

November 2010

Understanding our Anger

Anger should not be confused with aggression although it often manifests in that way. Anger is an emotion and does not necessarily lead to aggression. It is important to understand that a person can become angry without acting aggressively. Hostility is a term often related to anger and aggression but hostility is a complex set of attitudes and judgments that motivate aggressive behaviour. However, anger is an emotion; aggression is a behaviour; hostility is an attitude that involves disliking others and evaluating them negatively.

Anger can be a healthy, normal emotion but if we allow our anger to take over our life making us destructive and violent, then it becomes a big problem.

Not only does the anger eat away and destroy us but it also affects everyone and everything around us. It can emerge from one or a variety of causes and part of the process of therapy is helping to sort out the cause of our anger. In order to do this our anger must be acknowledged and felt. Naming our anger is a crucial stage in the healing process.

The resistance to anger is no more wrong than having the experience of anger. Both are rather normal human reactions. What is more important is to recognise the resistance we are feeling, identify it, and then discuss it. Gradually, as we begin to acknowledge our resistances to anger it becomes easier to let it go and work through it.

Angry outbursts, irritableness and finding we have a short temper may often be symptoms that mask depression. Sometimes when we feel depressed, we feel angry that things are going

so wrong for us, angry that we are in so much emotional pain and angry at the seeming hopelessness of our situation. We may have been discouraged from showing the helpless, vulnerable sides of ourselves as a child when we were younger, but we will still have that urge to express how we feel. We will have learnt that anger may be a more acceptable way to us of expressing emotional pain than crying, or asking directly for help.

What other people see when we act out anger is our breathing becoming more rapid, an initial reddening and then our face turning white, our voice becoming louder and speaking more quickly and our movements becoming quicker, our muscles tensing up, our face becoming distorted, our shoulders hunching up and we will probably clench our fists. If we continue down a path where we are constantly angry and either suppressing it or acting it out, it will eventually cause major problems with very serious consequences on our health. We may also find that the periods of time we need to recover from illnesses becomes significantly increased.

Anger is the natural emotional response designed to protect us from danger

It is part of our instinctual system for protection and preservation. It is a force of energy that we project in order to push away or combat a threat. However, if the threat is not real, anger ceases to be a form of protecting our life and becomes a means of destroying our life and relationships.

Our emotions respond the same whether a threat is real or part of our imagination.

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There is nothing irrational or wrong with the anger from imagined scenarios and beliefs. Our emotional response system is working properly. The problem is with the thoughts, beliefs, and scenarios in our mind that generate an anger response. We need to understand that the scenarios the mind projects are often not rational at all.

An anger problem exists when we become dependent on anger as a primary means of expressing ourselves; when we inappropriately use anger or the threat of violence as a weapon to get our way. Inappropriate and uncontrolled anger is harmful for both, the targets of anger and the angry person as well.

Inappropriate anger destroys relationships, makes it difficult to hold down a job, and, as mentioned above, takes a heavy toll on our physical and emotional health.

The expression of anger within some families is not permitted. The children are taught 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 channelled externally, the child learns ways of suppressing the anger inside.

Many Psychologists use water as a straightforward analogy for anger. Water is necessary for life. When it is channelled effectively, it sustains life, allowing us to drink, cook, bathe, etc. However, when water is channelled 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 mould, and it damages the supporting structures of the house. Similarly, suppressed anger harms the self. It leads to guilt, depression, poor self-esteem and passive-aggressive behaviours such as seeking to get back at someone through passive-aggressive means.

A popular misconception is that we inherit our anger but this is totally untrue. All this misconception achieves is to allow us to fool ourselves that it is an inevitable reaction over

which we have no control. We do however learn it as children from the behaviour around us. Not only is the expression of anger learned, but it can become a routine, familiar, and predictable response to a variety of situations.

We need to learn the difference between being assertive and behaving aggressively.

Assertiveness establishes our own authority and is respectful whilst aggression is threatening, bullying and intimidating. People listen when someone is speaking assertively but not when someone is being aggressive, they will only hear the anger.

Unfortunately, many people believe that venting our anger is a positive thing in ways such as screaming at the wall or beating a pillow. I disagree with this theory absolutely. The more we vent anger in an aggressive manner the more we learn to deal with situations in that manner. It does not achieve a positive result from others or within ourselves. Although we may feel better after an angry outburst, everyone else will feel worse. This is called an "apparent" payoff because the long-term negative consequences far outweigh the short-term gains.

Through Counselling we can learn to own our anger and allow it to manifest in a healthy and positive way.

This can be a wonderful and powerful thing when taught correctly. However, it can be counter-productive if not taught well. For example, a common approach to anger management is simply teaching people to control and repress their anger. This is not healthy! This will often redirect the anger to a different outcome which, as described above, could be depression, physical or psychological problems, or more serious physical ailments.

If we suffer from suppressed anger, Counselling helps us learn to speak out, in a way that is safe and productive. If we suffer from explosive anger, Counselling teaches us to learn how to calm down, think and find ways to discuss our

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thoughts and feelings in a productive manner. Counselling also helps us work out why we become angry and teaches us not to be a slave to our emotions.

In conclusion, anger is a natural part of our life. It has many causes and there are many ways to deal with anger. Generally, it is most helpful to go through these processes with a trusted professional.



"Sustainable Empowerment" is a new approach to psychotherapy and counselling developed by Richard Gosling that can help in building a stronger and more loving You.

Richard specialises in "Trauma Therapy" and "Crisis Counselling", is a member of the UK Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners and is offering his help and services in West London.

For more information on "Sustainable Empowerment" please visit www.sustainable-empowerment.co.uk or get in touch with Richard via the following email address: richard@sustainable-empowerment.co.uk