a "hot head" or tell you that you scare them sometimes? All of us have had times when we've lost our temper or gotten angrier than the situation warrants. For some, however, being angry with everyone and everything is a constant attitude that impacts life. They may not even be aware of how it affects them or the others around them until it comes to a head in an angry confrontation or they find themselves losing relationships with people they care about because of their anger.

The Ugly. Anger can turn ugly when the behavior produced becomes aggressive. Anger can be responded to in many ways, but individuals who have not learned adequate ways to cope with their anger may respond in a verbally or physically aggressive manner.

The Good. Anger is not all bad. Anger, like all emotions, has a function or a purpose. For example, the purpose of fear is to help keep us safe and the purpose of love is to bond with other people. The purpose of anger is to let ourselves and others know that something is wrong. When we feel hurt or betrayed by another, we feel anger. When we are unable to reach our goals, we feel anger. When we perceive injustice, we feel anger. Anger motivates us to try and change our world. Anger both *communicates* to others and ourselves and *motivates* our actions. When we feel we (or others) have been wronged, we are energized and primed for action. Our anger can help us stand up for ourselves and let others know our feelings.

The Two-Step Process of Emotion

To understand anger, it is helpful to understand emotions in general. McKay, Rogers and McKay describe anger and other feelings as a two-part process requiring some sort of arousal plus a triggering thought or interpretation that determines the emotion felt.

$$\boxed{\text{Arousal}} + \boxed{\text{Interpretation}} = \boxed{\text{Emotion}}$$

For example, if someone steps on my toe I will feel pain and arousal. My heart will start beating fast with the experience of physical pain. Those reactions are automatic and I have little control over my initial physical response. The *emotion* I experience, however, is not automatic and will be influenced by my interpretation of the event. If I perceive that it was an accident and the person feels badly, I may feel compassion for the person, even though I am in physical pain. If I perceive that the individual stepped on my toe on purpose, I may feel angry and that it shouldn't have happened. Thus, it is our *interpretation* of events that are the key to our experience of emotion, not the events themselves. Someone who is angry much of the time interprets many events and situations in ways that are more likely to produce angry feelings than other feelings.

There are many ways we interpret situations that are likely to produce the feeling of anger. If I am overly sensitive to rejection, I may interpret meaningless interactions as a sign that someone is rejecting me. If I have a strict code of conduct, I may become angry whenever anyone else does not meet my standards. I may interpret others attempts to win a game as a sign that they are putting me down. Individuals who feel anger frequently tend to interpret many events in anger producing ways. If you find yourself angry frequently, you may want to examine your interpretations.

Tips to Help Decrease your Anger

Prior to experiencing anger:

1. Identify issues and situations that are likely to get you angry. What are your buttons, those things that you are most sensitive to? Can you change the situation or decrease your exposure to it?
2. Imagine how you might react differently the next time the situation arises. How would you like to respond differently? Ask others how they would respond. Develop a plan of how you would like to respond next time.

When you find yourself feeling angry, do the following:

1. Take a break. Give yourself a chance to cool down and evaluate what is going on.
2. Analyze the situation. What is the anger telling you? Is this a time when the anger is letting you know something needs to change? If so, consider possible ways to respond and determine which is most likely to have the desired effect.
3. Examine your feelings. Is there another feeling beneath the anger? Sometimes we experience anger when we are afraid, feel threatened, or feel hurt.
4. Examine your stressors. Are you feeling under stress that may contribute to your feelings of anger? Are you tired or hungry?
5. Examine your interpretation of the event. What are alternate interpretations for the event? Might someone have acted unintentionally? Are other needs competing with your own? What expectations are you bringing to the situation?
6. Examine the importance of the event. Is this matter worth your continued attention or is it unimportant?

After going through the above steps, consider possible responses to your anger:

1. Change your behavior so you are not in the situation again.
2. Talk with the person involved to let them know your feelings.
3. Talk to someone else to help sort through your feelings.
4. Drop it and go on to something else.
5. Distract yourself.
6. Do something to decrease your arousal such as relaxation or exercise.
7. Use humor.

BOOKS: Available for browsing in the UI Counseling & Testing Center Self-Help Room

When Anger Hurts: Quieting the Storm Within. By Matthew McKay, Peter D. Rogers, & Judith McKay, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1989.

The Angry Self: A Comprehensive Approach to Anger Management. By Miriam M. Gottlieb, Ph.D., 1999.

The Dance of Anger. By Harriet Goldhor Lerner, Ph.D., 1985.

Angry All the Time: An Emergency Guide to Anger Control. By Ron Potter-Efron, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1994.

Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling and Testing Center offers free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for full time UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) or call at 208-885-6716. Website: www.uidaho.edu/ctc

All appointments are strictly confidential.