

Understanding Anger

By Sue Brooks, M.A., L.P.C.

I have a hope that someday people will come to understand anger.

Anger is an emotion, with a message.

Anger is not any behavior that may follow it – rapid heart rate, bulging eyes, pouting, punching someone or punching a wall, or taking a time out. Hostility, violence, aggression, bullying, conflict, hate, attack, assault, and abuse may all be associated with anger, coming either before or after the feeling of anger, but they are not the emotion of anger. As such we need to be specific with the words we use in order to convey the message we want to convey.

Years ago emotions were categorized into positive emotions (joy, happiness, generosity) and negative emotions (fear, anger, jealousy), and the positive ones were supposedly experienced on one side of the brain and negative ones on the other side. With the advent of neurological brain research, it was discovered that the “negative” emotion of anger was actually experienced on the same side of the brain as the “positive” emotions. As a result, experts now conceptualize emotions as *approach* emotions and *avoidant* emotions (Harmon-Jones, 2009, 2006). For example, when we feel joy or generosity, we are drawn to one another. When we experience fear, we are being given the message that something is not right, to be cautious and keep our distance.

Anger, simply put, tells us that our needs are not getting met, and if we can use it purposefully and wisely, anger can draw us together to problem-solve those needs. Unfortunately though, we learn and believe that anger is a variety of impulsive reactions such as throwing a temper tantrum, screaming, cussing, pouting and punching. As such, we can't and don't give ourselves the chance to ever come together.

Also unfortunately, anger does not tell us if our needs are reasonable or not. I may think I need another piece of chocolate cake but my neighbor's need for food and shelter after a hurricane is unquestionably more crucial. Likewise for fear. Feeling fearful in a dark, unlit parking lot at midnight may be prudent, but feeling fearful near the front door of a public building at high noon may not be.

The Dalai Lama often discusses anger as being destructive. I wonder if ancient languages had more words for anger than our current languages, like Northern American indigenous people who have 50 different words for snow.

Maybe, since our modern vocabulary does have a list of precise words, like hostility, attack and aggression, we use them, instead of just using the word *anger* as a catchall. In doing so, maybe we'll get more of our needs met.

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