Letting Go Of Anger: How To Get Your Emotions Under Control

By Dr. Stephen Van Schoyck
“You will not be punished for your anger;
you will be punished by your anger.”

~Buddha

From that quote you can see that Buddha was not a big fan of anger. He is not alone. Some like Buddha fear their anger. Many people are scared of getting mad.

These people rarely feel angry because they get anxious about being angry. If you ask them if they are angry, they will deny it and tell you that they feel anxious, not angry.

You learn to be afraid of your anger at an early age. When you were young, you depended on your parent’s approval for survival.

When they were angry, you became afraid that you would lose their emotional support.

You learned to read their reactions, and knew when they were getting angry even before they admitted it.

You learned very quickly how to avoid their anger to stay emotionally connected to them.
The fear of anger can also promote unhealthy sexist attitudes. Women who risk being honest about their reactions run the risk of being labeled as “over-emotional”. People whose emotions are visible are thought to make poor, impulsive decisions. For years, our culture has used this excuse to keep women from positions of power.

Controlled emotions are associated with strength and control. Men who over-control their emotions are trusted. Their decisions are rational and not overly influenced by crazy emotions. Fortunately, we are beginning to realize the fallacy of this idea and are hopefully embracing our emotions as necessary sources of information for good decision-making.

Anger: The Confusing Emotion

Regardless of your personal experience with anger, most people can agree that anger is a confusing human emotion. Many find it hard to manage and control. It can heal at one level and harm at another. Still others use anger to solve problems. Some artists need it to fuel their creativity.
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Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher wrote about the difficulty with anger thousands of years ago.

He wrote in *The Nicomachean Ethics*:

“Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy.”

Benjamin Franklin, the wise American philosopher, was equally conflicted about anger and the mixed feelings people have with anger. Here is what he has to say about this difficult emotion:

“Anger is never without a reason, but seldom with a good one.” ~Benjamin Franklin

Some others have seen value in their anger. Some know how to use it. Others see it as normal and a source of human connection. Consider the following quotes:

“My passion and energy get mistaken for anger.” ~Gary Oldman

“I have sadness in me. I have anger in me. I have heartbreak in me.” ~Ellen DeGeneres

“We’re taught to be ashamed of confusion, anger, fear and sadness, and to me, they’re of equal value to happiness, excitement, and inspiration.” ~Alanis Morissette

“Depression, suffering, and anger are all part of being human.” ~Janet Fitch

“Sometimes you have to get angry to get things done.” ~Ang Lee

The Importance Of Being Angry
After 34 years of practice as a clinical psychologist, I continue to believe that anger is your best friend. You need it to survive as an adult. It exists for a reason. It is not a fake emotion that is generated from nothing.

I believe strongly that people do not manufacture anger for some unhealthy reason. They are not over-reacting or being super sensitive. They don’t get angry for no reason. Why would someone intentionally feel angry if it is such a difficult emotion to manage? It would be an emotion to avoid, not generate for some unknown reason.

I want to make the case that anger is essential to health and well-being. It exists because problems exist. It is the signal that something is wrong.

Anger occurs naturally for a valid reason. A relationship is out-of-balance. Somebody has tried to hurt you or taken something from you.

You have lost something important. It’s sending you a message that is important to hear. There is a problem waiting to be solved. The anger can’t go away until the problem is solved.

Another way to think about anger is that it is your psychological back-bone, your fighting spirit. You fight to stay alive. You fight for what is right. Your fighting spirit makes you stand up even if you are alone in the fight. If a fighting spirit makes these good things happen, then anger has to be a good thing as well.
Regardless of how you think about it, the problem isn’t really with anger. It’s your reaction to anger that creates the problem. If anger is suppressed, it eventually explodes into rage.

Many people do not understand this distinction and confuse anger with rage. Anger is a low level reaction. It makes you solve problems and improves relationships.

Rage is destructive, and comes from living with unresolved problems. When you are in a rage, you want to silence or deny the other person’s right to have an opinion. You want to shut them up or make them go away. Rage destroys relationships.

**Dealing With Anger**

So what is the best thing to do when you are angry? Fear it? Let go of it? Control it? Use it?

I agree with Aristotle in that it is all very confusing. I believe that the management of anger is the key element to having a strong sense of self that lead to healthy relationships.

