

ANGER

All feelings give us information about our experience and reactions to the world in any given moment. Anger is a feeling. When we feel angry in response to any stimulus, to something or someone, it is information that something is not right. Anger is a normal, human reaction, essential to human health and survival, along with sadness, fear and joy.

We often hear people talking about negative emotions and positive emotions, good feelings and bad feelings. Anger is most commonly seen as a negative emotion. Whether we define emotions as positive or negative, it does not stop us from experiencing and feeling them. The feeling itself is neither good nor bad, it is what we do with it, how we express it, that makes the difference. If we scream and shout at people, or punish them with our silence, or if our anger leaks out in barbed and hurtful passive-aggressive comments or we lash out and hurt, then that clearly is not positive. However, anger is our ally when we recognise that we feel it, acknowledge it in ourselves, express it deliberately and safely using an anger ritual in a bounded way and then reflect on what need is not being met or what boundary was being overstepped and take appropriate action where possible.

Many of us learned early on that it is not ok to be angry. Whether we grew up in a loud family with lots of shouting or a quiet household where everything was 'nice' and no one ever raised their voice but anger and disapproval were palpable nevertheless - or any other variety of expressing or repressing anger - most of us were not taught how to acknowledge it, name it, express and process our anger in a deliberate and controlled way and then to reflect on what was going on for us and take action where possible. Our parents, carers and teachers likely had not been taught how to manage their feelings of anger either and often acted out their anger in ways that were hurtful, confusing and sometimes frightening.

As adults who have not learned how to express our anger safely and deliberately we can become explosive and aggressive. We lash out and hurt people with the power of our anger. It can feel like our anger is always there, bubbling away, ready to pop. And many of us go through our daily lives swallowing our irritations, frustrations and indignations. We ignore them, pretend we don't feel them or talk ourselves out of them. We numb or silence ourselves with a glass of wine or two, we release or repress the energy of our anger with drugs or sex, we distract ourselves from this feeling that we do not know how to deal with and that we feel bad about having. We learn how not to recognise our anger at all, we become desensitised to the sensations and energy in our bodies. None of these strategies actually deal with the anger or make it disappear, they result in our anger being stuffed it down deeper and deeper, as we learn to squeeze ourselves and hold it all in, sometimes

leading to depression or expressed as anxiety, hopelessness, stress or a constant state of low level irritation and frustration which we unintentionally take out on people and things.

We can tell ourselves that if we don't acknowledge that we feel angry, then we are not feeling it. Not so. It is there, in our bodies, as a powerful energy, even when we do not acknowledge it. When we deny our anger, when we hide it because we are scared of owning it, it lurks in the shadows. We cannot be in control of something which we do not own and acknowledge. And then our anger controls us. We are not in charge. And at times, when we've swallowed one thing too many, we explode and feel furious. Or maybe we somatise the feelings and it shows up in our bodies. It can sometimes be a small thing that tips us over the edge. It feels like the anger is controlling us (which it is) and we feel powerless.

Sometimes it's so uncomfortable and unfamiliar to be angry with others that we turn the anger in on ourselves. We beat ourselves up because it feels safer. Instead of acknowledging that our boundaries have been overstepped or something is not right, we blame ourselves, we make ourselves wrong, it is all our fault because we are stupid, or bad or weak...

By being willing to own our anger, we can take control and choose how we want to express it and what action we want to take, if any. Many of don't know how to express it safely and feel scared or horrified at the very idea. It goes against most of what we were taught as we were growing up. When we did feel angry as children and behaved angrily, we may have been told things like...

"There's no point making a fuss, that's how it is.."

"Don't be annoyed with your sister... she didn't mean it"

"How dare you talk to me like that"

"One more word..."

"Stop it. Stop that right now"

"Stop being naughty!"

"Be quiet, no one is interested in what you want"

It is important to recognise that no one *makes* us feel angry. The feeling of it, the energy in our bodies, the thoughts that go with the sensations, our reaction to the stimulus, whatever it may be, is ours and ours alone. We have reacted to something or someone with anger. It is our reaction to their behaviour or to our perception or interpretation of their behaviour. Feeling angry is always legitimate, it is there in us, as energy, and try as we might not to feel

it, we have very limited control over that unconscious, immediate reaction. We can however have 100% control over what we do next, how we express our anger and how we respond to the stimulus that evoked it.

Our anger belongs to us. If we make it someone else's fault, we also give them all the power to make us feel better. They have to change or do something so that we can feel ok and we remain powerless. When we are willing to fully own our anger as ours, as our reaction, valid or not, reasonable or not, proportional or not, then we have the power to affect our experience. We have the power to choose how we express it, the power to reflect and understand our reaction and the power to choose to take action if we want to.