

Understanding anger

Therapist James Earl on how to keep a lid on fury.



There's a secret about anger. If you've ever been told, 'it's good to express your anger' or 'you mustn't to bottle anger up' or 'repressing anger can make you physically ill' – it may be time to rethink it. None of these statements are actually true.

To really understand anger, try googling 'basic human emotions'. You will probably come up with a list like this: sadness, happiness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust.

But anger doesn't really belong on that list, because anger is not really a feeling at all. At least, it's not a primary human emotion like the others.

Instead, it is helpful to think of anger as a way we manage our feelings. If you're disappointed, frustrated or anxious, anger can soothe us by blocking those negative feelings. When we are angry, there is no mental space for those difficult, underlying emotions. This is why 'losing it' usually feels like a momentary relief.

Soothing like this is an early part of everyone's behaviour as a child. When you see a toddler having a tantrum, you're watching the way they are dealing with frustration, disappointment or

some other negative emotion (adults are no different). A tantrum is the way a child expresses, 'it's not fair', and at the same time blocks their underlying feeling of disappointment or sadness.

While we have all probably envied the three-year-old that can scream and shout when they're frustrated, if we try to employ the same strategy as adults, we usually know it looks and feels quite childish. Anger is an early self-soothing strategy.

Anger works, because it gives voice to the part of us that feels injustice, and makes us feel powerful for a moment, which is particularly effective if the underlying feeling includes a sense of helplessness. But since it blocks the sad, unhappy or disappointed part of us, it actually takes us away from our real feelings.

Shortly after we calm down, we often feel remorse – even a sense of inauthenticity. This is because, although we used anger to soothe, we are now thrown back into the original feelings we were having. We may feel remorse about what we said or did while were angry, but it often goes deeper than that – we realise somewhat sheepishly that anger wasn't really what we were feeling before.

There are many ways to manage our feelings. Some people reach for a drink to soothe themselves, but it wouldn't make any sense if they said, 'This glass of wine IS my feelings.' Rather, having

a drink is the way they've chosen to soothe their feelings.

In the same way, if we reach for anger, we shouldn't really say, 'This anger IS my feelings.' It's more accurate to say, 'This is the way I'm dealing with my feelings.'

Looking at anger as a self-soothing technique, rather than as an emotion, leads to some interesting ideas. If anger isn't a primary feeling, you can't really bottle it up – though of course

***'Look at
anger as a
self-soothing
technique
rather than
as an
emotion'***



you can bottle up sadness, grief, disappointment and so on.

And although we talk about someone being an ‘angry person’ we are really just describing their behaviour. There are no angry people, just people that use anger a lot. It’s not them, just a script they learnt earlier in life.

Soothing ourselves in this way is always a choice. There are usually better alternatives, such as going for walk, putting our feet up and reading a good book, listening to music, meditating or meeting up with friends. Alternatively, we could, if we are self-aware enough, look at our underlying feelings, anger’s hidden roots.

Anger is unfortunately a major problem, not just for individuals

but in relationships too. When your partner gets angry, it is NEVER OK to blame you for it. Remember, it is their choice to be angry, even if they say you provoked it (or if they use my favourite pet-hate phrase, ‘You triggered me!’).

A partner’s behaviour may lead to you feeling frustrated, disappointed or sad, but they never ‘make’ you angry. That’s your choice, to deal with the feelings you’re having.

If you are the one that gets angry, ask yourself – what am I really feeling?

And if it’s your partner who is the angry one, why not encourage them to read this article?

Good luck – understanding is the key to change.  jamesearl.com

Top five anger mantras

- 1** Anger is not a feeling.
- 2** Anger is a self-soothing technique.
- 3** Anger is a script learnt early in life.
- 4** Anger is always a choice.
- 5** ‘You made me angry’ is never true.*

** And bear in mind it would never work as a defence in court.*



Scan the QR code here to watch James’ award-winning two-minute animation on anger