

Anger

From the work of Professor Ray Novaco

Functions of Anger

1. *Anger energises behaviour*

But: It is disruptive, it hinders clear thinking, it interferes with logical thinking and planning, it does not necessarily resolve things or bring about desired aims (even in survival fighting)

2. *Anger is expressive*

It enables us to express what we are thinking; it gives information about what we are feeling.

But: It is defensive - an ego defence/character armour; it can mask other pertinent feelings; it locates the problem on the outside (e.g. the person criticising me) rather than on the inside (the criticism might be accurate and helpful)

3. *Anger is a signal*

It tells us something (e.g. we are upset, we are being bullied or hurt, what is happening is wrong)

But: It easily escalates into aggressive behaviour; it becomes all consuming not allowing other thoughts or feelings that might relate to the issues involved; it moves us towards aggression rather than other solutions

4. *Anger potentiates*

It leads to people feeling more powerful and brings about change (e.g. social change in conditions considered unjust or oppressive)

But: it is dramatic; it does not necessarily lead to the best way to sort out problems; it leads to posturing and manipulation rather than co-working to bring about change

Anger

Some interesting research findings:

People go into a state of high arousal when their experience differs greatly from their expectations; this arousal is anger when there is thwarting or antagonism.

Expectations of an antagonistic experience primes anger reactions as people tend to over-interpret signals (e.g. gestures) as antagonism, insults, provocations or annoying.

People can be aggressive when angry and when not angry: anger is neither necessary nor sufficient to become aggressive. But at high levels it is experienced as overcoming (internal and external) controls and is impulsively acted out.

Aggression towards the source of annoyance reduces anger level and lowers the probability of subsequent aggression (provided the person is not re-annoyed) – the cathartic effect. It also increases the likelihood that aggression will occur when the person is later provoked – in short, the person learns that aggression works; it is reinforced by the person getting what they want (the annoyance stops) and the losing of the (toxic) feeling of anger. However when the aggression does not remove the annoyance or stop the provocation it can heighten anger.

When you control for anger, depressed people are less likely to be aggressive than non-depressed people. When you control for depression, angry people are more likely to be aggressive.

Depression and aggression might be different people's reactions to similar stresses. The psychotherapy literature suggests depression might be a result of repressed anger and internalised aggression: "Murder and suicide are essentially the same thing" (Winnicott).

However, there is no published research evidence that depressed people when they have become less depressed express their anger more.

In USA people report getting angry 3-4 times a day. In Japan, 3-4 times a month.

When asked what made them angry people tend to describe immediate triggers/reasons rather than underlying or more distant factors. e.g. violations of expectations, social norm violations, physical injury, frustration, rather than constant pain, ongoing work stress, debt worries, long-term relationship problems, job loss, summer heat, congestion on the journey home from work.

Parry (1968) in a study of London motorists found that 9% of men and 1% of women had been in a fight with another driver; 7% of men and 2% of women had deliberately driven at another vehicle, and 15% of men and 11% of women stated "At times I felt I could gladly kill another driver".