



Learning dynamics of anger may help control it

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We all experience "it." Anger can be one of our best friends or our worst enemy. Put another way, it can be a double-edged sword — good when it's expressed under the right circumstances and destructive when it's not.

Once anger is fully activated, we have tremendous power available. In "Taming the Anger Demon," Neil Warren notes, "When angry, we can move like a missile to a place of resolution and peace or to the point of destruction. We can either make things right or create chaos."

Leon Seltzer, a clinical psychologist, acknowledges his unorthodox interpretation of the dynamics of anger.

In his article "What Your Anger May Be Hiding," he notes, "Anger is almost never a primary emotion in that even when anger seems like an instantaneous, knee-jerk reaction to provocation, there's always some other feeling that gave rise to it. And this particular feeling is precisely what the anger has contrived to camouflage or control."

He gives the example of being cut off while driving. Many people will admit that the immediate reaction to such an event is anger. But when drivers were asked what being "cut off" really meant — namely, the very real threat of an accident — they noted that the initial emotion preceding the anger was one of apprehension and fear.

Seltzer goes on to note, "Cycling from the heightened arousal level of fear to an equally intense level of anger happens with such breathtaking speed that almost no one can recollect that flash of trepidation preceding the anger."

Some people with major issues concerning anger have suffered from significant self-image deficits. Others have been successful in their careers, yet far less so in their relationships, where anger triggers abound.

In understanding the dynamics of anger, it is Seltzer's belief that it covers up the pain of our "core hurts" such as feeling ignored, unimportant, accused, devalued, rejected and powerless. Thus, the role of anger can be the means to counter hurtful or unbearable feelings. Consequently, the potential is there for people with anger issues to become dependent on the emotion, even to the point of addiction.

Throw in some neurobiology in the process and what you have is the role of anger actually becoming a means of self-medicating against all sorts of psychological pain or, as one psychologist noted, it actually can be "self-soothing."

Another way of looking at anger is by way of our need to self-validate our worth and value, not monetarily but psychologically. Our sense of self is critical for ensuring a feeling of well-being and confidence. If our view of ourselves is generally positive, then we have the healthy resources to acknowledge some personal deficits (which we all have) without experiencing intense levels of guilt or shame. However, for those without sufficient ego strength (which enables us to feel good about who we are), the "core hurts" can consume us.

So, potentially, what can happen? Anger can serve the purpose of demeaning "whoever or whatever led us to feel unworthy, devalued or powerless."

The result is, "If we can't comfort ourselves through self-validation, we'll need to do so through invalidating others. In accomplishing this, the helpless feelings convert to anger, instantly providing us with a heightened sense of control and power, thereby allowing us to proclaim the superiority of our own viewpoint."

Seltzer concludes, "If anger can make us feel powerful, if it's the 'magic elixir' that seemingly is able to address our deepest doubts about ourselves, no wonder

it can end up controlling us. In a sense, it's every bit as much a drug as alcohol or cocaine."

So what do we do about it? Admittedly oversimplified, it's about "self-talk" — being able to catch the anger at the earliest possible point, and quickly start thinking before acting. The brain can be distracted. When angry, we have a tendency to forget to think. So use the keyword "think" as a means to proceed with answering two questions:

- Why am I angry?
- What is my deepest "core hurt"?

Answers to these two questions can help identify what actually may lie behind the anger, such as feeling unloved, not trusted, devalued, powerless or threatened. Know yourself. For those who believe it's absolutely necessary to have love and approval from everyone all the time to be competent in everything they do, believing that "My way of looking at the world is the only way" and "It's my way or the highway," then the ingredients are there that can cause buttons to be pushed and anger to surface at whomever and whatever.

Finally, know what you can control and acknowledge what you cannot control. Be able to "blow it off," be alert to your stress triggers and implement QTIP — quit taking it personally.

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