

How To Let Go of Repressed Anger

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John was a 45-year-old stockbroker who seemed to be living the American dream. He had a \$600,000 house in the suburbs, an attractive and athletic wife, two good-looking and healthy children, and a dog. The only thing missing was the white picket fence – and a heart.

If you scratch the surface of John's life, things are not what they seem on the outside. His wife is ready to divorce him. She drinks to survive his criticisms and sarcastic remarks. Both his daughters can't stand him and don't want to be in the house when he gets home. He claims he can't relate to girls and hands their care over to his wife.

As long as John dismisses the reactions of his wife and children, he can feel good about all that he has accomplished. His wife has the cushy life of a suburban mom who doesn't have to work. His children have all the toys and video games that they want. There is a big screen TV in each child's room. They even have a vacation home down at the shore where John's wife and children spend most of the summer.

But they don't have John. During the summer, he stays at home and begrudgingly comes to the shore home on the weekends. Even when he is with his family, he is lost in his head about work stuff. He acts like an emotional robot with his family, staring into his cell phone or drinking heavily with his friends.

Even his office staff can't stand him.

He dismisses them too as people who are lazy and don't want to work. He is a top producer and they should want to service his clients whenever he demands. If they put up any resistance, John humiliates them much like he does with his wife and children. He feels that people owe him because he works hard, is successful, and provides a nice life for everyone associated with him. To John, he is surrounded by ingrates who use him.

John's friends tolerate his behavior because he is the life of the party. He loves to get drunk on the weekends, dance and be wild and crazy. He makes the party happen. John's friends are likewise party people who enjoy getting drunk every weekend. They see how hostile John can be

to his wife and children but don't want to get involved. Who wants to kill the buzz that John creates?

I got to know John after treating his wife for depression. As she got stronger and more willing to challenge him, their marriage began to deteriorate. While John admitted that he had no respect for his wife and probably didn't love her, he didn't want to be divorced and lose his marriage. That would be a sign of failure and not something that he wanted to be associated with his good name and reputation.

The problem is that John didn't want to change. He was happy being just the way he was. It worked for him. He was successful, people looked up to him, and he felt good about himself. Why fix something that wasn't broken?

While John could not admit it to himself, John was emotionally bankrupt.

His hostility was apparent to anyone who spent time with him. He justified his lashing out at his wife, children, and staff as the result of the pressures of the job. Stock trading was a high risk, high yield business that could disappear in an instant. John expected people to adjust for him because he shouldered these pressures for them.

If you asked John if he was angry, he would say "no". If you asked him to explain why others were angry at him, he would say that they didn't understand him. He lacked any insight into his own behavior and denied that he was angry. The only thing he would admit was that he was "stressed out", but that people should expect him to need the release from the pressure and they should understand. It was all part of doing his job.

Was John really that unaware of his anger? Did he really believe that it was all somebody else's fault or was he hiding the truth to avoid blame? Could John or anybody be that unaware of their emotional reactions?

Suppressed vs Repressed Anger

John is a good example of an individual who is run by his emotions that are only visible to others. He is able to deflect and justify his actions and denies the hostility that is obvious to everyone else in his world. When his rage is obvious, John always has a reason and it is always somebody

else's fault. He suppresses all awareness of his level of hostility and has an explanation for any of his outbursts.

Does he really believe what he says? Is he kidding himself and totally unaware of his emotions? How is John able to do that? The answer is that we are all able to hide our anger from our awareness. John is no different than you or me. As children, our anger threatens to disrupt our connection to our parents. Universally but to differing degrees, every human being must hide their anger as a child to please parents in order to survive.

Over one hundred years ago, Freud noted that children must repress emotions to survive their childhood. He's not the first. Thousands of years ago, Aristotle discussed the human problem with emotion and specifically with anger. Aristotle noted the universal problems created by the attempt to manage anger in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Called Aristotle's Challenge, he said, "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 – that is not easy."

Freud added another wrinkle to Aristotle's Challenge.

Freud separated repression from suppression. He believed that repression not only involved a total lack of awareness of one's emotions but also that awareness would destroy the mind's ability to function. Because he believed that man was self-destructive and overrun by the strong instinctual impulses of aggression and sexuality, these impulses created unconscious and destructive behavior. He felt the mind must repress these reactions in an unconscious form that invisibly continues to influence emotions and behavior. Hence, Freud believed that the unconscious mind operated outside of conscious awareness and formed the basis for man's inherent death wish:

"Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are

buried alive and will come forth in uglier ways".

Sigmund Freud, M.D.

Freud now painted himself into a corner and had a theoretical dilemma. If the goal of treatment is to make the unconscious become conscious, then treatment would render the person unable to function and cause irreparable harm. This created the Gordian Knot (a problem that cannot be solved) of psychoanalysis that could not be undone unless Freud's basic tenets were challenged.

Modern theorists found the way to untie the Gordian Knot.