I do understand that this is difficult to achieve, requires emotional risk, and will often not make you feel good.

But the one thing you can be sure of, it will always make you healthier.
With that awareness in mind, I would like to address seven issues people commonly have with anger.

It is important for you to work through any confusion you may have with your anger so you can embrace it and use it to improve your life.

**Argument #1: Let go of your anger**

To those who say that you should let go of your anger, I ask, "Where does it go?" Anger does not disappear merely because you don’t want it around. You can push it to the back of your mind, but that does not mean it went away.

It doesn’t leave because you choose to ignore it. Simply because you may tell yourself, "That doesn’t bother me" doesn’t mean your mind is convinced or that the anger disappears. It can’t go away until the problem goes away.

Anger that is suppressed comes back to haunt you. For the time being, it gets moved to the back of your mind, in an area some call your subconscious mind. You store it for later use, but storage has a price. It is difficult to carry stored emotion. It takes energy to maintain defenses that prevent the anger from leaking out. Your mind prefers to be free of stored emotion and looks to unload what is carried.
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If you are carrying stored emotion, it will eventually get exposed. The next time you get angry, you naturally scan your mental storage unit for suppressed anger. The new anger gets combined with the old anger to create a new, larger reaction. Old reactions join with new reactions. It comes out loud and scary. The reaction is bigger than it should be.

**This is how anger turns to rage.**

Rage scares people. It wrongly reinforces that anger is scary and needs to be held in check. It promotes the self-fulfilling prophecy that anger causes chaos.

Letting go of your anger sounds good on the surface, but doesn’t work.

No problem gets solved, and more anger gets suppressed.

Letting go is a simplistic solution for a complex problem and doesn’t work. In fact, it ends up making things worse.
Argument #2: Holding onto anger hurts you

This is the old argument that anger can turn into resentment, and the person becomes defined by their chronic anger. They are labeled “angry people” and not much fun to be around.

Consider this quote from the physicist Stephen Hawkins:

“People won’t have time for you if you are always angry and complaining.” ~Stephen Hawkins

Or this one from a famous American writer:

“For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind.” ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Both Hawkins and Emerson agree that anger is an emotion to be avoided. In fact, anger is so terrifying to people that they can become defined by that single reaction. People get the label, “an angry person” if they stand up for themselves and speak their mind.

Challenging others is frightening. The person is now accountable, being asked to define who they are and what they believe. It is far easier to stay silent than be labeled as a problem. Those who choose to stand up and be counted run the risk of being labeled as “one of those angry people”.

I would argue that there is no such thing as an “angry person”, anymore than there is a “sad person” or a “happy person”. These are mood states that vary from time to time. Mood states are not character traits.

They vary by the situation. People who are unfairly labeled by their mood are misunderstood, and unfairly targeted. Most often, they are messengers for a message that nobody wants to hear.
Argument #3: Anger creates regrets

A similar argument to anger hurting yourself is that anger causes harm to others. Anger is blamed for marital fights, separations, family problems, broken homes, harassment, and lastly, violence. The argument is that “you can’t take back words”, so you better not voice any anger or you will regret the harm that you cause.

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that anger is being once again confused with rage.

Rage does cause relationship damage. Rage causes people to not listen, dismiss others, discount other people, shut them up, or even do physical harm to them.

The second fallacy with this argument is that good relationships should have room for differences. In fact, these differences become the basis for learning from each other. It’s brittle relationships that cannot tolerate anger or differences.

These types of relationships are typically superficial, are based on roles and obligations, and can’t stand the test of time.

Anger is the younger cousin of rage. Anger is low level and enables problems to be identified and solved.

There is nothing about anger that damages relationships. In fact, the failure to recognize anger and manage it is what ends up doing harm to relationships.
This is true for family relationships as well as friendships. If getting angry destroys the relationship, then maybe the relationship was not worth saving.

**Argument #4: Anger hurts people’s feelings**

This argument is a more specific reason to explain why some people believe anger harms relationships. Anger can cause people to say hurtful things. It’s not the anger that is the problem. It is the person’s inability to state their needs in a healthy way that is the problem.

