



Anger

The Beast Comes Out

Are you a ‘Mama Bear Protector’ or are you a ‘Defender Against the Unknown’?

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Introduction

Judgments, decision making and even our perceptions no longer live solely in our logical mind. In, these activities do not occur disconnected from our other activities. All of our actions have an undertone – not always conscious or visible, yet our emotions are there. To put this in perspective, are simply information our brains provide us to guide our decision-making process or analyze our . It is the same type of information as “the speed limit is 65 mph” or “it is supposed to rain today”.

Emotions exert strong influences on judgment and choices. They affect our thinking process in a variety of ways –adding influencing factors that do not exist or disregarding actions that we logically deem irrelevant. Our emotions can misinterpret a ‘look’ or add an implication to a voice tone. For example “What are you doing?” can come across as accusatory (implying you should be doing something else or you are doing something you should not be) or as a simple question soliciting information.

Your emotions – that information from deep inside your brain – serves as a motivator of behavior. It will either thrust you towards something or someone (your attacker), or push you away from them (avoidance).

The stronger the emotion, the more limited your capacity to focus on other thoughts and activities. You can only hold one thought at a time in your mind, and if that thought is your anger at someone or something, you are more prone to make mistakes. In this anger-ness, you are more likely to have an overinflated sense of self and of what you can accomplish, hence taking more risks than you would if you were calm and thinking rationally. In other words, you are not dealing with the reality of the situation. To further complicate matters, your emotional residue remains with you long after the actual event and any visible reactions have passed.

Anger and Angry Expressions

Is anger a positive or negative emotion? Is it our judgment of the emotion, the behaviors accompanying the emotional actions, or the outcome of those actions that determines our assessment of the anger emotion? Or is it tied more directly to the situation?

Generally speaking, anger is considered a ‘negative’ emotion. I challenge this judgment and **present you with another perspective: anger is in the ‘eye of the beholder’; anger can be an appropriate response in certain situations.** Anger is most effective when it is consistent with the message the person is conveying, the situation and the environment or corporate culture.

Imagine a crisis – should anger never or rarely ‘appear’ during this time? Negative emotions are commonplace and natural during a crisis. Anger can serve as a reason people band together – to fight the common enemy. Anger can also spark action; it is connected to resilient resolution in times of perceived unfairness or injustice. Think of revolutions, strikes or even a slanderous remark against you, your family or a colleague.

Anger also implies direct aggression; your brain interprets this expression as a threatening behavior. Displays of anger are regarded as an attack – a method of communication where hostile conditions can erupt. Anger is linked to unbridled strength (remember The Hulk?) and dominance (think of a Mama Bear when her cubs are threatened), felt both in the angry person and perceived by those in the immediate area. As a result, we react to defend ourselves from the perceived ‘attacker’. In other words, **we unconsciously choose the ‘fight’ response.** Anger attacks the problem and generally does not work with others to remedy the situation.

Our facial expressions communicate our motivation. We spontaneously react to happy or angry faces – it's a feedback system based on our own experiences. Angry faces are seen as unpleasant and negatively focused. It suggests the level of aggression a person may use. This reaction induces a similar emotion in the other person; it is an unconscious and automatically controlled process. After the initial unconscious reactions, we control our subsequent emotional expressions by a conscious process and a deliberate response.

Anger easily captures the attention from others. It makes us eager to act and motivates future behavior. It leads to increased risk taking by selecting certain information as true and disregarding other, perhaps equally as critical, data. It influences perceptions of control, responsibility and certainty. It colors your perceptions and guides our behaviors, not necessarily linking back to your source of anger.

The TEA™ Tornado

Your thoughts are at the center of your actions. They are influenced by, and in turn, influence your emotions. What you think affects how you act. Imagine driving to work. Someone cuts you off. You swerve and brake. You may calmly brush off the event or you might honk, curse, make obscene gestures, or take other unsafe action. Which one of these actions you choose is largely determined by what you are thinking and how you are feeling. You may react more aggressively if you had a bad morning. You may respond less aggressively if you are in a good mood. How you feel can change how you think and that can change what you say and what you do. **The more intense your emotional state, the more extreme and illogical your behavior will be.**



This is a simple example of the thoughts-emotions-attitude cycle. The thought, avoid the other car, leads to the action, turn and brake, which leads to the emotion, anger, which will influence the next thought

This cycle might be better seen as a spiral - a tornado - where each negative thought, emotion, attitude and action leads deeper into the spiral, deeper into angry and potentially unsafe behavior.

Simple enough? Not really! The tornado didn't just appear out of a clear blue sky. Chances are it was the product of a lingering storm. The undesirable behaviors you unleash often have a similar storm of issues feeding them. This workplace storm can be fueled by your home life, interactions with others, or worry or anxiety about an unrelated event.

