

Transforming

Anger

Anger is a reactive emotion which causes great pain to ourselves and, when acted upon, can cause pain to others. It is an emotion most of us fear.

As a result, we often avoid adults and children who are angry and we might feel guilty or go into denial when we ourselves feel anger.

What is seldom taught, however, is that anger is a reaction to painful feelings which were triggered by an event.

By learning to access these feelings, we can help the anger transform and our subsequent actions can arise out of our centered personal power and compassion rather than out of anger, blame and resentment.

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What is Anger?

An Emotional Reaction

Anger is an intense emotion, born out of fear, that arises when an event triggers a feeling (often unconsciously) which causes us to feel unsafe.

Although many consider anger a feeling and often the only one they are aware of, it is not a primary feeling but a reactive one.

Anger arises when primary feelings such as rejection, helplessness, betrayal, worthlessness, abandonment and so on, rise up out of the depths of our unconscious. When these feelings scare us, we get angry because we don't want to feel them.

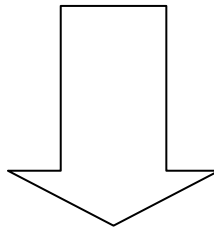
We continue to move away from feeling by blaming and rejecting the person who triggered our feelings!

If we were to be comfortable with the primary feelings triggered in us, such a helplessness, worthlessness, abandonment, rejection or betrayal, anger would not arise.

So now you see that anger is not so much a feeling as it is a reaction to feeling!

And, you are probably thinking, gee, if I allow the feelings underneath, I won't have to feel so angry! You are right! But before we get into that, check out the diagram on the next page.

Anger is an emotional reaction to not wanting to feel what lies underneath.



Rejection

Worthlessness

Insignificance

Loss / Grief / Sadness

Loneliness

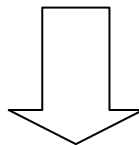
Abandonment

Betrayal

Helplessness

Confusion

Shame



unsafe

Why Managing Anger Isn't Enough

So now it probably makes sense to you why I call this booklet "Transforming Anger" and not just "managing anger." To manage anger is to just move it around so it is not so harmful or powerful. But the next time an unwanted feeling is triggered in you, that managed anger will arise to full force again.

Managing anger is like giving someone with a broken leg a crutch and telling them to move on as the broken limb flails about. Transformed anger heals the broken leg and helps us to look at what we need to not break the leg in the first place.

How Anger Affects Your Body

Triggering of the Fight or Flight

Anger affects our body in much the same way as stress. When feelings are triggered that cause us to feel unsafe, our "fight or flights" kick in and adrenaline is released into the body. You know the effects - the tense shoulders, fast heart beat, and the need to fight or run. When our fight or flights are triggered our whole body responds to help us survive.

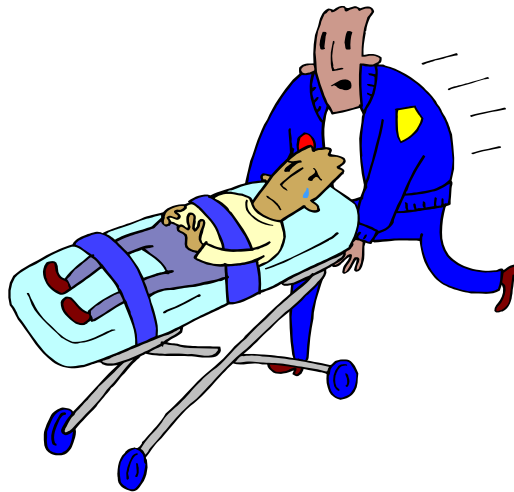
Blood pressure is elevated to increase flow to the extremities, muscles are pumped up to enhance strength. The heart rate increases, digestion stops, and the endocrine glandular system which controls all body functions is put on hold.

Anger and Disease

The results of this process are devastating. Tight muscles can cause headaches and even pull our vertebrae out of alignment causing neck and back pain. Indigestion and acid reflux is another common side effect.

Our entire physiological system, especially our immune system, is compromised and can become dysfunctional. High blood pressure increases the risk of developing arteriosclerosis and related diseases such as heart attacks, and strokes.

Anger damages the ability of the liver to filter toxins from our body resulting in lymphatic congestion causing headaches, allergies, fatigue, flu-like symptoms and entire body pain, often misdiagnosed as fibromyalgia.



