The Purpose and Resolution of Anger

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**Why have anger?**

If we operate on the assumption that our brain is trying to help us and not hurt us, then of what possible benefit is there in feeling angry? Our culture would have us think that anger is ugly, negative, unnecessary, and counter-productive. I am convinced that while anger CAN be any of those things, when used as it is intended it is none of them.

Anger is a tool, and like any tool it can be used correctly or incorrectly. The criticisms of anger come from incorrect uses of the tool, rather like if you called a hammer bad because it doesn’t work well at cutting boards in two. When you use a hammer as a hammer, it is a remarkable apt and useful tool.

So how is anger to be used correctly?

**We feel anger automatically when our unconscious recognizes what appears to be the following pattern: someone or something has made an intentional choice to provide an outcome less valuable to us than the one we agreed upon, and there was not a more important unexpected reason which made this an acceptable exception. The purpose of feeling anger consciously is that our unconscious has determined that we need to consciously assess if this is true and/or consciously make choices on what to do about it.**

**The emotion of anger alerts us to the situation we have unconsciously become aware of, directs us at what to assess and to do about it, and provides us with energy to tackle these tasks.**

Let’s look at this more closely.

The component parts of the pattern are: 1) there was an intentional choice; 2) there was an agreed-upon outcome; 3) the actual outcome is less desirable/valuable than the one that was expected, and 4) there was no unexpected more important reason which makes this an acceptable exception to the agreement.

Imagine that you arranged to meet someone for lunch and that they are not there at the agreed-upon time. You wait for them – and then wait and wait. Finally, 45 minutes later they arrive. Let’s then say you are feeling angry – it’s not the only possible feeling, but probably the most common in this kind of situation.

Your anger directs you to explore the four component parts of the pattern. So, first, did the person make an intentional choice to not arrive on time?

If they were unable to make that choice – say they had a flat tire on the way – then the pattern is not fulfilled, and we change from being angry to being sympathetic or concerned, or to simply being annoyed we were inconvenienced. If their choice was not eliminated, then we look at criteria two: did we in fact have an agreed-upon outcome?

Quite frequently this is where the problem will be found. Either the outcome was not well-enough defined, we had differing understanding of what the outcome would actually look like, or, frequently, we really didn’t actually have the agreement we thought we had. For example, when I sometimes become angry at other drivers I often find that I am expecting them to behave as if we had an agreement about what is a proper driving style – but I actually have no such agreement with them, nor is there (usually) any legally defined and enforced agreement that applies. When I realize this my anger goes away -- instead I may feel frustrated, but most often I feel chagrined or a bit silly for believing my desired reality was the only correct and acceptable one.

But in the restaurant example, the outcome was clear and of mutual agreement. And let’s assume there wasn’t any flat tire or other impediment to intentional choice. We next look at criteria three: is the actual outcome less valuable or desired than the expected one. Let’s say that while you are waiting alone for your friend your favorite Hollywood star enters the restaurant and, seeing you alone at your table, asks if they might join you. You have 30 minutes of exhilarating conversation and then they leave. When your friend arrives 45 minutes late are you angry? Probably not – the outcome you got was better than the one you expected. This is of course an unlikely alternate outcome, but it is not uncommon for another benefit to occur – yo9u use the time to seal a deal, or to muster courage to connect with a family member you really should have called earlier, or whatever. The benefit is usually unexpected – but maybe you really DIDN’T want to spend time with your friend for lunch, and this really is a better outcome!

Let’s, however, say it is actually a worse outcome. Now we look at the final criteria: was there some unexpected and more important reason which happened which “trumps” the agreement and provides an acceptable exception? Your friend explains she stopped to render first aid at an accident that happened in front of her -- its an intentional choice, you had an agreed outcome, you got a worse outcome than you wanted, BUT you agree that this was more important and justified as an exception.

But what if there wasn’t such a reason? Then you are justified in being angry – and you know what exactly to address: the intentional choice of your friend, the agreement, the value of the outcome to you, or the nature of what is an acceptable reason for an exception. If you nail these things down, you can move forward and set up another lunch – if you don’t, you won’t have as much (or maybe) any trust that the friend will be there if you try this again.

Anger tells you what to look at to assess the situation, what to focus on to correct it, and gives you the motivation and energy to deal with it.

Hurray for anger! When used appropriately it makes our lives more predictable and safer, and our relationship communications and agreements clearer.

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