



# Understanding anger

## WORDS

Jeff Weston is a writer, existential psychotherapist and author of *WAGENKNECHT*.  
[helpineedsomebody.org](http://helpineedsomebody.org)

## FEATURE



Jeff Weston wonders if anger is life's blunt saviour or the most hideous of emotions

I sometimes hear the raw scream of the world,' a client once said. 'What I see, I don't like. And yet that comes back on me... because I care, because I want to shake things up. People think I'm mad, crazy, angry, because I'm dogmatic, because I get affected by things, because I'm intense and rarely switch off.' 'Were you always this way?' I recall asking. 'No, I don't think I was. I was the joker. Sarcastic. Observational. A sceptic, but never a cynic. There was a lightness to me. I wanted to make people smile, laugh, tell them stories.'

'What do you think changed?' I asked. 'I got older. I saw too much. Liars, shysters, white-collar bullies, people who just want to dent harmony. Example - I'm sat in a hospital waiting room the other day, reading my magazine, and a nurse comes in and turns the TV on without asking any of us if we want it. Like we're useless humans who need daytime TV with its jabbering presenters and pointless programmes. Anyway, I consult with the others, ask them if they want it on. No, is the unanimous response, so I turn it off. Five minutes later, the nurse returns. "Can I turn the TV on now?" she asks, as if her life depends on it, as if we need to be culturally suckled by this monstrosity in the middle of the wall, as if that final word of hers suggests impatience at our rebellion or mutiny. "Do you get royalties?" I ask. She just looks at me as if I'm rude or abusive, turns it on with the remote again and departs.'

'I shake my head. So many of these little instances. So many people with their routines who never really stop to think how things impact others. Didn't she see me with my magazine? Didn't she see the worried woman sitting directly underneath the TV, deep in thought, or the elderly couple having a pleasant chat?' 'Some of the *old* normal has

been taken away?' I asked. 'It has. You're damn right. It's like we were her congregation, and the hospital handbook says, *Keep them occupied, distract them, do not allow them to sit in silence...* because silence equals rumination and rumination compounds the patient's worries.'

### Roots to anger

Nearly three decades ago, psychologist Sandra Thomas conducted a women's anger study with females aged between 25 and 66. The study revealed three typical roots to anger: '...powerlessness, injustice and the irresponsibility of other people'.<sup>1</sup> All three are arguably part of the above story. And it's a little story - not an altercation as such or a dust-up - but nonetheless demonstrative of frustration or being slighted or overridden in some way.

'Anger is a moral emotion,' we're told, 'and typically associated with justice-oriented demands in the form of "should"'.<sup>2</sup> The definition of it is wide-ranging, however, and encompasses so much. Tudor and Merry consider it '...a strong emotional reaction to a feeling of threat, exploitation [or] being wronged'.<sup>3</sup> Feltham and Dryden speak of a '...strong primary feeling directed against others or parts of the self. Broadly speaking, anger [includes] aspects of hostility, self-defence, protection of others and reactions against threat to self or parts of the self (eg cherished beliefs)'.<sup>4</sup>

### Cherished beliefs

This last bit is significant, I think - cherished beliefs. Because we all develop what we believe to be crucial values, principles and standards - things that hold us together and give us meaning; largely non-negotiable elements of ourselves. If these are compromised or traded, then we may well

ask: Who the hell am I? Why did I bend or concede ground to the person opposite?

As with anything though, it's a judgment call. Do we wish to be seen as fair, forgiving and altruistic (putting others first) or consistently *right*? John, a client of mine, knew - in his words - that he would always be testy, opinionated (in the manner of Victor Meldrew) and up for a harmless 'fight', just to allay his boredom, and so he vowed to alternate his attitude day by day.

Monday, he would let rip, typically challenge his colleagues half a dozen times via the internal Skype instant messenger system, generally inject a bit of much-needed humour and be direct (mostly to rescue his brain from what he saw as the mind-numbing excesses of office life). Tuesday, however, he would be very complimentary, agreeable, and helpful - genuine bits of him, but characteristics often forgotten or disregarded by others.

It was a start, John assured me - a way of keeping his spirit alive but avoiding the sack. 'If I'm good the day after I've been perceived as bad, then that balances things, I reckon.' 'How's it working out?' I asked. He chuckled to himself. 'Some weeks are better than others. It's a source of amusement, I guess. "Remind me - *which* John is in today?" my

## REFERENCES

- 1 Dittmann M. Anger across the gender divide. American Psychological Association. [Online.] <https://www.apa.org/monitor/mar03/angeracross> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 2 Kassinove H. Anger: how to recognise and deal with a common emotion. American Psychological Association [Online.] <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2012/05/anger> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 3 Tudor K, Merry T. Dictionary of person-centred psychology. Monmouth: PCCS Books Ltd; 2006.
- 4 Feltham C, Dryden W. Dictionary of counselling (second edition). London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers; 2008.



“  
**...we all develop what we believe to be crucial values, principles and standards – things that hold us together and give us meaning**

colleagues will sometimes type. Jokes aside, I just think I'm misunderstood though. Nina Simone and all that.'

