



Mindfully Managing Anger

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Anger is a natural, human emotion. There is nothing destructive about anger. It demands our attention when our health is in danger, when a boundary has been crossed, or when someone takes advantage of us. However, *how one behaves* when angry may be either destructive or constructive. Being mindful when angry does not mean the anger is ignored, suppressed or denied. Being mindful does not mean that one behaves in destructive ways. Rather, being mindful when angry means a) recognizing the anger, b) labeling it, and c) choosing the best action to take.

In a recent conversation, Paul Ekman, one of the world's leading experts in emotion, told me:

“It is the nature of emotion to make you act without thought. This serves you at times - it can save your life. And sometimes it screws things up. Is there an antidote? Become more aware of the emotion in the moment. Increase your emotional vocabulary so you can make finer differentiations between similar emotions. And lengthen the gap between stimulus and response.”

Step 1 - Spend Time in the Present

When dealing with anger, the first step is to train your mind to spend more time in the present moment. If your mind is wandering to the past or the future, you have little opportunity to stay ahead of anger. It's difficult to be aware of anger if you are lost in thought about the conversation you had with your supervisor three hours ago or what you will be making for dinner later tonight. When your attention is in the present, you can focus your awareness on the physical cues coming from your body. These cues will alert you to the emergence of anger (e.g., quickening heart beat, blood flowing to hands and feet, tightening jaw, overfocus on angry thoughts, and

perhaps tightness in the chest). These cues differ slightly from individual to individual so it's important that you become aware of your top 1 or 2 cues.

Step 2 - Recognize and Label The Anger

Once you become aware of the bodily sensations alerting you to the start of irritation, simply label it. "Ok, I'm starting to feel a little annoyed. What's going on to which I need to pay attention?" To help you get the correct emotional label for the type of anger you are experiencing, check out Paul Ekman's [Atlas of Emotion](#). Briefly, the top types of anger are annoyance, frustration, exasperation, argumentativeness, bitterness, vengefulness and fury (in order of increasing intensity). Why does this matter? Studies have shown that merely putting the right feeling word on your emotional state serves to reduce the intensity of it.

Step 3 - Stay Mindful In the Midst of Growing Anger

Allow the anger to be. It's merely a normal part of being human. There's no need to suppress it or deny it. That only serves to make it more intense (if not now, later). Recognize the dynamic between anger and attention. When anger arises, it hijacks your attention and causes you to look for things (internally and externally) that fuel your anger. Anger wants to keep itself alive. Be aware of this and cut off the oxygen to anger by interrupting your stories about how you were treated unfairly, how the world is out to get you, or how your anger is justified. Instead, mindfully shift your attention to a part of your body that does not feel angry. Perhaps it's your low back or your feet or your thighs. Where are there pleasant or neutral sensations in your body? Tune in to those. Perhaps there is a pleasant smell on which you can focus. Or maybe there are some pleasant sounds outside to which you can attend. Rest the spotlight of your attention on these neutral or pleasant sensations for several minutes. Breathe deeply and slowly. Gradually bring down your heart rate. Your mind will likely resist, wanting to return to thoughts of the anger-inducing situation. Simply come back to the pleasant points of awareness and shift from "fight, flight or freeze" to "attend and befriend."

Step 4 - Examine the Anger

Once you have calmed down, then you can take a closer look at your anger, what caused it and what else surrounds it. Adopt an attitude of self-compassionate curiosity towards your anger. For instance, “what specific type of anger was I experiencing?” “What triggered my anger?” “What message was the anger sending me?” “Was a boundary crossed?” “Was I in harm’s way?” “Did someone insult me?” “Was a loved one at risk?” and “Are there other emotions lying beneath the anger?” The most common underlying emotions I’ve seen are embarrassment, hurt, and anxiety.

Step 5 - Choose the Best Action

As you practice working with your anger, you will notice that you have more time between stimulus (i.e., the trigger) and response (i.e., the anger). Studies show that you have 1/3rd of a second to interrupt the anger cycle. That is, you have 1/3rd of a second between the event that triggers you and feeling angry. Every one of my clients says the same thing, “Man, that is no time at all!” And yet, this is the speed of thought that is involved here. This is also without any training. So you have the ability to insert 1-2 thoughts between the trigger and your anger within the 1/3rd of a second. This might be something like “breathe,” “relax,” “go to the bathroom to cool off,” or “that was just an innocent mistake.” As you learn to turn down the volume on your anger and increase the time between stimulus and response, you have more and more choices available to you as to how best to respond. Perhaps you state your needs assertively, “I need you to treat me with respect.” Or perhaps you switch your mindset to feeling compassion for the offending party. Or maybe you reframe the situation and remind yourself that you were the recipient of an unintentional mistake. In any case, the more your practice, the more skilled you become!

In summary, learning to manage anger is one of the most critical skills you can learn. It will boost your parenting, your career, your marriage and your friendships. To do so, stay in the present moment, become aware of and label the anger, remain mindful in the midst of anger, examine the anger with curiosity and then chose your best course of action. With repeated practice and perseverance, you will see improvement!

About the Author - Dr. John Schinnerer

Dr. John Schinnerer, an expert in positive psychology, men's divorce, and anger management, is revolutionizing the way in which people make sense of the mind, behavior and emotion. He consulted with Pixar on the Academy Award-winning movie, *Inside Out*. His offices are in Danville, California. His most recent project is helping men get through divorce as painlessly and inexpensively as possible at www.DivorceSupport4Men.com. He graduated from U.C. Berkeley with a Ph.D. in educational psychology. He is an award-winning author of the book, *How Can I Be Happy?* He has been a speaker and coach for over 16 years. Dr. John's blog, Shrunken Mind, was recognized as one of the top 3 in positive psychology on the web (drjohnblog.guidetoself.com). Dr. John hosts an online anger management class using positive psychology at WebAngerManagement.com.