The Story – *can you relate to any of these?*

- Joe's day began normally. It soon took a sharp downward turn – he dropped a carton of milk, a button fell off his shirt and he had a fight with his wife before work. As he speeds recklessly to work, he continues thinking about the argument, not really paying attention to traffic.
- Sally realizes she's made a mistake - one that will cost a lot of money. She tells herself it was a stupid mistake. As a result of her irritation, she snaps at her colleagues who eventually avoid her.
- Dan gets to work and finds out the two-day trip is now a four-day trip causing him to miss his son's t-ball game. He vents to a colleague who offers no sympathy. Angry and frustrated, Dan stomps outside and fuels his anger by reminding himself of the unfairness of his boss' decision.

Any or all of these situations can cause someone to become angry, unaware of their reactions and the effect these reactions have on others. Yet there is a deeper consequence to anger.

Anger, Specifically

Let's look at these situations overall, then dissect them for a deeper insight into possible outcomes of these impulsive reactions.

All emotions, but specifically anger, interrupt your in-progress thinking. It redirects where your attention is focused, what occupies your short-term memory (think of computer RAM), and colors your judgment – all to attend to this emotion-eliciting threat. Anger rises within us for reasons that we believe:

- We, or someone else, has been offended or injured.
- Our reputation is threatened
- Our credibility is diminished to the point of no return
- Our situation will change and we are not equipped to quickly adapt to the change and risk looking incompetent or foolish

Emotions, especially anger, is associated with a specific event. This event, having occurred in our past, reminds us of our current situation. We have a sense of certainty about what happened and, if another person was involved, the offending person's motives. **In our anger, if we believe another person is responsible for negative events, we believe we can still influence the situation.** However we must act quickly and aggressively to rectify the situation. Unfortunately, we often take our anger out on the non-instigating person.

Looking Ahead of the Stories

To be more specific, let's relate each point to the stories above.

- Joe's anger relates to fighting for control of the situation. If he is late for work what will his colleagues think? If he has been late before and appears to be a recurring problem that he will suffer consequences for, he can be defensive about losing his job and providing for his family. It doesn't matter whether this is a real consequence or not, Joe's brain is seeing it that way. His instinctual reaction is to intimidate and use force (aggressive body language, loud voice) to hinder any discussion about his actions. Because speeding regains his sense of control, he believes that he can successfully maneuver through and respond quickly to traffic. The safety component never enters his mind.
- Sally's anger is directed at herself and the question of 'What will others now think about me?' Her self-anger relates to her reputation ('if word gets around about this dumb mistake, will others think I don't know what I am doing?') and her credibility ('will my boss feel a need to double-check my work now?'). She will hide behind this anger until her brain can accept her actions and consequences. It is then and only then that she will be able to think rationally. Her mind, in reaction to this, bypasses the 'minor' consequences (embarrassment, hurt pride, reprimand) and jumps immediately to being fired, humiliated, not being able to get another job quickly and ending up homeless.
- Dan's anger stems from several areas: a perceived loss of control (his boss extended the trip without asking him about it first) and from his family 'status'. He may be thinking "My son will think I don't love him and he won't understand that I cannot cut short my trip. He will be very disappointed and I don't want to do that to him". Dan may believe that his wife won't respect him or no longer trust him; after all, he is going back on a promise he made. Dan may also feel hurt pride because he feels out of control. His reaction (in his mind) is justified to demonstrate to others that this extension causes him major problems that, at this moment, he is not equipped to deal with objectively. He takes action – even though the action is not productive or professional.

In all the above examples, Joe, Sally and Dan let their emotions gain control of their thoughts. As a result, their thoughts fed their emotions and incited their defensive behaviors. Joe's imagination created a disastrous situation that had catastrophic consequences; Sally denied the reasons (possibly fatigue or preoccupation) why she made the mistakes and also denied that other people also make large mistakes; Dan's thoughts created a no-win situation between him and his family, and him and his boss and him and his colleagues. Denial is a defense mechanism; our unconscious mind is aware of pertinent data; however our consciousness is not prepared to recognize it. The information remains buried until your inner brain's emotions have realized that the event is not a life-threatening or survival situation.

What this Means for You

The effect of your emotions, and your ensuing thoughts and behaviors, should be recognized when you are in a changing or spontaneous situation. Digging deep into your true reasons (which may be disconcerting, mortifying, or ugly) can help your 'front brain' (Tex) to regain control and your composure. When you are in a good mood, you handle stress and disruptions more easily than when you are irritated or frustrated. To negate or neutralize your anger, you can:

- Think of a song that you enjoy; this puts your mind back to a 'happier place'
- Do something physical; move furniture, take a walk, get some air; by changing your environment you make it easier to change your thoughts and release your intense anger
- Talk through your reasoning – aloud – and play devil's advocate with yourself

Conclusion

In short, a person who is angry is more likely to over-react and behave with exaggerated actions and dramatic words. A person who is afraid is apt to become quiet and physically back away from the offending person. Both people will not see the situation as it truly exists; they will see it through their own emotional lens. While these actions make others nervous, the anger emotion prepares you to defend yourself against subsequent 'wrong-doings'.

We risk overreacting when our emotions suppress our rational thought. We share that same risk when we under-react because our minds are preoccupied with another activity or memory; our current thoughts override any additional sensory information. Your ability to stop your emotional reactions and subsequent behaviors is damaged.

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