



Article by Mary Ann Iyer, MD, MA

Anger: what to do

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What is it about anger that makes us so badly want to be free of it? Is it the searing inner heat? The feeling out of control? The fear we might actually do harm we will later regret?

On the other hand, what is it that creates the sneaky desire we may have to keep it?

Many, but not all, religious disciplines admonish us to be free of anger. The advice they give for how to rid ourselves of this malady ranges from philosophical to paradoxically brutal. But perhaps the greatest motivator we have is that to feel angry is just plain uncomfortable. We frighten ourselves with our own vehemence.

Anger is a universal emotion. We all experience its ravages. And, so far as I can tell, any attempt to rid ourselves of anger (or any other emotion, for that matter) is doomed to failure. Resisting or pushing away any facet of our experience has the rather alarming effect of intensifying its hold on us.

Nor have I noticed relief with the free expression or so-called venting techniques which have the dual misfortune of stoking the fire within and potentially causing us to do irreparable harm to self or someone we love. It seems the more we express anger without concern for its effects, the more anger there is to express! There is a (sometimes not so) subtle boost we get from anger which permits us to overpower what may have been fearful or constraining.

So what is left to do?

Well — there truly is a different way. Odd as it sounds, fully allowing the sensation of anger while not acting on it can be the quickest way out of self-inflicted pain. Often our tendency to try to get rid of an emotion either by pushing it away (resisting) or venting it only makes matters worse. If, instead, we get curious about what we are trying to tell ourselves, we get to the matter at hand in such a way that finally allows true resolution.

The [FEAD technique](#) is wonderful for this — Face, Embrace, Allow space, invoke Divine grace. When you feel the rise of anger, immediately turn to yourself with curiosity. “Dear One, what is this? I am curious. I want to know. I am absolutely here with you. What is it you need?” What is revealed may or may not be realistic to the logical mind. It still needs attention.

Here’s what I’ve noticed: anything that remains bottled up, no matter how old — fear, hurt, opinion, truth, love — sooner or later must burst out. And if we’ve been squelching some intimate, essential part of ourselves, or in any way living a lie, it is likely to be a surge of anger that breaks open the cave to let it surface. Let that be. Although ranting and raving are not necessary for the expression of anger, sometimes it is exactly that which forces out the needed words.

Stay as open to yourself and the experience you are having as you can possibly be. When we adopt an attitude of genuine caring for that in us from which the lava of anger has arisen, we provide a different kind of “venting”. In this, we allow room for authentic resolution of whatever inner misalignment is going on to generate such heat in the first place. Sometimes these hidden spaces are like deep tectonic plates shifting to force the issue. This opens us to say exactly the words that we’ve been holding back and that need to be said. It is perhaps an honesty we’ve been too afraid to express because of presumed consequences. Or a fear, grief, or loneliness so great we haven’t dared to feel it, yet. Often there is pain beneath our feelings of anger that runs so deep that our fear of being destroyed by it keeps us denying, covering up, protecting ourselves.

Be curious. Be welcoming of every (denied) part of yourself needing attention. It is not the anger needing attention — that is just the torrent carrying the message. Strive with all your might to hear the voice under or within or at the base of the anger.

When we do this, there is really no need to focus on getting rid of anger. Once that which needs our attention is recognized, the anger seems to evaporate as mist. It was just the conduit — the lava bringing the message to the surface. The self-contained impetus anger seems to have to maintain itself points to the desperate need of something needing attention. Once its service is over, anger no longer exists. It really never did exist in the first place, independent of that which it was serving.

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