

The Power of Anger

Our first survival impulse is to avoid threats and then to gravitate towards seeking rewards. Every aspect our evolution and ongoing existence is focused on not being or feeling vulnerable (anxious). The outcome is predictable and often happens rapidly. Fellow creatures seem to be inclined to hasten the process. We are all familiar with what often happens with a wounded chicken in a coop. Herds of animals will force the weaker members towards the periphery or at the tail in order to place others between them and predators. Humans are mammals that share these survival instincts.



We do have a different set of issues created by language and consciousness. There are an infinite number of scenarios of threat that other creatures don't have. The basic problem is that mental threats are equally as upsetting as physical threats and it is common to be trapped by an angry boss, abusive relationship, poverty, lack of justice, etc. But even worse, we are all trapped to a greater or lesser degree by our thoughts.

If we are all “flawed”, why are any of us flawed?

So, we deal with our “flaws” by hiding them or overcompensating for them. We “escape” from our disruptive thoughts and emotions by suppressing or masking them. However, these have consequences and eventually fail. The irony is that all of us are struggling with the same issues. It is the human condition.

The bottom line is that from a survival perspective there are few rewards for being vulnerable. We spend a huge amount of our life energy avoiding this basic feeling. Yet being vulnerable is the essence of rich and productive human relationships. This paradox creates a lot of problems.

Control

Control is the core solution to solving anxiety and it manifests in every aspect of our lives. The less control we actually have, the more determined we are to exert it. Your body kicks it all up a notch with more inflammatory proteins and stress hormones. The result is anger. It is your last attempt to regain control, and it often works. The reward is less inflammation. However, anger is destructive because is only about you. You have no awareness or compassion for other's needs. You may be fine but the havoc it creates is terrible. Anger, driven by the need to minimize anxiety, is the essence of abuse.

Additionally, the anger response diverts blood flow from the thinking centers of your brain (frontal cortex) and can't even think clearly. You are only able to react and you are acting from the lower centers of your nervous system. Anger is temporary insanity, and what if it is sustained?

Trapped

When you are trapped by any circumstance, especially by something as unpleasant as mental or physical pain, the depth of anger is unlimited and it evolves into rage. Dr. Sarno, a famous rehab physician clearly described the problem.

So, why are so many people hesitant to let go of such a destructive reaction like anger? Going back to the beginning of the discussion, is that anger keeps you safe. Even if it actually doesn't keep you safe, you feel safe, and we'll do anything to avoid feeling vulnerable (anxious).



The key so solving chronic pain, in essentially every patient, is processing and letting go of anger. It is a learned skill that you implement daily. Life keeps coming at you. However, you cannot let go until you have learned to be vulnerable, which is also a learned skill. It is not possible to let go of your pain until you can tolerate anxiety.

The first steps

Most of this occurs at the unconscious level and the core concept is to learn the methods to decrease your levels of inflammation and stress hormones. Once you have a handle on how to consistently accomplish this, then it is game on. You now have the control you need to face ongoing new challenges and not be taken out by your survival response.

Then you can move into forgiveness, which addresses the sensory input so there is less of a response. (1) This is the tipping point of addressing chronic pain. Once you learn to de-energize anxiety and anger, the creative and caring you will emerge and thrive. You can't "fix" chronic pain. The solution lies in moving your nervous system into a different reality.

“I can’t let go”

I had patient who I have seen over several years. He was a middle-aged and had experienced low back pain for over 10 years. He had disc degeneration that wasn’t amenable to surgery. He never bought off on the idea of addressing his pain using the DOC concepts and did not want to let go of his anger.

When he showed up in my office again a couple of years later, I vividly recalled our prior conversation, as the emphasis had not changed. He said, “I can’t let go of my anger.”

I pointed out that no one was forcing him to hold on to it. He wouldn’t tell me any of the details to explain why he was so upset. I reminded him that he was the only one who was continuing to suffer.

I asked him, “What could be so hard to forgive compared to experiencing this level of ongoing pain?”

He didn’t answer and walked out the door.

Compassion

Although we can pay lip service to the concept of living a compassionate life, the unconscious survival patterns will always win out when we are exposed to stressful situations. The problem is further magnified by society’s emphasis on accomplishments and winning, rather than play. The quest for power is endless and anxiety tends to progress with age for many people, especially those in pain. The power of anger will always bury our compassion.



People become addicted to the power of pain and anger. I know few exceptions, including me. I finally concluded that there will never be a day when I wake up and want to give up being a victim. I simply have to keep re-processing it every day – sometimes many times. However, understanding that anger is necessary and part of staying alive is a part of the solution.

1. Luskin, Fred. *Forgive for Good*. Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2002.