

Understanding and Befriending Anger

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Anger can be the most honorable emotion you have, if you know what it is, why it appears, and how to work with it.

All of your emotions bring you specific gifts and skills, and we'll look at all of your emotions – one by one – in terms of how each one works, why it arises, and which actions you can take to work with each of your emotions (instead of working against them and losing your way).

When I discuss emotions, I always start with anger, because it's the emotion that can help you understand exactly who you are – as an individual, and as a member of social groups.

Anger is one of my favorite emotions, because when you know how to work with it, it can help you become more authentically yourself – and more able to interact authentically and honorably with others as well. Anger is a wonderful and pro-social emotion when you know how to work with it.

However, when people don't know how to work with anger – when they attack others with it, or when they repress it and lose their way – anger can be a real problem. The troubles that many people have with anger make it one of the most hated emotions there is, but this is truly a shame, because anger brings you gifts that are irreplaceable.

No other emotion can do what anger does, and no other emotion can support you in the way healthy anger can. Simply put, anger is a necessary and magnificent emotion that can improve your life and your relationships in astonishing ways.

When you understand that emotions are action-requiring neurological programs that bring you specific gifts and skills, you can change the ways that you approach your emotions. Instead of dropping into simplistic valencing (where some emotions are good, right, and positive, while others are bad, wrong, and negative), this new approach can help you understand emotions more deeply and more functionally.

When you know that each of your emotions arises for a very specific reason, and that each one requires its own action, then you can respond to all of them with intelligence and empathic skill. When you know why your emotions arise, you can respond to them skillfully, access their gifts, and discover your inborn emotional genius.

Embracing anger as your ally

Let's look at the specific gifts and skills that anger brings you.

ANGER: The Honorable Sentry

GIFTS: Honor ~ Conviction ~ Self-awareness ~ Healthy self esteem ~ Proper boundaries ~ Healthy detachment ~ Protection of yourself and others

ACTION REQUIRED: Anger arises to address challenges to your standpoint, your position, your interpersonal boundaries, or your self image. Your task is to restore your sense of self and your interpersonal boundaries without violating the boundaries of others. Your anger will also step in when others are being challenged or devalued, and your task is to address the offense and restore the boundaries of all parties. This is the sacred practice for anger, which I very intentionally call The Honorable Sentry.

THE INTERNAL QUESTIONS: What must be protected? What must be restored?

Anger's job is to help you set and maintain effective interpersonal boundaries. At its most subtle level, anger helps you uphold mutual respect and keep open the lines of communication in your relationships. Sadly, most of us weren't taught about the subtleties of emotional nuance (understanding nuance helps you identify emotions at many different levels of activation), and as a result, we tend to identify anger only after it gets to the level of a mood. Since most of us were never taught how to take effective actions with our anger, this mood-state can often be acted out in very painful ways.

We've all been on the wrong end of someone's badly managed anger, and we've all used anger as a bludgeon (or sarcasm as a stiletto). In fact, when most of us think of anger, we see a red-faced bull or something like it. Anger has a pretty terrible reputation.

However, people can also experience a great deal of pain and trouble in their lives if they don't have enough anger – so let's look at anger empathically.

Identifying the gifts of anger

I have a series of questions for you, and I want you to think about them in the present moment – in relation to your current relationships and your present-day skills. These answers can change over time, so let's focus on your situation right now.

As you answer these ten questions, please grade your responses from 1 to 5: 1 (No - Never); 2 (Rarely); 3 (Sometimes); 4 (Often); and 5 (Yes - Always).

I feel heard and respected in my interpersonal relationships

I am comfortable speaking up for myself, even during conflicts

I take good care of myself

I know who I am

I can make clear distinctions between my own needs and the needs of others

I can say no to demands on my personal time

I can make clear distinctions between my own emotions and the emotions of others

I can remain present and focused when others are angry

I am sensitive to issues of social justice

I work to make the world a more just and loving place for everyone

Each of these questions relates to the Gifts of Anger, and a low score (from 10 to 20) can mean that anger isn't welcome in your life right now – which means that these gifts may not be available to you just yet. However, this can and will change as you learn to work with your anger, so worry not.

A medium score (from 21 to 39) can mean that you're working well with anger in certain areas, but that you may have some difficulties in other areas. As you learn to work with your anger empathically, you'll be able to address any areas where your anger is not currently available to you.

A high score (40 to 50) can mean that you and your anger are working together very well – but notice that almost none of the skills and abilities I listed above would be attributed to the Gifts of Anger. If you got a high score, people might think of you as self-contained, self-aware, focused, responsible, honorable, loving, and just. But they

probably wouldn't be able to trace their way back to the emotion that's helping you maintain all of these qualities.