While remaining the cornerstone of much of psychoanalytic theory, more modern theorists have separated suppressed emotion from repressed emotions. This distinction is significant because the idea that emotion has to be hidden can be now understood as an adaptive response to anxiety and not an expression of self-destructive tendencies. We no longer need to be afraid of our hidden emotion. You hide emotion because you are afraid it will change your relationships and potentially lead to rejection. It is understandable and not based on an unconscious death instinct. It does not have to explode as rage and hurt others. Quite the opposite is now true. You can use it to solve problems. It can now become something to understand about yourself that helps you become more self-aware. As one famous psychologist put it,

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will

direct your life and you will call it fate”.

Carl Jung

You have autopilot responses to both felt and suppressed emotion that are programmed through childhood experiences with your parents and family. You now know that everyone hides emotion because high levels of emotion can interrupt mental functions and temporarily disrupt your ability to relate to others. They act as the circuit breaker to prevent overload and get triggered automatically. It is why we sometimes feel that we have no control over our mind.

Suppressed anger answers the question about John's level of awareness. For John's defenses to be activated, there must be some degree of awareness of his anger. While John may have perfected his level of denial through much practice, his anger has to flash, even for a brief

second. He may have minimal awareness, but cannot maintain that he has no awareness of his reactions. However, it will take years of work for John to relearn how to recognize his emotions.

The Natural Pathways of Emotion

John does have other options to manage and use his emotions. John's fear learned through many years of living with the pressure to perform that originated in his family, prevents him from recognizing his anger. John is a classic example of acting out emotion. His behavior expresses the hostility that he suppresses. He mistreats others and refuses any accountability for his actions. His confusion about his own emotions pushes people away.

John avoids the natural pathways for the expression of human emotion. These natural pathways enable John and you to manage your emotions in a healthier way. Talking out your emotions is one of the most important uses of human emotion.

Consider the following quote:

“When decorum is repression, the only dignity

free man have is to speak out”.

Abbie Hoffman

You can feel emotion and use it to focus your thoughts. Speech requires that the mind translate feelings into thoughts. While you at times may feel that words cannot express the complexity of your passion, the process of verbalizing them enables emotion to direct thought and behavior.

Since emotion is contagious, the act of verbalizing enables others to understand what is being communicated. Emotions, words, and behavior all communicate a message. If the words don't match the behavior, the message is confusing and potentially harmful to relationships. When words, actions, and emotions are consistent, trust is built and relationships get closer.

One of the values of psychotherapy is that people get the opportunity to examine their own emotions in a trusted relationship. They get to see clearly the examples of misdirected or suppressed emotions, examine the fears that follow the flashes of anger, and enable them to believe in the power of their emotions and themselves.

There are other pathways for the natural expression of emotion. Dreams are used by the mind to clean out stored emotions. Emotions are muted by the mind to avoid overload. They are experienced in delay or stored for removal by dreams. If there is stored emotion left over from experiences in the day, or built up over time, the mind uses experiences from memory to concoct a dream that will release the stored emotion. The content is difficult to read since the mind is in a state of autopilot and disconnected from the normal controls that organize your life experiences.

However, the emotional content of the dream tells you that there have been events that bothered you more than you realize. Interpreting dreams is more about reading the emotions in the dream than understanding the content. Regardless of how they are interpreted, dreams are a natural expression of emotion and are good for you.

The Negative Effects of Suppressed Emotion

There are other pathways that emotions can take that are not good for you. Emotion that is stored in the body or the mind causes health risks. Consider the following quote from Buddha:

“Holding onto anger is like grasping onto a hot coal

with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you

are the one who gets burned”.

Buddha

He also had this to say about suppressed emotion:

“Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and
expecting the other person to die”.

Buddha

When the mind stores emotions in the unconscious, there is an increased risk for anxiety and depression. If emotion is stored and then triggered by a subsequent event, the person will experience high anxiety. They will not be able to identify the source and not be able to respond to the problem that creates the fear. The anxiety will not be functional and there is no learning to reduce the fear in the future.

The same holds true for depression. Stored anger prevents the individual from creating relationships of mutual benefit. Instead, in the absence of felt anger, the person excessively adjusts for the needs of others to the neglect of their own needs. Imbalances in relationships form the breeding ground for relationships that don't work despite the continuous effort. Because they promote helplessness and hopelessness, these relationships become a prescription for depression.

Emotion can also be stored in the body. There are three levels in the body that are affected by emotional distress: voluntary muscles, involuntary muscles, and the immune system. When stressed, the person may report tension headaches, pains in their back or neck, strained muscles and other physical symptoms related to tension involuntary muscles. If the stress continues, the involuntary muscles become affected. This gives rise to stomach pains resulting from spasms in the stomach and intestines that interfere with normal peristalsis. Irritable bowel syndrome results from spasms in the colon. Gastric distress can result from spasms in the flap that covers the opening where the esophagus meets the stomach. Lastly, if the stressor is chronic, the immune system becomes compromised. The person has a limited capacity to fight infections or viruses. They get sick more frequently and the sickness lasts longer than average.

Being emotionally healthy requires that you manage your emotions by using the natural pathways. If you do not, your body will pay the price.

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