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Dealing with Anger

By Susan Dunn

Dealing with Anger by Susan Dunn, MA, Emotional Intelligence Coach & Consultant

"When I was growing up," Annette tells me, "girls weren't supposed to get mad. Just as we were supposed to sit still, and not speak unless spoken to, we were supposed to look pretty and keep a smile on our face. It's no wonder I had migraines for so many years. And when I did start dealing with it, I had no idea what to do about it."

"There was something wrong with her, I think," Anthony told me. "My ex-wife ... she never got angry, all the time we were married. Not once." He paused and looked away. Then he added, "She just threw the keys on the table one day and walked out. I had no idea there was anything wrong."

"'Let it all hang out' was the catchword sometime around the late 70's," says Martha. "After years of being told NOT to express our anger, we were supposed to do so all the time. I remember this period of time as very unpleasant. We got it from all sides. It was very, um, noisy."

"In the 80s, they were telling women to stomp around, talk loudly, and assert themselves. We were supposed to 'get angry' in order to compete with men in the work world," says Paula.

Anger ... how we struggle with this primitive, upsetting emotion. Denied to women, it was at the same time the "all purpose" emotion for a generation of men - the only legitimate way they could express any emotion, since tenderness, grief, shame and sympathy were women's territory.

We are more accepting now for both genders to have all feelings (like we had a choice), and yet we still don't know what to do about anger. "Anger kills" and the evidence mounts daily how detrimental this emotion, unmanaged, can be to our health -- physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Can't we just do away with this emotion we dislike so much? Reach some state of nirvana where we're always "happy" and nothing bothers us? Not likely, and if we could, we'd be missing a great source of information.

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The key is not to get rid of anger - or any other emotion - but to learn how to deal with it in a manner that's not harmful to ourselves or to others, and to heed its message.

There have been more "fads" about anger, than fingers on my hands, and I've lived through many of them. So how are we dealing with it now? What's the latest?

Let's get away from "fads" and get to the nitty-gritty about this potentially destructive, yet vital, emotion.

WHERE IT COMES FROM

Anger, in its rawest form, comes from the primitive, or reptilian brain. While "anger" encompasses many things when we experience it, comes from many causes, and contains many puzzling layers, at the bottom it's aggression.

Emotions from the reptilian brain are designed for survival, and are stronger than our thoughts will ever be. If we didn't pay attention to them, we might come into harm's way. They're designed to preclude thinking. When the insult comes, or the push, or the threat, we react ... just as if there were a beast in front of us, threatening our life.

Adrenalin starts pumping and we move into fight-or-flight. There's no time to think, or we'd be dead ... at least the way the emotion was originally designed to operate. The trouble is, today there are few real threats to our existence, but our bodies don't know the difference, and so we react.

CAN WE IGNORE IT?

We ignore it to our peril. We are our emotions, and if we shut down one, we shut them all down. If you aren't willing to experience the "bad" ones, you can't experience the "good" ones, to about the same degree.

I'm reminded of a friend who told me in one breath about the death of his mother, and the birth of his first child, as if he were reporting the Dow Jones for the day.

His inability to deal with his grief and anger at his mother, rendered him unable to rejoice at the birth of his daughter. Foregoing pleasure was the price he paid for being numb.

Our emotions are our guides. Anger tells us something is wrong we need to deal with. And even if "you" choose to ignore it, your body isn't. It will talk to you in migraines, back pain, ulcers, depression, and fibromyalgia.

Anger compromises the immune system. Illness ensues. It isn't a question of whether or not you can ignore it; you can't. It's whether you're mindful of it or not.

It will also talk to you in aborted careers, shattered relationships, and damaged children. "The sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons," refers to legacies of dysfunction.

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CAN WE ACCEPT IT?

We have a long communal history of judging our anger and finding it "bad". It's hard to accept. It makes us somehow "not nice." The physiological response to it doesn't feel good, and we wish it would go away. We want to be "calmed down; at least those of us who aren't so addicted to it we're living in a state of hostility, on the verge of going postal, walking time bombs, coronaries waiting to happen.

However, the more we fight it, the greater the hold it will have on us, and we compound the stress. It takes energy to stuff it down and that takes its toll. Besides it doesn't work.

The first step is to recognize and accept it. "Nothing's either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," said the poet, and this applies to all our feelings, including anger. They are. They happen. They're there for a reason, which should be noted.

Judging our emotions only compounds the stress. Even in the Bible it says, "Be angry, and yet do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger." [Ephesians 4:26] The New Living Translation phrases it, "Don't sin by letting anger gain control over you."

It gains control over us when we do one of two things - either ignoring it, or reacting to it in knee-jerk fashion, and doing something harmful.

What's the alternative? Sit with the anger. Experience it. Acknowledge it. Then move yourself to the higher center of the brain, the neocortex, and figure out what to do about it, if anything. Respond, don't react. Put a pause in between feeling and action. Be willing to do nothing, while feeling it at the same time. But don't ignore it.

Better Anthony's wife had told him each time she was angry and asked for changes rather than just throwing the keys on the table one day and walking out. Then it was too late. There was too much water under the bridge, too much resentment, too much to deal with.

When we stuff it down, it's likely to come out in the "kick the dog syndrome" as well. Some unsuspecting person will be the brunt of our resentment toward someone else, or we'll get drunk, or crash the car, or trash our life in some way. Anger is energy.

