



Anger, the Misunderstood Emotion



Looking at a range of issues facing society these days, including family conflicts, bullying, domestic violence, road rage, and online behavior. Anger can be seen to be a central component of much dysfunction. While anger is a normal emotion, its nature tends to be poorly understood with many myths and misunderstandings prevailing. These myths and misunderstandings often reinforce and perpetuate the interpersonal dysfunction promoted by anger itself.

To understand the nature of anger, it is important to remember why we evolved to experience the emotion. As with a number of emotional responses, our brains evolved to utilize anger as a coping response to the perception of threat where one's safety was endangered. In this way it is a primary reaction based on the innate stress response (sometimes called fight-flight-freeze response). When activated, anger mobilizes the mind and body to engage in the fight response of this system. Its focus is to help fight off, dominate, or even kill the perceived source of threat to ensure one's own safety (1).

For humans this tends to be regardless of whether the threat is physical or to one's self concept or concept of life. As such, anger is inherently anti-social, being concerned with winning conflict through force. It has also been observed to bias decision making, with people relying more on simple automatic information processing and being more likely to make more punitive decisions when in angry states (2 3).

While the anger response is greatly motivating, what it motivates is generally problematic as it has no regard for the wellbeing of the perceived source of threat. For people to respond in a prosocial manner when anger is present, it requires other processes to "kick in" and down-regulate the anger. The problem here is that people often perceive their anger, and the perceptions and beliefs driving it, to be justified, which gives rise to a sense of righteousness in the anger (4) .

Such beliefs also likely contribute to an abdication of responsibility for the anger, as the anger is then perceived as an inherent response to the perceived source of threat. This could also contribute to a mindset that the anger response is the only possible and/or logical response to the situation. These problematic cognitions then inhibit the likelihood that the individual will consider the functional costs of the anger response and work to regulate it (5). Interestingly, it has also been demonstrated by Tice and Baumeister (1993) that individuals who justify their anger tend to also skew their interpretation of events to be more favorable to themselves.

While the expression of such anger may have short term benefits (e.g. cooperation from others out of intimidation), a range of studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of regular anger episodes. These include increased conflict with family, friends, and work colleagues, increased dissatisfaction with aspects of life, (6) increased likelihood of criminal behavior, increased risk of

substance use and other mental health issues,(7) and increased risk of some health conditions (e.g. Type II diabetes and coronary heart disease).(8)

When looking at the cognitions involved in triggering an anger response, it is often seen that the perception of threat is triggered by the violation of expectations held by the individual (9 10) For example, common expectations include ideas about how others should behave, about how one should be treated, and about not being endangered. The violation of these expectations then results in a judgmental evaluation, whereby the worth of the perceived source of threat is devalued (11 12) — even if the individual is not aware of these cognitions (13). This loss of respect for the source of perceived threat (also known as dehumanizing and demonizing) makes sense in the context of anger. Such a cognitive process understandably helps in allowing for the expression of aggressive behaviors towards the perceived source of threat. (14 15)

An adaption of this may also be to devalue the content of any messages conveyed from the perceived source of threat (e.g. they're a stupid idiot, so what they say must be stupid as well). This can be witnessed in many arguments, whether online or within families. When people become angry with each other they quickly fall into name calling and often ignore any legitimate points raised by the other party. What's more, these interactions serve to polarize interactions between the parties, and can lead to an escalation of conflict, with both parties only relating to each other through anger. This can then result in resentment and can contribute to vengeance-seeking behaviours.

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Footnotes:

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