

# Practical Skills for Working with Clients Who Are Angry

Why Anger Can Become an Addition—And How to Help Clients Break Free

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**Dr. Borysenko:** There’s an interesting guy by the name of Karim Kassam at Carnegie Mellon. Part of his research has shown that of all ‘negative’ emotions, there is just one that tends to look like happiness in the brain – and that’s anger.<sup>1</sup>

It can cause the left prefrontal cortex to have more activity, in which case anger is wired in there to make us feel a little bit happier.

It makes me think, why is that?

Here’s my theory – and it’s only a theory.

For many people, anger is the hardest emotion to deal with. It may be the least socially acceptable to deal with, but we have to have it. Without anger, we’re not going to survive. It has to be a bit rewarding, or maybe we wouldn’t be able to express it at all.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Dr. Joan Borysenko brings up an interesting aspect of anger.

According to the studies, anger-based patterns of brain activation can look very similar to joy. They share the same neural building blocks with pleasure and arousal.

This helps explain why anger can be so rewarding. But as we know, it can also be maladaptive as well.

So let’s look at how Dr. Rick Hanson worked with a patient’s maladaptive anger.

**Dr. Hanson:** Luella had a hot temperament, and this goes to a larger point I’ll get to in a moment. She was fiery and quick to react in general. She was sensitive, generally – she had some health issues – sometimes a hot temperament and health issues go together.

Often, a sensitive, reactive, hair-trigger psyche is associated with a hair-trigger body, particularly in the immune system – and that was true for her.

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Culturally, she grew up in a family with a lot of hot-headedness and she had a fair amount of anger directed at her, including the disempowering of or the invalidating of her own anger as she was asked: “Why are you always so angry?”

But she had good reason for always being so angry in her childhood.

This gets us to a larger point, especially around anger. If you belong to any family/group where your very legitimate anger is invalidated by others as a way to maintain the current social structure, it’s very important, as a therapist, to not collude with the inner oppressor – we need to be very careful of that.

In this case, gender was relevant to the situation. Classically, women have been told, or are still being told, that if they get angry, they’re losing it – they’re hysterical – they’ve over the top – they’re bad... when in fact, they’re angry for a reason.

I want to be clear that my intention, maybe not always perfectly my practice, but my intention is never to collude with and be one more dude who’s maintaining that whole gender system.

In her case, there were a couple of useful distinctions.

“She used anger as a defense against depression.”

One was the distinction between healthy and unhealthy anger. She used anger as a defense against depression – when she wasn’t heated up, she would slump into very painful feelings of dejection, powerlessness, worthlessness, and despair about the future of true love ever coming her way.

She had a whole history of short, unsatisfying relationships with men.

We had to explore how her anger served her, and this overlapped into resistance: What was the function of her anger?

I needed to resource her with distress tolerance so that she could tolerate her feelings and be mindful of her experience of dejection, smallness, worthlessness, and worry about the future.

This was a major piece of our work together – to understand the function the anger served and then to help her find healthier, more effective, nuanced and supple ways of accomplishing that same function so that she could lay down her warrior arms.

The second distinction was to distinguish between anger that showed appropriate fieriness and anger that

was out-of-control enraged.

We looked at those distinctions through a granularity of emotion, or a granularity of mindfulness, which allows you to recognize important distinctions.

There's a critically important difference between fiery and enraged. There's a critically important difference between fierce and losing-it.

We had to carve out those differences and help her to stabilize around fieriness and fierceness so that her felt experience would be more like a sense of potency or calm intensity. That may sound like an oxymoron, but it's where you're intense, yet internally, undisturbed and at peace in your core.

We wanted her to be able to know and appreciate what that was like when she was getting angry – how it was an affliction upon her.

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There are four classic negative categories on the emotion spectrum — shame with feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness, sadness that ranges from subtle mopiness all the way into clinical depression, fear that ranges from subtle apprehension all the way to panic and terror, and anger that ranges from being very mildly exasperated all the way to a 10 with rage.