Anger Turned Inward

Sometimes we feel like anger is wrong, and that it is wrong to be angry at others. When we feel that way, we turn anger in upon ourselves. We can become self-hateful and unconsciously self destructive, feeling like we don't have a right to be happy.

Anger turned inward can have a powerful impact upon our body as well. You know how uncomfortable it can be to be around an angry person. Imagine all that uncomfortable energy turned in upon yourself!

How We Treat People Who Are Angry

Fight or Flee

There are two responses we have towards people who are angry. We fight them or we flee from them. We may fight by yelling back at them, discounting their anger, diverting their anger, pushing or attacking them or challenging them in some way.

We flee anger by getting the heck away from them, ignoring them, or pretending they are not angry.

These responses usually cumulate in causing the angry person to feel even more angry. After all, if they are angry because they feel rejected or abandoned, your rejecting them, or fleeing is just more rejection or abandonment they have to deal with.

How We Treat Our Own Anger

Of course, as we do unto others, we also do unto ourselves.

We may fight our anger by yelling at it, pushing it away or trying to hold it down. It takes a lot of energy to hold back anger, and few of us do it well.

We may deny it is even there or pretend we don't feel it, trying to be "nice." Then we might notice how it comes out in the weirdest places and times, when we least expect it, when we are not on guard.

Maybe that is why so many people with repressed anger have nightmares - as was the case of the twelve year old boy in the next story.

"Nightmares"

He was twelve years old when his mother brought him to me. He had been suffering from nightmares every night.

They began three years ago when his parents divorced, and had grown worse ever since.

I asked him to draw his feelings.

He drew a heart.

He said, "I love my family."

But something dark was showing at the heart's edge.

"Something is sticking out there, under the heart," I said.

"If you lift up the heart, what would you see underneath?"

He drew a gun. "It's my anger," he said.

Then he shared how he felt overwhelmed with the responsibilities of being the man of the house.

How he felt responsible for his younger brother and his mom.

I asked him why he drew a heart when he was feeling angry.

"Because I want to love them. I should love them."

I explained that his anger was ok.

That it's just one of the many ways he feels.

Then I noticed something blue sticking out under the gun.

"What's that underneath the gun?" I asked

He drew tears.

"It's my tears. I feel sad. I miss my dad.

I miss being a kid and having fun."

We talked about how he might meet his need to be a kid again and spend time with his dad.

"What's under the tears?"

He drew a heart.

"This time," he said, "it's real!"

Three months later I called to see how he was.

The nightmares were gone.

The Power of Being Present

What we don't do well is be present to anger. But being present is necessary to transform it. Acknowledging our anger or the anger of another is a huge first step and it works wonders.

Take for instance, the story of my friend on the following page. She normally flees from the anger of others as well as her own. But this time she couldn't. It is a powerful lesson in transformation.

It doesn't happen very often that people are present to our anger and the hurt lying underneath. But when it happens it is transformative, as the story suggests.

The irony is that if you want to transform anger, you have to first be present to it. Fighting or fleeing it or trying to change it, only makes it worse. One way to be present is to treat your anger as if it were a hurting little baby. It makes it a lot less threatening.

Of course, if you are in immediate danger from another, by all means run or protect yourself. This is not the time to learn the power of being present. Practice in less hostile situations. And above all, practice on yourself.





"Anger in the Office"

The woman walked into the office
"She was so mad," my friend said,
"Every part of her body was screaming!"

"How were you feeling?" I asked.

"I felt scared and trapped.
I wanted to get out of there
but I couldn't leave my job."

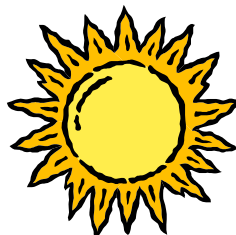
I asked her what happened next and,
much to her surprise,

"I found myself saying,
'You're really angry aren't you?'"

"And, I couldn't believe what I saw with my own eyes."

"Suddenly the woman's anger deflated.
She was silent and her whole body relaxed.
She was a totally different person."

"We talked and she was really pleasant.
She even stopped by a few days later just to say hi."



Why We Hold Onto Anger

Unaccessed Feelings

There are two basic reasons we hold onto anger. First, because we don't access the feelings lying beneath our anger and take the time to feel them.

