



Understanding Anger by Dr. Mark Sofair-Fisch

We know that there are three primary colors, and all other colors are derived from combinations of these three. Similarly, it has been said that there are four primary emotions, and all other emotions are derived from the latter four. The four primary emotions are MAD, SAD, GLAD and SCARED.

So Mad, or anger, is a normal primary emotion. Anger is NOT bad. It is merely a signal that tells us we are unsafe and are facing some sort of loss or threat. It signals that we need to take care of something quickly.

Anger can be triggered by things that occur around us, or within us.

External occurrences that trigger anger:

- Physical attacks (someone threatens or attacks you, your family, property, etc.)
- Emotional attacks, such as insults and put downs.
- Criticism that we feel is unfair.
- Loss of a valued role or relationship, job or something that is very important to us.

Internal occurrences that trigger anger:

- Memories or thinking about past events where we felt we were wronged.
- Loss of a loved one, our health and mental and/or physical capacities.
- Anger from the past that was never resolved which is re-awakened by current stressors.

Anger is manifested by physical and psychological reactions. Physically, the “fight or flight” adrenalin rush kicks in and floods the nervous system, resulting in the possible sensations of pounding/racing heart rate, dry mouth, flushed face, shaking, cold hands, abdominal distress, rage that seems to take over the body like a wave. Psychologically, we experience ourselves as victimized, diminished, powerless, and we feel entitled to seek revenge and/or justice.

No doubt about it, anger is a force that cannot be ignored. How we handle anger is learned when we are young. There are three basic types of responses to anger. Suppressed anger and explosive anger are two destructive ways of handling anger. In contrast, a thoughtful response to anger is healthy and desirable.

Some families do not permit the expression of anger. They teach children that the expression of anger is bad, selfish, etc. Children brought up in anger intolerant homes develop suppressed

anger. Since the anger energy is not allowed to be channeled externally, the child learns ways of suppressing the anger inside. Water provides an excellent analogy for anger. Water is necessary for life. When it is channeled properly, through aqueducts and pipes, it sustains life, allowing us to drink, cook, bathe, etc. However, when water is channeled improperly, it causes huge damage. The water equivalent of suppressed anger is undetected water that is leaking from pipes that are behind walls. This leaky water creates mold, and damages the supporting structures of the house. Similarly, suppressed anger harms the self. It leads to guilt, depression, poor self esteem and passive-aggressive behaviors (e.g., getting back at someone through passive-aggressive means).

Explosive anger or anger expression that lacks control is taught in homes where there are few restraints for the expression of anger. Families that manifest physical violence, yelling, cursing and minimal problem solving for conflicts teach children to deal with anger in explosive ways. Using the water metaphor, explosive anger is depicted by tsunami- like storms. The damage from uncontained water is enormous, and has been known to wipe out towns through flooding, etc. Unrestrained anger also inflicts huge damage. At milder intensities, it disrupts relationships, jobs, etc. As it intensifies, it may lead to legal action caused by damage to people and property around you.

Healthy expression of anger involves a process of learning to recognize the external and internal anger triggers for you. The goal is to learn to

- Recognize the physical sensations of anger, as they begin to manifest themselves;
- Learn techniques to calm yourself, so that you can figure out the source of your anger, and what you need to do resolve the issue.
- Look inwards to determine if the anger is a result of an old wound from the past.

If you suffer from suppressed anger, psychotherapy helps you learn to speak out, in a way that is safe and productive. If you suffer from explosive anger, psychotherapy teaches you to learn how to calm down, think, and find ways to discuss your thoughts and feelings in a productive manner.

Anger management therapy for both types of unhealthy anger responses can be obtained at our practice, Advance Thru Psychotherapy & Family Development, PA.

Dr. Mark Sofair-Fisch is a psychologist with practices in West Orange, New Jersey and Lawrenceville, New Jersey. He specializes in relationship problems, parenting issues, spiritual growth, anxiety, depression, life transitions and stress management. Dr. Sofair-Fisch provides individual, family, marital couples and group psychotherapy for these and many other issues. For more information, please visit www.RelationshipSolutionsNJ.com.

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