

EXPLETIVES UNDELETED

The Secret of Real Anger Management

MAYBE IT'S TIME TO UNLEASH WHAT IT REALLY FEELS LIKE TO CARE.

YEARS AGO, in a desperate attempt to get out of limbo in our seven-year revolving-door relationship, my boyfriend and I decided to get some professional help. Our counselor was an older, gentle giant of a man who listened to our weary situation with soulful compassion and much head nodding. At the end of our second session, he slowly and calmly made a declaration about our obvious, perpetual dilemma.

“Well, if I were Joy right now, I think I might be thinking something like—[he took a significant pause, seeming to carefully find his words]—well, something like, ‘Fuck you!’”

Those words cut through my trance of self-pity. I sat bolt upright, my vision cleared, and I felt a hot surge of energy flow through my body. In that moment, I woke up to how numb I had become to my boyfriend's criticisms. Somewhere along the line, I had come to believe that it was my duty to listen to, even validate, his judgments of me. I left our session finally ready to face how I had been futilely trying to prove myself worthy of love—suddenly understanding that trying to earn his love was inherently flawed. On that pivotal day, that gentle giant helped me reunite

with a feeling state that I would eventually teach to empower others: anger. In my practice I find that anger is the feeling state most people want to deny, avoid, or override—and with good reason. Most of us have been overexposed to distorted forms of anger where self-righteous blame, passive-aggressiveness, vengeance, or shaming rage are the norm. As children, we may have been given the message that our anger was wrong and unwelcome. Yet expressing healthy anger may be the way to finally ascertain our truth, create healthy boundaries, and take a stand for what we value. In other words, we get angry because we *care*.

Recently, I watched a client's neck flush and jaw muscles tighten as she talked about her boss. When I mentioned that

she seemed angry, she retorted, “I'm not angry. I'm just annoyed.” This sort of denial is the norm. Most people seem uncomfortable even using the word *anger*, let alone claiming it. Others have learned to substitute tears. It is also common for conflict-avoidant types to mask their anger by focusing on their fear instead.

Yet, not wanting to experience anger doesn't make it go away. It simply goes underground. Buried anger is called “resentment.” Chronically squelched or misdirected anger in a relationship leads to distance, dampened vitality, and broken agreements.


Hannah Fry illuminates the science of this in her 2015 TED Talk, “The Mathematics of Love.” She says that every couple has a “negativity threshold,” which she describes as “how annoying the husband can be before the wife starts to get

really pissed off, and vice versa.” Surprisingly, research substantiates that couples with a *low* negativity threshold—meaning they argue often—tend to go the distance. She reports that successful couples are continually trying to repair their relationship and have a much more positive outlook on their marriage.

Many couples come in my office knowing they have “anger issues.” They are often locked in a cycle of blame and defensiveness. Without a clear container for expressing

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*Storage Warehouse,
Cambridge, MA* 
Sandra Salamonoy

Deconstructing Anger

In understanding how feelings work, it's helpful to think of them as having an energetic signature in the body. On a basic level, they flow up or down, in or out, run cold to hot. They have reliable ways that they affect the body, our breath, even our visual perception. In my experience, the optimal energetic flow of anger is one of an upward-moving energy that runs warm to hot. Anger's breath pattern is full and deep. It rises through the core of the body, out the top of the head, and circulates back down into the earth. At first, the visual field becomes chaotic, then clarity comes with a renewed focus. When a rush of anger flows to completion it is replaced with an inner spaciousness, vitality, and often insight.

Again, this is optimal. It is more common for anger to get stuck somewhere along the central channel of the body, where it creates mild to extreme tension—either in the solar plexus, the chest/neck/shoulders, or the head. Breath becomes short and tight. It produces a sense of being armored or can bunch into tight, squiggly knots in specific places, which is why we may refer to someone being “a pain in the neck.” It can also be experienced as energetic spikes coming out of the body and especially through the eyes (aka “if looks could kill”). It is also a real phenomenon to have “tunnel vision” or even “see red” when fury is present. Sardonic looks and sarcastic humor are the most popular passive-aggressive forms of expression. Getting stuck in mental loops of blame and judgment are also indicators that anger is stuck.

Our bodies are constantly giving us feedback about what we are feeling, if we are willing to listen. There is an entire spectrum of angry feelings—from peevishness or frustration or resentment to quiet fury or ballistic outrage. Taking a moment to identify and acknowledge angry feelings—instead of denying or defending them—is the first step to neutralizing anger and receiving the insight it offers.

anger, partners tend to either blow up or sequester themselves when conflict arises. Sometimes they both agree that *one* of them has an issue with anger. Ultimately they come to see that they both do. Having them each take full responsibility for their anger and committing to ending the “blame game” is key to reestablishing trust and intimacy. This requires them to see that the story they are telling themselves about *why* they are angry is less important than having a safe space to feel angry. A huge shift occurs when they are both able to simply acknowledge “I’m angry” without having to blame anyone—their partner or themselves. In this new context, a space of curiosity opens up where couples learn to listen to the longing beneath the anger their partner is presenting.

—JOY HOSEY