Self Protection and Power

And second, because anger is power, we fear that we will be hurt again if we let go of the anger. Here anger is like a shield or wall we build up in the solar plexus. It keeps others away but it also keeps us away. To some extent it protects us, but it also makes us sick.

How to Let Anger Go

Acknowledge Anger

As my friend's story teaches, the simple words, "You're angry, aren't you?" are an acknowledgment of what the other person is feeling. First we must acknowledge the feeling of anger.

If you are working on your own anger, ask yourself, "Am I angry?" The question makes room for the possibility without triggering our defenses. After all, we can always say "No" or "Yes," "but I don't want to talk about it right now!"

The following story is the first time I became aware of my own unconscious anger. Notice the power of breath in the story and the importance of asking the question, "Am I angry?"



“Am I Angry Too?”

It was in my spiritual direction internship and
I was working with a client and having some difficulty.
The next evening I had a dream. I saw my client’s head behind a chain link fence.

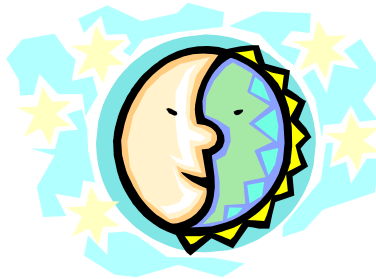
Suddenly his head blew up into flames.
I was shocked with the vividness of the picture
and began awakening.

I realized, “My client is angry.”

Now, believing the truth in the statement,
“Life is a mirror reflecting us whole,”
I asked myself,
“Am I angry too?”

Suddenly my belly extended to take in
a huge gasp of air.
I felt frightened but
filled with wonder.
What might I be angry about?
What feelings might lie underneath my anger?

I got out of bed and sat for a while
with the possibilities.



Take Deep Belly Breaths

After acknowledging the possibility of anger and the situations in which it may have arisen, take a few really deep belly breaths. People who are holding feelings take only shallow breaths. Breathing deeply helps to release emotional blocks so you can access buried feelings.

Access the Feelings Underneath Anger

Then notice the feelings triggered by the situation.

It is important to get beyond the word "hurt" to identify the actual feelings which are causing you to feel unsafe. The following list may help you.

Sad

Rejected

Worthless

Insignificant

Loss

Lonely

Abandoned

Isolated

Betrayed

Helpless

Confused

Diminished

Belittled

Powerless

Trapped

Guilty

Shame

Identifying feelings is not always easy. We tend to want to identify thinking instead. When I work with couples and ask how the actions of the other feels, they will often reply: "It feels like you....." But that is not a feeling! Although, with some skill, we can access the feelings through thinking.

For example, if someone says, "It feels like you don't care about my feelings," I ask "What does, 'It feels like you don't care about my feelings' feel like?" If I get the response, "I feel hurt" I'll ask for clarification by saying "What is that hurt like? Do you feel belittled, discounted, worthless, rejected...?" The client can usually then identify the feeling. I use the same words in my own process as a way of accessing buried feelings.

Identifying the feeling is the first step to being able to feel what lies underneath our anger. It is necessary to feel what lies underneath the anger in order to transform anger and find our true personal power.

**Just saying the feeling has power
to help us feel and move beyond anger.**



"A Couple Fights"

A couple had been fighting for a few years by the time they
came to my office for help.

In the office I observed their fighting.
I watched them push each other's buttons
and get nowhere.

Suddenly, the woman had had enough.
She stood up and yelled,
"I'm going to the bathroom and I might not come back!"
"OK," I said to her,
"But first tell me what you are feeling."
"I'm angry!" she shouted wondering why I had to ask.

"I know you are angry," I said to her,
"But tell me what you feel underneath your anger?"
She stopped, took a deep breath
and allowed herself to feel.
Her energy calmed as she said,
"I feel rejected, sad and helpless."

She cried.

Then she went to the bathroom and came back.
She didn't need to flee or "not come back" because
she no longer needed to avoid her feelings
of sadness, rejection and helplessness.

I'll always admire this client
for taking the time to access her feelings,
especially in the midst of such powerful anger.

Feel

When we finally give ourselves permission to feel we often have a need to cry. Go ahead and cry. Tears are cleansing and healing. Holding them in is not.

Caution: Do not skip feeling while rushing head long into a conclusion. Feeling the feelings you uncovered are key to letting go of anger. Without feeling there is no letting go.

