

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS & DE-CODING ANGER - With Love from Dr. G

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Greetings country family!

We've passed the 4-month mark since 01Oct2017. Many of you are feeling significantly better than four months ago, but there seem to be a lot of people who are not doing so well. One thing that I keep seeing all over the closed Facebook pages are posts about how angry people feel...about everything and towards everyone!!! I thought it might be helpful to write a brief post on this for our community to provide a different perspective on emotions.

This approach to understanding emotion will make more sense if you have some knowledge of basic psychological concepts, many of which have been presented in my previous postings. To have more tools and to learn new skills, I encourage you to review or read the documents I have previously posted in the order that I posted them. We have now created a website with all of these documents that is accessible and available to the public so that we can help as many people as possible! This site is: **route91sd.com**

25Oct2017 – Trauma 411

29Oct2017 – Rules and Compassion (PDF poster)

04Nov2017 – How PTSD Develops (also included Classical Conditioning diagram PDF)

01Nov2017 – Sleep Basics

04Nov2017 – Why Avoidance Makes It Worse

13Nov2017 – Finding New Meaning After Trauma

20Nov2017 – Anxiety and Panic

27Nov2017 – How to Change Unhelpful Thinking (also included CBT Thought Record and Unhelpful Thinking Styles PDFs)

17Dec2017 – Healthy Communication

27Dec2017 – Closing 2015 by Paulo Coelho

15Jan2018 – Tips On Managing Nightmares

26Jan2018 – Leading Change by Example

09Feb2018 – Understanding emotions and Decoding Anger

So, what's the deal?!? Why is everyone so angry? Well, it probably won't surprise any of you to learn that anger (i.e., feeling irritable, frustrated, easily annoyed) is all pretty normal following a traumatic experience. It's also something we see in folks who are experiencing depression or anxiety. But the more interesting aspect of this is that anger...isn't usually really anger! Anger is not typically the only thing going on, but often presents secondary to or in combination with other emotions that may not be as readily apparent, for example, sadness or fear. When you begin to have a better understanding of

emotions then you can also foster a little more compassion for yourself and other people who express anger. Let's start from the beginning.

What are the primary emotions? Well, research all over the world has found that there are 5 primary emotions that seem to exist cross-culturally. They are: Happy, Sad, Scared, Angry, and Disgusted. There are also more nuanced emotions that exist but may be more socially-driven (e.g., Shame/Guilt) rather than biological-driven (as are those five). Think about the very brilliant Pixar film *Inside Out*. We need all of these emotions functioning together and effectively in order to keep everything running smoothly. When one or more emotions shut down, then the headquarters (symbolic for our Limbic System, in the brain) goes haywire, and EVERYTHING and EVERYONE are affected!

What I've observed from treating patients with trauma over the past 15 years is that anger isn't usually anger at all. Once we start challenging rigid or irrational beliefs about the Just World Belief (i.e., the idea that the world should be a fair place all the time, so good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people – which is why I teach people Rule #4 of the Bucket Rules, No Should'ing) then what's usually left is the deeper more painful, scarier emotions...profound sadness and fear.

Think about yourself right now and try to think of examples of when you have felt angry or reacted angrily to someone else. If you peeled away the anger, which unrealistically expected others to be essentially "perfect," know just the right thing to say, react to your pain with compassion (like a therapist might)...then what's left? Is it really anger? Once you understand that it's not helpful or realistic to expect other people to read your mind, understand how you feel or what you're thinking, or be just like you, then you're left with more "raw" emotions. When someone asks you about Route 91 in a way that suggests that you should be over it by now...does that really make you mad? I would offer that actually this is a much more SAD scenario for someone else to lack the compassion to understand the gravity of surviving a massacre such as Route 91. I mean, imagine how lacking in compassion they must be to the pain in their own life????!!! When people show a lack of capacity to understand our situation, is that really anger? Maybe not. Maybe this makes us feel a little scared or anxious? Perhaps this emotional disconnect between us and the other person makes us also question ourselves? And what does it mean if other people don't understand our pain? Will we ever be understood? Maybe there is something wrong with me? Or something wrong with them? All of these questions lead to anxiety/fear...not anger.

So why do we so often demonstrate anger if the real underlying emotions are fear or sadness? Probably because anger feels powerful. It's tangible. You can grab a hold of anger and hurt someone or yourself with it. You can use anger to hit something, yell (highly cathartic), push weights, or scare away the "lion." We like feeling powerful because it feels productive and safe. It also satisfies a need

when we have anxiety already (which trauma creates a lot of!) because anxiety tends to make us feel powerless. We would much rather get angry and tell ourselves it's motivating and satisfying, and we do a really good job of justifying our anger as a meaningful and legitimate emotional response. But usually it's not. We just don't want to feel sad or scared. Feelings of sadness and fear leave us feeling powerless, and this makes us feel even worse (in the moment)! However, if you want to process trauma properly and you want to truly process all of your emotions so YOUR headquarters doesn't go totally haywire and take your whole life down with it, you have to process the sadness and fear too. This means you will benefit in the long run by showing yourself (and others) compassion and allowing yourself to really sit in the sadness or fear you are experiencing in that moment. Remember the compassion statement: *I am having a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of life. May I be kind to myself.* When you have the capacity to simply sit in your feelings, then they will pass. It's like a wave that comes over you and although it may feel as though it consumes you, it won't...it's just a wave. You are the ocean. The ocean consumes the waves, not the other way around.

Next time you feel angry, take a "time out" and ask yourself if the anger might be hiding any other emotions. If it is, then peel away the anger and allow yourself an authentic moment to feel the pain with the understanding that it, too, shall pass. Consider that other people might be doing their "best" and that doesn't have to be what you want or expect, or equivalent to your best. Anger blocks us from processing our real pain. It is not productive, it is destructive, and it has a significantly negative impact on our health in the long run. Although anger may be a helpful conduit emotion, we just don't want to get stuck there...we want to get to the other side.

Good luck in not letting your ANGER run your headquarters!

- With Love From Dr. G