Anger is also connected with justice; not only for yourself, but for others as well. Your anger can be evoked when you see someone being stripped of their sense of self, their rights, or their position. Anger is a very social emotion; if you can understand its nuances and subtleties, it can help you become an effective voice for social justice.

Anger contains a great deal of focused, protective energy, and when you don't have enough of it, you may struggle to set boundaries and protect yourself in relationships (or to protect the rights and dignity of others). Without your healthy anger, you can lose your vitality and your capacity to react and respond in resilient ways.

But when you're using too much anger, you may have so much energy that you're like a loose cannon with revolving knife attachments that breathe fire. With too much anger, you may set rigid boundaries and protect yourself and your opinions so fiercely that you make everyone's lives miserable, including your own. So let's look at anger more closely and learn how to use it more skillfully.

From the Anger chapter in *The Language of Emotions*

Cover of *The Language of Emotions* If I were to personify anger, I would describe it as a mix between a stalwart castle sentry and an ancient sage. Anger sets your boundaries by walking the perimeter of your psyche and keeping an eye on you, the people around you, and your environment. If your boundaries are broken (through the insensitivity of others, or in any other way), anger comes forward to restore your sense of strength and separateness.

The questions for anger are: "What must be protected?" and "What must be restored?" Both protection and restoration can occur quickly when you ask these questions. This gives you something immediate and honorable to do with your anger, and with its help, you can easily reset your boundaries and restore your sense of self. All by itself, this simple act will address your anger and circumvent any need for internal or external violence - because you'll be making the proper action in response to your anger. This will allow you to speak and act from a position of strength, rather than from brutality or passivity, which is where so many people tend to go with their anger.

If you tend to repress your anger, you'll be unable to restore your boundaries because you won't have the strength and focus you need to protect yourself; therefore, further damage will inevitably follow the initial affront. Your anger exists to protect you honorably. If you repress it and refuse to respond to an insult or affront, it is as if your castle sentry is inviting attacks and letting people get away with vandalism.

However, if you choose to dishonorably express your anger at a person who offends against you, you will be dangerously unguarded – just as you would be if your castle sentry left his post and went out on a rampage. When your anger is used as a weapon and your territory is left without a sentry, your psyche will have to pour more anger into the situation. If you habitually express your anger, you'll end up expressing this new infusion of anger as well, and you'll break your boundaries (and the boundaries of others) even further. This is how escalating rages and furies get started – the problem doesn't come from the essential energy of anger, but from the unskilled use of anger when it arises.

Yet when your healthy anger flows freely and in a healthy way, you won't even know it's there – it will simply help you maintain your boundaries, your inner convictions, and your healthy detachment. Free-flowing anger will allow you to laugh compassionately at yourself and set your boundaries mercifully – because both actions arise from the inner strength and honorable self-definition anger brings you.

But when your anger is not allowed its natural flow, you'll have trouble setting and maintaining your boundaries, you'll tend to dishonor or enmesh with others, and your self-image will be imperiled by your reliance on the capricious opinions of the outside world.

Healthy anger sets your boundaries and helps you engage more effectively because it allows you to relate authentically and respectfully. When you have an awakened connection to your anger and a clear sense of your own boundaries, you'll be able to honor boundaries and individuality in others; therefore, your relationships won't be based on power struggles, projections, or enmeshment.

However, if you don't have access to your vital, boundary-defining anger, you'll be undifferentiated, certainly – but you'll also be dangerous to the people around you. If you repress your anger, you'll endanger others by creating passive and poorly defined

boundaries that will lead you to enmesh yourself in their lives. And if you dishonorably express your anger, you'll create imposing, fear-inducing boundaries that will degrade the stability of everyone around you. When you can instead channel this noble emotion properly, you'll be able to maintain your boundaries - and protect the boundaries of others - with honor.

In this post, I demonstrate one way to channel your anger (see [A new option for working with your emotions](#)).

If you are never angry, then you are unborn

This saying is from the Bassa tribe in West Africa (it's interesting that I had to go outside of our culture to find useful words about anger), and it reminds us that anger is a normal part of every life. When you know you're feeling anger, you can make intelligent emotional decisions about what to do with it. Anger brings you a lot of energy, intensity, forcefulness, and focus. Knowing anger's purpose - and asking the internal questions - will help you channel that intensity into healthy action.

A reminder: Constant expressions of anger may be a sign of depression, especially in men. Remember that you have more than one emotion, and if nearly everything in your life evokes varying levels of anger: impatience, annoyance, irritation, crankiness, rage, indignation, sarcasm, and so forth, it's time to check in with your doctor or therapist. Your friends and family will thank you!

Anger is a wonderful and completely necessary emotion, but it's just one of dozens of emotions. Anger has a very specific purpose, and it can't do the work of other emotions all by itself. If your anger is out of balance, reach out for help so that it can get some rest and then get back to its real work. Any emotion can be too much (see [How much emotion is too much?](#)).