

Paying heed to anger

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Anger is much like pain. It transmits messages; accurate warnings that tell us when something within us, or something around us, is amiss.

Yet the pure experience of anger has been culturally reconditioned to the point of failing to acknowledge or heed these signals. We may, in fact, fear them, especially when anger is perceived as a destructive force that leads to disapproval, loss or retaliation. That's when we suppress our anger, deny it, or translate it, into a different, seemingly safer, emotional language.

Anger can be turned into blame, misdirected, or reframed as "I don't care." It can become submission or just be swallowed — along with booze, pills, or too much food. But ignoring anger does not eradicate it, or resolve the situation that provoked it. And our denial can cost us dearly in the long run.

Scary as it may seem, paying attention to our anger offers a far more fruitful alternative, because each time we listen to our feelings and seriously consider what triggered them, we discover something significant about ourselves and our relationships.

"We can't pick and choose our feelings," says Beverly Engel, a psychotherapist and executive director of the Center for Adult Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Redondo Beach.

"But," she continues, "we can use feelings as springboards to better communication. For example, if you suddenly become short tempered with people at work or in supermarket lines, it's important to assess your shift in attitude and ask yourself if it's a clue to something upsetting going on in another area of your life."

Maybe you're really angry with your mate but have buried that feeling in order to

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ANGER: Women are conditioned to repress hostility — often with damaging emotional results

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avoid the consequences of a confrontation. In that case, Engel suggests you share your feelings, even if you are confused about them, in an exploratory, non-blaming way.

"Anger," she remarks, "is not always just one person's problem. Perhaps both people have unfinished business to discuss."

When we fail to acknowledge angry feelings, the price we pay may be practical as well as psychological: Engel tells of a client who had encountered "bad luck" on every job she held. She felt her bosses were critical, picky, demanding and unfair men who misused and victimized her. As a secretary, she rarely remained in one position more than a year, and whether she quit or was fired, she believed the fault always lay with her employer.

Through therapy, this woman began to see how much anger she had been harboring toward her authoritarian, critical father.

"She saw the men she worked for as mean, authoritarian fathers, too," says Engel, "Whether or not they actually were hard on her. But as she dealt more honestly with her feelings about her father, her current boss appeared less critical. And when she started to look at the kind of person he really was, separate from the identification with her father, she realized she was treating him differently than she had before, which naturally elicited more acceptance from him."

Engel makes it clear that coming to terms with anger can enhance the quality of our emotional lives. But in some more extreme circumstances our ability to feel and express anger may preserve us from bodily harm.

"Women are conditioned and socialized to repress their anger because that makes them more exploitable," says Al Potash, a psychotherapist who is in the Los Angeles area director of Model Mugging. Potash, along with instructor Sandy Margolin teaches a professional self-defense and empowerment training class for women. It's uniqueness lies in that the students actually practice the techniques they learn against a heavily padded instructor who "models" the role of mugger.

"When women don't express anger they are more easily controlled, including during physical confrontations where their conditioning makes them coy, charming, frightened, subservient and unable to use their anger to mobilize against the problem," Potash said.

Potash explains that some rapists test potential victims in public places by inappropriately pushing, jostling, and in a variety of ways "invading their space." Women who smile, avoid responding, or react apologetically may be seen as "marks."

It is natural to feel angry when our physical boundaries are transgressed, and an awareness of that feeling can warn us when trouble is brewing. So Potash recommends we communicate our anger loudly and vigorously, even if it means making a public scene, since that's the last thing an attacker wants.

However, that may be a difficult task for women who question their right to be angry and who bury such emotions beneath self-effacement and submission. Potash describes the experience of one student, an actress, who had been seriously beaten by her lover.

"She was a man-pleaser," says Potash, "involved in an industry where that quality is endorsed and personal relationships are often dedicated to the man's needs."

"At the beginning of the class the student thought her predominant emotion was fear. During one practice scenario she stopped defending herself and started to cry. But a moment later she exploded, let out a raging scream, and began fighting non-stop. It turned out that fear had not been her problem. Anger had been her problem, and confronting it became a turning point in her life. She stopped feeling like a victim and started living for herself."

Potash said Model Mugging is not about training us into angry people

with chips on our shoulders. It is about empowerment, self-confidence and self protection. When anger emerges, the purpose is to use it toward positive, life-saving actions.

That, in a sense, is what all "anger-work" is about. Just as the repression of anger is dangerous anger as an end in itself is inappropriate. But where anger can be respected and understood, it can lead us toward a better way of life. As Beverly Engel said, "We can't decide not to feel anger, or pain or fear without also jeopardizing our ability to feel love and joy."



Model Mugging of L.A.

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