

HEEDING ANGER (i) Beliefs and Perceptions

Anger has been given a bad name. We often associate it with violence and aggression. Actually 'anger' is not the problem. Anger itself is neither good nor bad. It is *how* we express anger which is the problem. And this has to do with our beliefs about anger. Our unhelpful beliefs of anger make us express anger in problematic ways. These beliefs were formed by our past experiences.

'Anger is Power.' That may be the unhelpful hidden belief of people who express anger through aggression. They raise their voice. They bang the table. They believe that if they strike fear in others, they will have their way. But if they are honest with themselves, they will admit that they have but lost the respect and trust of those who have witnessed their loss of self-control. When they confront what lurk inside this façade of power, they will find fear and shame;- fear of losing control, of being taken advantage of and of experiencing shame. Real power comes in acknowledging the emotions behind our aggression. Real power is about being willing to uncover the root of the fears that fuel the fiery outbursts.

'Anger destroys.' "I must not express it." "I must ignore and hide it." This is the belief of someone who holds repressed anger. Anger does not destroy. Destructive expressions of anger do. Repressed anger can wreak just as much havoc as explosive anger. What is



repressed 'leaks' out in subtle ways. The person with repressed anger is prone to passive-aggressive behaviours such as stubbornness, unresponsiveness, sulkiness, uncooperativeness etc. He will also likely turn that repressed anger towards self, often leading to depression.

'Anger is my reaction to others' provocation. I don't want to be angry. People make me angry.' People who have this belief use blame to justify their explosive or repressed anger.

'No one can make us feel inferior without our consent.' (Eleanor Roosevelt) In the same way, no one can make us lose our control unless we ourselves allow it. We have no control over what happens to us. We cannot control how others think, feel or behave. We are responsible for and have absolute control over ours. We have complete control over how we react to provocation. We have the power to choose.

We can choose to keep our unhelpful beliefs about anger and so express our anger in ways that would hurt others, ourselves, destroy our relationships and health. We can also choose to maintain a healthy approach to anger where we manage and regulate ourselves and our emotions. This requires us to look at anger differently.

Contrary to seeing anger as a result of external provocation that we should react to, we can perceive anger as *our friend and not our foe*. When we perceive anger as an ally, we will acknowledge and connect with it instead of disown or deny it. Our body remembers what our mind forgets. It holds what the mind disowns. The body is put under great strain when anger is inhibited. Dealing with it appropriately instead of suppressing it will relieve us of detrimental effects of anger.

We tell ourselves that it is *alright to be angry* but *watch how we express it*. We adopt a new perception of anger. We see it as giving us feedback about ourselves, first about our psychological well-being and also about what we attach importance to. Just as pain alerts us to a part of our body needing healing, our anger tells us that some issues in us are still 'unresolved' and 'need attending to.' Our anger also tells us that something we attach importance to, such as values of punctuality, fairness, loyalty, or our reputation, etc. has been violated.

Connect-Point

Our beliefs shape our convictions. Convictions in turn drive our behaviour. We must first be convinced that we need to adopt healthy beliefs relating to anger. Then will we be able to get rid of the unhealthy ones we have. This must happen before we learn the 'how to', ie. how to express anger appropriately.

If we accept the belief that our anger carries a message about us, we will discard the belief that anger is to be suppressed or denied. We will want to pay attention to our anger. Keeping an anger logbook is a good start. This records circumstances that activated our anger, the bodily sensations we felt, accompanying emotions, the thoughts that ran through our minds before and after our anger episode and the trigger issues. In doing so, we will be able to discern patterns over time;- thought patterns and issues that trigger our anger.

By *trigger issues* we mean 'what causes us anger?' These are usually related to values we hold dear or unmet core-needs in us;- the need to be accepted, belong, and be loved. For example if we felt angry because someone was rude to us, the *trigger issue* could either be because we value politeness and felt that that was violated, or because of our unmet need to feel valued, or both. If it had to do with unmet needs, the anger would usually be accompanied by other emotions, in this case, shame and rejection.

Anger is the 'visible emotion.' It is actually driven by emotions such as shame, fear, rejection etc. which are the 'hidden emotions.' These are the emotions that actually trigger anger. Identifying the hidden or primary emotions lead us to the real issues, the root of our anger, (eg. perceived rejection by our parents). That is why identifying *accompanying emotions* and *thoughts* that surface during an anger episode is important.

Are we saying that it is wrong to be angry when others are rude to us? No. But how we express that anger, whether this is due to the importance we attach to a value or our unmet needs, can be wrong. This anger has to be appropriately expressed.

If we accept that anger should be expressed appropriately, then the way we express anger should not hurt others or ourselves. We



acknowledge our need to regulate our emotions, the need for greater self-control. We have to dispel the belief that anger is power. Instead, we work towards self-empowerment, the power to put ourselves under our own control.

To do that, we keep ourselves under our own watch. The anger logbook is a good aid. It increases our awareness of self. We also become more conscious of our *bodily sensations* when we are angry. We will recognise the tension, increased heart rate, bodily heat etc. When these sensations arise, we can choose to move away before attending to the situation more rationally. We take responsibility for ourselves to learn techniques that can calm us, such as abdominal breathing. If applicable, we assume responsibility. We acknowledge our part in contributing to the heated situation.

So there are two paths we can take. One is the unhealthy path where we continue to use anger to wield false power, to ignore it or to justify our anger by shifting blame. Or, we can move away from that and choose to now listen to our anger, believing that it communicates something to us. This begins with recognising and changing our beliefs.

A lot of good things come from angry people who heed their anger. They can then divert it into positive channels. People who are angry at the social injustice or suffering they see may be driven to start projects supporting that cause. Their anger, expressed appropriately, becomes a gift to their community. At other times, they use what they 'hear' from their anger for greater self-awareness and self-empowerment.

The choice is ours.

Contact Us

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