When we track those negative emotions, the first three tend to be unpleasant for people – they don't like to feel them. People want to get out of feelings of shame or fear or sadness.

“Anger, in the moment, can feel rewarding – it's energizing and moves us away from the slump of depression.”

But anger, in the moment, can feel rewarding – it's energizing and moves us away from the slump of depression.

Anger makes us feel potent, which moves us away from learned helplessness.

Anger, also tends to be very much wrapped up with justifications and rationales: “Yeah, they deserved it” and “Yeah, they did me dirt.”

It's tricky to recognize the personal costs of anger in the immediacy of the moment and then its long term consequences to our relationships.

Anger can mean blowback to oneself and others, and we really don't want to do that to other people.

So, tracking the costs of inappropriate anger and distinguishing inappropriate anger from healthy fieriness, intensity, assertiveness, and fierceness was really useful for her.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Rick showed, helping our clients understand the function of their anger can open that important first door in treatment. He also touched upon the anger/joy parallel that we talked about earlier.

For some more insight on the neuroscience behind anger and reward, I spoke with Dr. Kelly McGonigal.

**Dr. McGonigal:** The few studies that have looked at what anger feels like by doing anger inductions – or asking people to remember a time when they felt anger, or to think about someone they hate, and you see something very different going on in the brain.

One thing you tend to see is activation of the reward system as opposed to merely the threat system. You also see activation of areas of the brain associated with the self.

You see increased activation in many regions of the frontal cortex during anger – including areas of the frontal lobe that detect error and conflict, and areas of the frontal cortex that give you a sense of your values and areas that are associated with your sense of self. They tend to become increased in activation when people are thinking about something that makes them angry.

When people can't control their aggression, you might see under-activation in the front of the brain. I think this is what Rick is really talking about here: when people experience anger, it is an addictive state. It increases activation in the premotor cortex.

The premotor cortex is a part of the frontal cortex that plans my behavior. It's getting me ready to go. That becomes increased in activation during anger.

“When people experience anger, it is an addictive state.”

I think it's similar to when people are tempted with foods that are maybe not nutritious, but look really good. That's a very appropriate way to think about what's happening in the brain during anger – comparing it to a tempting food. It catches your attention. It makes you think something good is going to happen if you act on it, and it has a lot of that energy to it, that approach motivation.

**Dr. Buczynski:** Kelly showed how the reward of anger can be like an addiction for some of our clients.

Now, just to go back to our discussion on how our self judgements can feed anger, here is another take from Dr. Steven Hayes. He believes that our personal narratives can be a direct path to pain.

**Dr. Hayes:** I usually assume there is either a thought that's linked to a threat – especially ones of inadequacy, or challenges to a conceptualized self in which you've almost nominated the story that you tell about yourself to be you. Then, when it's attacked, it's as if you were attacked as a physical being.

Painful emotions that have some of those qualities and have a threatening or overwhelming quality to see them as they are and anger as a safer way.

It's not by accident that males tend to show anger issues sometimes when they have anxiety issues or when they have sadness issues or when they have relationship issues. That's old clinical wisdom. There are things underneath chronic anger and hostility that need to be looked at. The problem is – how do you create a safe place in which to do that?

In the ACT work, we do it by not working directly on the anger but by working on emotions that the person can access, and by doing acceptance and mindfulness work so you can get a skill that people begin to believe they can trust. Then, they believe they can open to even those more difficult emotions.

“Knowing you have more resources means you don't necessarily need your full angry mobilization. You can go in there more open.”

Doing defusion mindfulness work with self-judgment is the same thing – when stories and thoughts are threatened, we have an opportunity to walk in there with more resources. Knowing you have more resources means you don't necessarily need your full

angry mobilization. You can go in there more open.

I'm thinking of a client who showed something that I think isn't necessarily that common, but it's not that uncommon either – the threat to the conceptualized self was dominant.

If you think of things like, why do children fight on the schoolyard? Most of us would probably think this work has been done. I'm thinking of Rom Harré, who's an Oxford philosopher who did some of the survey work as part of the social constructionism.