LET IT PASS

One way to deal with anger is to learn to forgive. This is a long learning process for most of us, but, of course, we have plenty of opportunity to practice it. Unjustices occur all the time, and we have all been wronged. Learning to let go of this anger is part of Emotional Intelligence.

One reason this is a good policy is because many of the most grievous injustices can't be undone. An apology wouldn't be enough.

Therefore, we forgive, and we do so for our own benefit, not the benefit of the perpetrator. The anger will eat us up, while having little effect on the object of our anger, which means we are twice victims,

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and more the fool.

USE IT (POSITIVELY)

Channel the energy. When your boss makes you angry, go chop wood when you get home. Use the anger over your divorce to flame through graduate school. Get angry at the opposing team and win the football game. Write poetry when your mother dies. Master Rachmaninoff's 3rd Concerto when your wife runs off with another man.

NAME IT, CLAIM IT, AIM IT, TAME IT

This is another method for dealing with anger. Name the feeling and claim it. It's your anger.

Intellectually speaking, someone could have said the same thing to someone else, and it would've had little or no effect. YOU are in the equation! "Aim it" means know where it's coming from. Don't slap your child because your partner infuriated you. "Tame it" means learning to self-soothe.

Developing your emotional intelligence can help eventually to modulate your feelings. (So can therapy.) You experience them less strongly after time, if you work at dealing with them as they come up.

DON'T REPRESS IT, DON'T EXPRESS IT, CONFESS IT

This is Paul Pearsall's formula. He has a Ph.D. in psychoneuroimmunology and is the author of "The Pleasure Principle." His work on anger is compelling, as he has studied the effect it has on our immunology system, which is our health.

Repressing anger makes us sick, and so does expressing it. There's a plethora of research showing that just recalling an angering event causes the same reaction as if it were happening again in real time. Why do this to yourself over and over again? Wasn't once enough? Skip the war stories, and skip the bypass, yes?

"Confess it," says Pearsall, meaning roughly that you acknowledge you have it, and that maybe you aren't "yourself," or thinking straight. You take a break. Breathe deeply. Count to ten. Think it over. Move on.

YOU MANAGE IT, OR IT MANAGES YOU

Learning to manage anger is part of emotional intelligence. We are never far from the two-year-old throwing a tantrum. "We never grow up," someone said, "We just learn how to behave in public." The difference is self-awareness and tools - understanding the emotion, being able to stop, self-soothe and think it through, and not letting it get the better of us.

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The Nature of Anger

By Kevin B. Burk, Author of The Relationship Handbook

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Many of us have some very definite ideas about anger. We see anger as destructive and hurtful. We consider it to be an inappropriate response. We equate anger with violence. In short, we feel that anger is simply wrong, and that when we experience anger, there's something wrong with us. Anger isn't nice. Anger isn't polite. And anger certainly isn't our friend.

Anger can be all of these things. But anger is also useful, necessary and even healing. We need our anger. We simply need to learn how to express our anger in appropriate, conscious, supportive ways. On its own, anger is neither good nor bad. It can be used to hurt, or it can be used to heal. It may not be a particularly pleasant emotion, but it's an important one. We can all benefit from exploring the nature of anger.

Guy Williams, a friend of mine who also happens to be a minister of Religious Science offers a tremendously insightful approach for understanding anger. Guy says that anger arises from a communication not delivered or an expectation not met. Anger is actually a tertiary response: our initial responses are grief and fear. First, we grieve the death of the expectation that was not met. Next, we fear that things will never change. Finally, we experience anger.

So few of us recognize that anger can be a positive, healing response. When we allow ourselves to experience anger, it focuses our minds, and strengthens our resolve. We discover reserves of strength and power. Our anger is what gives us the courage and the power to confront our fear that things will never change, by creating change.

Let's consider an example. We expect that our boundaries will be respected by others. When someone crosses a boundary, that expectation has not been met. The first thing we do is grieve the death of the expectation that other people will respect our boundaries. We feel unsafe because our boundary has been

violated. But we also experience fear. We're afraid that things will never change: that our boundaries will not protect us because other people will not honor them. Our anger, however, is what allows us to change this. Our anger gives us the strength to defend ourselves. Our anger gives us the power and the

courage to stand up and demand that our boundaries be respected. Our anger, in fact, enables us to feel safe again. Expressing our anger helps us to redefine and reinforce our boundaries. We know we can defend ourselves, and therefore we feel safe.

When we don't express our anger in healthy, conscious ways, we buy into the fear that things will never change. We feel unsafe. More importantly, we expect that we will always feel unsafe. Unexpressed anger inevitably turns to resentment and depression.

Anger is our call to awareness. Our anger encourages us to become conscious of a limiting belief. The key to experiencing anger in a healing way is to own our anger. We can then choose how to express our anger. We do not need to lash out, nor do we need to hurt anyone with our anger. Instead, we can choose to alter our thinking, change the limiting belief, and reclaim another piece of our true selves. When we embrace and understand the true nature of anger, anger can empower us, and help us to feel truly safe.

Kevin B. Burk is the author of *The Relationship Handbook: How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life*. Visit <http://www.everyrelationship.com> for a FREE report on creating AMAZING Relationships.



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