Discover Your Needs/Take Care of Yourself

After you have uncovered your feelings and given yourself plenty of time to feel them, you ask, "What do I need in order to not feel this way?"

If you are confused, you may need to ask for clarity. If you are sad, you may need to allow yourself to cry then ask, "What do I need to feel happy?"

If you feel guilty, you may need to offer an apology, to right a wrong. If you feel rejected by another you may want to clarify that their actions did indeed mean rejection. Then find out what is needed for acceptance and if you are willing to pay the price. Sometimes it's not worth it and you need to find acceptance elsewhere - beginning, of course, by accepting yourself.

If you feel helpless, seek help

Taking care of yourself is empowering. You are no longer a victim. You are no longer stewing in resentment and blame. You are no longer making yourself sick.

Claim Your Personal Power

Before you accessed your feelings and discovered your needs, you were reacting in anger, avoiding yourself and avoiding your feelings.

Reacting often results in flailing about, using your energy unwisely and doing stupid things because your heart and brain are not connected. More likely than not, you were making the situation worse.

Now, it's a whole new world. No longer afraid of your feelings, you can access your needs and any action you need to take from a compassionate, centered power within yourself.

Acting from your center is powerful- not in a showy or violent way - but in a compassionate and joyful way.

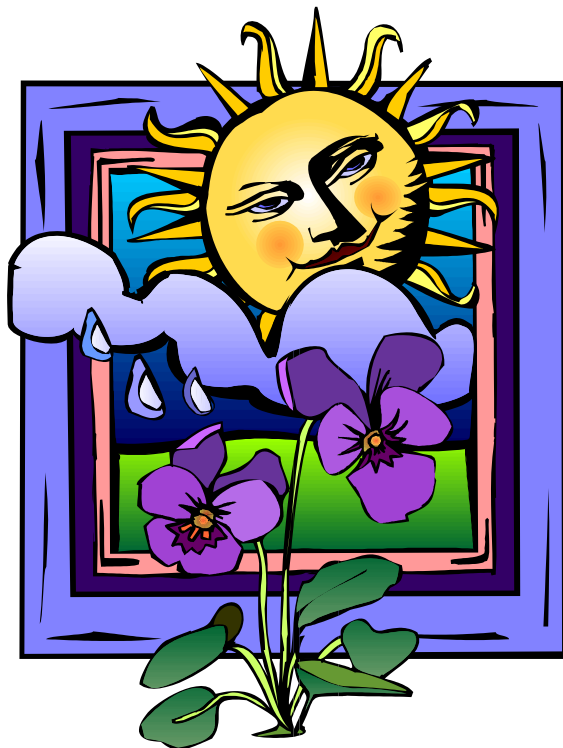
No longer having to spend so much energy fleeing from your feelings frees up energy for living.

And, no longer being afraid of your own feelings allows you to be a healing presence to the feelings of others.

*May the miracle of feeling touch your life
with compassion, wonder and joy.*

*Summary of
The Steps to Letting Anger Go*

1. Acknowledge your anger.
2. Review situations which may have caused it.
3. Take Deep Belly Breaths
4. Discover/identify the feelings underneath your anger.
5. Feel the feelings.
6. Determine your needs.
7. Follow through to meet your needs and take care of yourself.



About the Author

Julie Chai is an ordained Presbyterian minister who studied spiritual direction in an intensive 9 month internship at Mercy Center in Burlingame, CA. Here she learned the art of mindfulness or present moment awareness. She learned how to help people access feelings as well as how to access her own.

The feeling of intense anger is not foreign to Julie as her story below will tell.

When I was eighteen, my first boyfriend was killed in a car accident. The world as I knew it fell apart. The dean of the two year college I was attending, who broke the news to me, offered me a drink. Later, a doctor tried to figure out why my face was covered in hives. And, because upon returning to my room after classes, I would cry for an hour every day, my roommate saw to it that I got a single room. I felt isolated, lonely and was sitting on a powder keg of grief. I remember when my anger made itself known. I was in the cafeteria dipping Oreos into coffee and visualizing myself turning over the tables and machine gunning everyone in the room. It was an odd, scary feeling. Relief came in the presence of a compassionate, insightful woman who befriended me and taught me to meditate.

Thus began my journey of healing.

May this booklet assist you in yours.