When young children fight on the schoolyard, you'd think that would be about people taking their toys or moving their resources. But the single most common source of fight is who's right. If you think of a long trip with your kids in the back seat of the car, you can find it. It's a common source.

The particular client I'm thinking of had obsessive-compulsive disorder. I was working with him on that, and he had some of the qualities of a resistant client that we've talked about. There was an angry undertone that

kept coming back and coming back and coming back. It waxed and it waned, but it definitely became a clinical issue – never mind the OCD, we were going to have to deal with this to be able to work together.

One of the things I was trying to work on is the sense of a spiritual point of view that's beyond stories and evaluations. If you can find a place where you're not identified with the conceptual story of who you are, that gives you a place of perspective to look at those places where you're entangled with those stories of who you are. You're defending a story as if it's life and death – which is underlying in some of the angry presentations that we see.

Anyway, rather than do after it directly – I was trying to establish the sense of self that will allow you a place to be when the story is allowed to be just a story.

Sometimes people have this fear, if I'm not who I say I am, then am I nothing? Will I dissemble? It's almost as if I'm working with clients with BPD, as if you'll dissemble into a pool of protoplasm if you're not attached to your story.

“Pure awareness is beyond an evaluation.”

We did mindfulness work and we did work on catching this observing sense of the self, the 'I, here, nowness' of awareness. Pure awareness is beyond an evaluation. It shows up around three or four when infantile amnesia falls away. It builds into adulthood and it stays with you the rest of your life.

If you can connect with it, it's a place from which you can have the whole of your history and you can back out of your attachment to these self-stories and see yourself as bigger than all of that – but in a way that's ineffable, and that's not just going to be crammed back into another story.

**Dr. Buczynski:** When our clients are able to see that they are more than their story, it lessens their need to aggressively protect it. For some more insight on this idea, we return to Ron Siegel.

“When there is an argument, very often it hinges on who is right. It gets back to these different themes about different kinds of self-esteem or senses of self in the world.”

**Dr. Siegel:** It's so interesting. These things still take part in my family arguments. I've got grown adult children, and they don't happen as frequently, but when there is an argument, very often it hinges on who is right. It gets back to these different themes about different kinds of self-esteem or senses of self in the world.

When we're trying to boost our self-esteem to raise up our social rank in some way, and when we're becoming angry when that's

not working well for us, that becomes quite problematic.

I'm very drawn toward what Steve is doing. He's trying to help people deconstruct the way in which they form their whole idea of who I am and myself.

I've been doing it in therapy a lot lately. I'll give you a couple examples.

There was a patient of mine who is an extraordinarily hardworking and generous guy, and always comes out and does favors for friends. He's very talented. He'll work for days building something for a friend or a neighbor, and ask nothing in exchange.

He'd been quite anger inhibited. But, now that he's getting a bit more comfortable with his anger, he notices the anger almost always arises when somebody treats him like he's not a saint, or when being extraordinarily generous – which is part of his self-construction – is no longer the picture that's being painted.

Another guy was put down by a narcissistic father and tortured by older brothers. For him, it's if he ever senses that he's being unfairly dominated. That's a panic because, I am not that little kid who can be dominated anymore.

I think it is very useful to talk with people about what the stories are, what helps them establish or lose their social rank, and see how that's threatened.

In the case of my first fellow, we then move to realizing that we're all saints and we're all sinners – and in the case of my second fellow, we're all occasionally victors and occasionally victims. By grounding it in a common humanity, there isn't this one-sided sense of me that I have to work so hard to defend.

**Dr. Buczynski:** So when a client is able to open up to their imperfection, it can take the fuel out of their anger.

In the next video, we'll explore the unique challenges of working with trauma-based anger.

I'll see you there.

1. Kassam, K. S., & Mendes, W. B. (2013). The Effects of Measuring Emotion: Physiological Reactions to Emotional Situations Depend on whether Someone Is Asking. *PLoS ONE*, 8(6), e64959. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0064959>