

Anger

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Anger can surprise us. It may suddenly appear, as if out of nowhere. Or it may rumble along for days, getting stronger and louder. Sometimes we are not even aware of being angry, but we notice that we are impatient, abrupt, tense, irritable, or physically sick.

Anger is a feeling. Feelings are neither good nor bad; feelings just "are". The "good" or "bad" label applies to what we do with our feelings. The actions we take are subject to moral and ethical judgment; our feelings are not. Feelings are like "indicator lights" that tell us what is going on inside. If we learn to read our "anger signs", we can begin to better understand ourselves and our actions. We can learn to control our anger, instead of allowing our anger to control us.

Sometimes, we are afraid of our anger. We try to forget about it. We tell ourselves that "yes, we are angry", but we do not allow ourselves to FEEL angry. We "shut off" our angry feelings. We tell ourselves that "nice people do not get angry". We confuse angry feelings with acts of violence and destruction, and so we lock our angry feelings away. We are terrified that some day our angry feelings will break through, and we will be rejected. We don't believe that anyone will love us if we are angry with them. We learn to "roll with the punches". We learn to hide our real feelings behind the mask of a smile. Beneath our smile, however, unaccepted and unrecognized anger rages.

Unrecognized feelings do not magically disappear. Unaccepted anger does not go away. It eats away our insides, destroying our self-esteem and inner peace. Just as a boiling pot spills over if the cover is not removed, repressed anger spills over into other areas of our lives. We may experience migraine headache, muscle tension, chest tightening, irritability, stomach pain, anxiety, depression, pessimism, interpersonal difficulties, and marital or family conflict. In this case, each of these difficulties is a SYMPTOM of the ignored anger that is raging inside us.

If we allow ourselves to look at this anger as morally neutral, and if we regard it as an "indicator sign" of a larger and more pressing difficulty, we can learn to use our anger to help us identify our major problem areas. This process may sometimes be best undertaken with the assistance of a clinical psychologist who acts as a "guide" or facilitator. Learning to read our "anger signs" is the initial step in coming to better know ourselves and realize our potential.

Once we recognize our angry feelings, we must decide what to do with them. We may choose to express our anger in either appropriate or inappropriate ways; the choice is

up to us. Inappropriate expressions of anger do violence to other people or to their possessions. Examples of inappropriate expressions of anger include name-calling and swearing, blaming and accusing others, physical violence and acts of aggression or destruction, "getting even", and belittling and harassing others. To express anger appropriately, we need to recognize and accept the anger as that which we are feeling inside. We then need to allow ourselves to BE angry, and to listen to what that anger is telling us. It is important that we take our expression of anger one step further. Because anger is a physical reality, in addition to also being a psychic and emotional experience, we need to do something with the physical effects of our anger.

We need to get our anger out. Appropriate ways of releasing anger include running and jogging, swimming, tennis, handball and racquetball, throwing pebbles into a lake or river, bicycling, dribbling and shooting a basketball, beating on a pillow, wadding up and throwing paper, or watching sports events such as football or hockey. Once we have released our anger, we are in the position to talk about it with those involved. This is very important, and we need to be careful that we own our anger and that we do not dump it onto others by blaming or accusing them. We own our anger by using "I-messages" instead of "You-messages". For example, we say "I am angry when you do this", instead of "You make me angry".

"I-messages" do not put the other person on the defensive. Nor are they condemning or judgmental, as are "You-messages". "I-messages" respect the dignity and integrity of the other person. They allow us to share our feelings and to dialogue about possible situational causes and changes.

This threefold process of recognizing our anger, releasing it appropriately, and then dialoging with those involved, allows us to "harness" the energy in our anger. We are then able to put our anger to work FOR us.