We looked at the lyrics of that famous song the week after: 'Baby you understand me now/If sometimes you see that I'm mad/Doncha know no one alive can always be an angel?/When everything goes wrong, you see some bad/But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good/ Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.'<sup>5</sup>

Not always being an angel. Everything going wrong. But ultimately having good intentions. By singing 'Oh Lord', such expression pleads in a way with something or someone (whoever your god or inspiration happens to be) *beyond* earthly interactions. I've tried down here, it's almost saying, but things aren't going too well. I consistently upset people, but I'm just being me. Can you get them to cut me some slack? Was I born in the wrong town, the wrong country, the wrong century?

### A negative feeling

'Anger is a negative feeling state,' Dr Howard Kassinove tells us, '...typically associated with hostile thoughts, physiological arousal and maladaptive behaviors. It usually develops in response to the unwanted actions of another person who is perceived to be disrespectful, demeaning, threatening or neglectful.'<sup>2</sup> I find this definition lucid and insightful, mainly because it describes anger as a 'response' to events, yet does not remove agency or responsibility from the individual. It is in some ways the opposite of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

(*DSM*), which, in 1968, '...unobserved by the larger world [underwent] a revolution'<sup>6</sup> by removing the word 'reaction' when publishing *DSM-II*.

Put simply, mental disorders had been described in *DSM-I* (1952) as '...actual, discernible reactions to something – an event, a situation, a biological condition [so]... by severing cause from effect, the psychiatric profession [in 1968] privatized the entire field of mental illness, removed it from the marketplace of ideas, abandoned the rigorous proofs of the scientific method, and adopted circular thinking as its central discipline. Henceforward, in the absence of cause and effect, a mental illness would be anything the psychiatric profession chose to call a mental illness. Increasingly, and with gathering speed, American psychiatry came to resemble a man with a hammer.'<sup>6</sup>

Is there a point to this? Yes, I would say so. And it is that grand manipulation has the habit of stoking disillusionment later on. For those who are incensed by such behaviour and take the time to read up on abuses of power or perhaps see pockets of distrust and mendacity elsewhere on a smaller scale, it is no wonder that anger and resentment often become part of them. This isn't to excuse their obligations to society, but it is to understand their moral plight more fully.

### The individual and society

'Is it them or is it me?' my clients often say, slightly bewildered by life – disorientated, bemused, perplexed, at the mercy of an expedient bunch of people just getting on with it, unwilling to explore things and potentially come to a different conclusion.

This is where counselling really earns its stripes because it cannot and should not singularly focus on the client in the room (in the here and now) and thus dismiss the environment, politics and pressures around such a troubled mind.

We are wounded by those '...perceived to be disrespectful, demeaning, threatening or neglectful',<sup>2</sup> Kassinove says. It is a far-reaching indictment of society at large and yet it could be said to rub up against – or impinge on – humour, hierarchies, ambition and individuality; traits hardly discouraged. One's reaction is critical and is largely driven, I would suggest, by what exists at our core. Do we gain satisfaction from our job? Is our partner loving and faithful? Are we healthy and do we feel supported by friends and family? There is a tipping point between stoical acceptance of adversity and defiance, I believe, and a series of small incidents can prompt a shift from a position of strength to one of vulnerability (and hence less tolerance).

'Gogol claimed "only in anger is the truth uttered":'<sup>7</sup> His words are in the opposing camp to the '...Latin proverb, *Iuppiter iratus ergo nefas* (Jupiter, you are angry; therefore you are wrong)... a putdown in 19th-century Russia'<sup>7</sup> and Seneca's stance that '...anger [is] "the most hideous and frenzied of all... emotions" because it rushes to judgment and seeks revenge at any cost'.<sup>7</sup>

### Survival response

I'm on the side of occasional anger because I believe it calls things out. This doesn't mean that I sit in my therapy room and act in a vociferous manner with clients. Quite the opposite, in fact – I'm calm, keen to absorb and figure out their woe, and often surprise myself in the company of irate individuals. This stands in contrast to some counsellors, who almost hold their breath and prefer to 'get past' such an uncomfortable stage with clients, as if anger is somehow unnatural and inconvenient.

Anger is, in fact, '...part of our biological history. It is part of the fight-or-flight reaction. It had survival value in the past, and it has some positives in the present'.<sup>2</sup> It does, however, come with consequences – if not channelled correctly – to our health, relationships, work and all manner of areas. And its big brother, aggression (the physical

form of anger), is always lurking, keen to enlist and transform verbal tirades.

Antisocial behaviour '...caused by biological deficiency, socialization failure or... frustration [from] poor environmental conditions'<sup>8</sup> ultimately shifts one's purpose from meaningful endeavour to carrying out injury to others, damage or vandalism. And the underlying anger, whether intensified or not, leads to physiological consequences and not just psychological problems.