Let me elaborate on this point further. People are often confused about their responsibility for other people’s reactions. They will say things like, “You made me mad” or “You made me cry”. Others will apologize for other people’s reactions. They will say, “I’m sorry you feel that way”.

A person is responsible for how they present their needs, but not for the impact they may have. If they are indirect, cutting, or disrespectful, they are not taking responsibility for presenting their needs in a healthy way. They are creating a challenge for the other person to manage.

You are not responsible for how someone else chooses to react to your anger. How the person chooses to handle the situation has more to do with their own stored emotion from prior experiences than what you said or did.

There are many choices available, and you can’t take responsibility for the choice that is made. One person might yell. Another might cry. Yet another may run away. You are not responsible for what the other does with your reaction. You are only responsible for the challenge or threat you create when you present your needs badly.
**Argument #5: Anger gets you into trouble**

Anger only gets you into trouble if you are in an unhealthy relationship or an unhealthy family. Anger often begets anger, and that is a sign that both parties are contributing to the problem. In a good relationship, each will take responsibility for their reaction. In a bad relationship, each will blame the other for the problem.

The failure to listen to anger is what makes anger unproductive in some situations. Listening to anger requires that you accept that something is wrong, and try to find out what it is.

To determine what is wrong, it is important to separate the content from the style. Valid content is often lost in bad style.

A teen who curses at their parent is guilty of bad style. They may be rightfully mad at something the parent said or did.

Once they curse, then the disrespect becomes the issue, and the original issue gets lost.
I believe that the content/style distinction is the idea behind the following common expression: “If you have a choice to be kind or right, choose kind”. The idea is that kindness makes people feel close, and being right drives people apart. While that phrase sounds good on the surface, problems can rarely be reduced to that simple a solution. You sometimes have to use your anger to be kind.

I believe that the best choice depends on a third option, listening to your anger. If your anger surfaces, there is something wrong. To ignore it means the problem never gets solved, and suppressing your anger is not healthy.

Rather than choose to be kind and have problems go unsolved, the better choice is to trust your anger, and resolve the issues. You will feel better and your relationships will be more honest and closer.

**Argument #6: Anger violates the Golden Rule**

The Golden Rule is the Biblical principle, “Do unto others what you would have done unto you”. As the saying goes, if you don’t like people to be angry at you, then you shouldn’t be angry at others. Being angry violates the Golden Rule.
I believe that this understanding of the Golden Rule is a misapplication of the principle. I have discussed previously that anger creates anxiety for nearly everyone.

That doesn’t mean that it is healthy to listen to this fear. It is an irrational fear based on the learning experiences of a helpless child facing an all-powerful parent.

That power difference does not apply to two adults in a personal relationship, making it irrational to be afraid of your anger in that situation. In that case, you must stare down your anger to solve the problem that you are facing.

If nobody is willing to stare down their anger, then both sides are following the Golden Rule, but acting in an unhealthy way.

Healthy relationships require people to face fears about conflict. While avoiding conflict reduces the immediate threat, the failure to solve a problem creates resentment and withdrawal.
Argument #7: Anger creates stress

The argument is that stress-free living is the path to a long and healthy life. Differences are managed with acceptance. In some religions, this concept is extended to obedience as a primary virtue.

Wives are told to be obedient to their husbands to resolve marital conflicts, avoid fights, and reduce the chance of divorce. The idea is that acceptance promotes peace and harmony. Staying calm is best as anger creates too much stress.

Relationships based on these principles are full of unresolved issues, resentments, and hidden emotion.

A relationship without emotion is a superficial, functional relationship.

It may seem to work on the short-term, but at a cost of low intimacy and a lack of shared experiences.

Introducing anger can create conflict and stress, but makes people closer in the end. It is a risk. Emotional honesty may be difficult, but is the only path to an honest, intimate relationship.

In summary...
People receive confusing messages from professionals, the clergy and poets alike about the harmful effects of poor anger management. Most support the idea that anger is harmful, dangerous to yourself and your relationships, and must be avoided at all cost.

I make the case that anger is your best friend.

You need to recognize it when it first appears so it doesn’t grow too big. At this low level, anger becomes your fighting spirit.

It helps you to solve relationship problems, increases shared experiences and makes you feel more connected to those you love.

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For more information on his approach to emotional health and well being, please visit his website below.

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