Arousal of the autonomic nervous system is prompted by excessive anger, and the regulation of involuntary processes, including one's heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and digestion, are affected.<sup>9</sup> Hormonal and neurochemical changes thus take place, our cardiovascular or circulatory system duly responds and blood flow increases. But, as anger persists, the risk of '...hypertension and stroke, heart disease, gastric ulcers, and bowel diseases'<sup>9</sup> escalates. Add to this '...slower wound healing and a possible increased risk of some types of cancers'<sup>2</sup> and the need to get anger under control becomes all too clear.

### Anger management

'My parents are getting old, my colleagues are infuriating, my friends disappointing, and my partner demanding. I struggle to see a nice horizon,' David, a different client, told me in our third session. He was both fearful and angry – fearful of the weight of the world and an imminent, invisible danger ('You need people on your side, don't you'), and angry that he didn't seem to have a handle on things and that no one cared ('The more I get wound up, even if justified, the more people don't wanna know').

Acknowledging that '...some anger is a valid, necessary, appropriate and unavoidable human emotion'<sup>10</sup> is often the first step in dealing with it. Without accepting that anger is 'a natural phenomenon',<sup>10</sup> we effectively push it underground, Dr Stephen Diamond tells us. And this long-term mismanagement results in '...normal, existential anger grow[ing] insidiously over time into resentment, bitterness, hatred and destructive rage... no matter how much medication, meditation, intellectualization or cognitive restructuring is done'.<sup>10</sup>

Anger management has its relaxation techniques – training clients to '...use personal cues, such as words, phrases or images... to

relax in an anger-inducing situation'<sup>11</sup> – but until the 21st century anger was a seriously 'understudied emotion'.<sup>11</sup> There was an enormous amount of people *with* anger problems, but no corresponding or equivalent literature base. This fits in with Diamond's assertion that '...society condemns and denigrates... anger as negative, worthless or evil'.<sup>10</sup> Basically, people are implicitly told to shut out such feelings.

Society certainly has its beef with anger. The more modern, technologically advanced and 'civilised' (or 'sivilized'<sup>12</sup> to quote Mark Twain) we have become, it seems, the more we are progressively shocked by the slightest display of discontent. I would testify that from the age of 10 (in 1980) to now, each decade has evoked greater disapproval when it comes to witnessing public displays of not even anger, but annoyance.

Three years ago, I was having afternoon tea with a friend of the opposite sex, and thumped the table with the side of my right fist, for effect, as part of a story I was telling, and the other occupants of the tearoom looked in our direction as if I had committed the biggest *faux pas* they had ever seen. Perhaps their instinct was to protect *her*, my friend, but in society's 'rush to judgment' (the opposite of Seneca) I could easily have felt suppressed.

'You can't be calm and relaxed and p\*ssed off as hell at the same time.'<sup>11</sup> Dr Jerry Deffenbacher noted 18 years ago, highlighting the best available treatment for anger at the time: preparing for change (motivation and awareness); changing (barb exposure technique); accepting and adjusting (reconceptualise, forgive others and avoid grudges); maintaining change (relapse prevention).

I think, in the tearoom, I was calm, relaxed and a little p\*ssed off (at the recollection of what I was telling), but anger comes in many forms, and I believe people in worse situations than us are better placed to stress its continued importance in everyday life and its sporadic role as blunt saviour.

On 23 June 2021, mourning the end of *Apple Daily* – Hong Kong's flagship newspaper – a resident of China commented: 'When sharp criticisms are completely gone, mild criticisms are seen as a nuisance. When mild criticisms are not tolerated, silence is seen as an ulterior motive. When silence is not allowed, inadequate praises are a crime. If only one type of voice is allowed, then that voice is a lie!'<sup>13</sup> ●

- 5 Simone N. Don't let me be misunderstood. [Online.] <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/ninasimone/dontletmebemisunderstood.html> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 6 Davis L.J. The encyclopaedia of insanity. [Online.] <https://harpers.org/archive/1997/02/the-encyclopedia-of-insanity/> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 7 Bull M. Am I right to be angry? [Online.] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n15/malcolm-bull/am-i-right-to-be-angry> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 8 Cardwell M. Dictionary of psychology. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers; 1999.
- 9 Waxenbaum JA et al. Anatomy, autonomic nervous system. [Online.] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK539845/> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 10 Diamond SA. Anger disorder: what is it and what can we do about it. [Online.] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evil-deeds/200904/anger-disorder-what-it-is-and-what-we-can-do-about-it> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 11 Holloway JD. Advances in anger management. [Online.] <https://www.apa.org/monitor/mar03/advances> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 12 Absurdity of a 'sivilized' society – an analysis of Huckleberry Finn. [Online.] <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Absurdity-of-a-Sivilized-Society-an-Analysis-FKHPKCZS8CKBW> (accessed 10 July 2021).
- 13 Davidson H. Final days of Hong Kong's Apple Daily. [Online.] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/25/final-days-hong-kong-apple-daily-pressure-unbearable> (accessed 10 July 2021).

### **YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE**

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own. Email: [privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk](mailto:privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk)

