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Defusing Anger and Rage

with James
Messina, PhD

by Julia Griffin

Julia: Jim, can you tell me about your work and some of what you have gleaned from it?

Jim: My main focus for thirty years has been anger management. Anger is a huge underlying problem in clinical practice. If there is a problem in a relationship, there is usually anger underneath. Unexpressed anger can cause frustration, depression, grief, and violence. Until anger is expressed, you really can't achieve anything. I have spent most of my life helping people learn how to deal with anger.

Julia: What creates anger?

Jim: Anger starts in childhood when our security or survival needs are not met. Children don't know how to express that their needs are not being met, and they become angry. Parents don't always deal well with anger. It's often considered inappropriate.

Anger is a normal emotion and dealing with it can be healthy. We don't talk about anger much in our society. We tend not to address it. We do all feel anger, and we all have to deal with it; it's just that we are not taught how. When we deal constructively with anger, we can actually have a positive outcome.

Julia: There are many faces of anger, among them grief and depression. Could you talk about this?

Jim: Anger underlies so many things in psychology. It is very broad, and that is why I think it is important. Getting angry hides the emotions that are underneath. Depression, for example, is essentially anger at oneself.

You can be afraid you will lose someone's love through acting out anger, so you hide the anger because of fear, but you're still angry. We learn to hide our pain with anger. Anger also can be a result of loss of self-esteem, or idealism — believing that a parent or loved one should act or be a certain way.

Violent expressions of anger include verbal abuse as well as physical abuse. Passive aggressive people are hiding hostility and are sometimes acting the opposite way of what society agrees their behavior represents. Other people withdraw as a way of not participating in life, thinking it is safer not to get involved.

Julia: We all know what anger feels like, but some people act out their anger through violence or revenge. What causes that reaction?

Jim: People who haven't learned how to express their anger or rage will encounter what I call an "oil well": a reserve of anger. Rage is what happens when feelings from the past are triggered.

When people who haven't learned how to express this energy feel angry, all of their old memories are ignited, and their old anger flows into the new situation. It is like having a

small fire and then suddenly the fire hits an oil well. A huge ignition takes place.

The explosion is composed of what the person has stored inside — in this case, the old hurt and anger. There is a storehouse of emotion that ignites.

Julia: How does old anger cause this explosive reaction?

Jim: Irrational thinking is the beginning. You don't think the situation through or ask yourself why you feel the way you do.

Let's say your wife asks you to help with the dishes, and you fly into a rage. You could become violent emotionally or physically. If you're not willing to take responsibility for your anger, then you want to direct it toward a person or situation. It can be explosive.

Julia: Can you describe the cycle of anger?

Jim: We call it "anger in" and "anger out."

When you express anger in your usual way, you may feel guilty for hurting the other person's feelings. As a result of this remorse, you may then suppress anger, and it can become resentment. Suppressing is "anger in."

When you're irritated or upset the next time by a real or imagined event, you express the anger all over again in the old, sick way. When there is hurtful response toward someone or something, there is a release. The response of explosive anger is obviously disproportionate to the situation, but it's occurring because of stored anger. Acting out anger is "anger out." There is a whole cycle here.

Acting violently or in a vengeful manner is obviously not a positive response. Choosing to lose control in this way is an active choice. All of anger is about energy exchange and how we choose to express it.

Julia: Control issues are also a part of anger and not managing it well. Can you tell me about that?

Jim: If you can't control yourself or your emotions, then you will try to control other people. You think that controlling other people's actions will end your anger. You think that you will no longer have the anger and negative emotions that set off your reaction to a stimulus.

There's a lot of irrational thinking going on here. People in anger management classes will say, "Oh, I want to get even with him. I want to kill him. You wouldn't believe what he did to me."

I have to tell those people that it doesn't matter what happened to them. They can't keep thinking about revenge or trying to act out revenge. They think that by acting out they can control what happens to them. It's not true.

Julia: Relinquishing control is an important part of learning to deal with anger?

Jim: Absolutely. I say to my patients, "Oh, well, that's how it is. Life's not fair. It's awful, it's terrible. But that's how it is. It's too bad, isn't it?"

You can't always choose the direction of your life or what happens in your life. You can't control all of the events in your life. You have to accept that. Acceptance is a big part of coming to terms with anger. It is the key to moving away from anger and its responses. You have to accept that you can't control other people or what has happened in your life.

Julia: But if we are willing to explore and deal with our anger, it can be a positive force in our lives?

Jim: It's because we don't know how to get through old anger that we create the same emotional cycles again and again. We don't always recognize anger, and it stays in our lives until we do. We have to go through the anger we have experienced in our lifetime and defuse it.

When we begin to work through it, anger can be very helpful. It can take us to a place of emotional healing. It can teach us to develop communication skills, to learn how to say what we feel to the people we care about. By changing our attitudes about control, we can learn to say that we have free will to work on problems with people.

The past begins to resolve itself when we make positive steps toward the future. Everyone's energy is budgeted. When we rid ourselves of old anger and focus on the future, we create positive energy while getting rid of the negative energy that debits our energy flow.

Julia: So how can the average person, who perhaps does or does not want to work with a psychologist, work through their anger and its patterns?

Jim: I don't recommend self-help books with five-minute solutions. The goal-oriented books are not going to take you there. There's is no "quick-and-dirty" solution.

There is an effective manual on my website (Coping.org). You can work through the website and the exercises to work through some of your anger. It's a place to start. Many of my patients who work through the manual and participate in group therapy once a month have excellent results.

You have to learn new habits. It takes more than 30 repetitions to learn a new habit. So you need to realize it will take time to build more rational responses, but it can be done.

When you learn new responses, you will have a different attitude. People will treat you differently. Your life will begin to change positively. And this is the other side of anger. You can assertively express your thoughts and feelings to create a win-win situation.

Julia: Let's talk about some of your strategies for coping with feelings of anger and old anger.

You say to identify our feelings and the persons we are angry with, to exhaust our anger, and to reset our personal goals. Can we go through some of these steps with our readers?

Jim: First, you must identify the feeling you are experiencing as anger and accept this emotion. Many people have difficulty accepting that they are angry because the expression of this has been painful in the past. So you name the cause of the anger — the present stimulus and the past anger.

You get the emotion out through the anger workout. This is energizing, and you should experience it as relaxing. You can write down a list of everyone who has made you angry in your life.

Then you pick one person and write down, in the form of a letter, a list of all of the things that person did to you. Read the letter seven times out loud. Don't mail it — this is not about talking to people and being confrontational, it's about expressing old rage. But you can burn the letter. Or you can write your lists in a journal.

You can repeat this action each night.

Another way to deal with anger is to have a kick-bag and a t-ball bat. You can put a face in the middle of the bag and for fifteen minutes you exhaust your laundry list of anger by hitting or kicking the bag. The bag should be in the garage or a secluded room, and the family should be away while you engage in this activity.

If you can't do this workout, the writing works just as well.

After the anger workout, you visualize that you have a team of three members: your adult self, your inner child, and an angel or higher power. You make up a positive affirmation that you repeat to yourself. Then visualize that your team is going to create a new life without these problems — a new

way to deal with your life and a positive way to change. This visualization helps you to reset personal goals.

You will then resume your involvement with the person who was the stimulus, and assertively confront the person in a rational manner. You learn to do this in such a way that communication and mutual needs are met. This is creating a win-win situation.

This last step is important, because it is about establishing a new habit. It may take many repetitions for this new behavior to become a habit that replaces your old way of expressing anger. But it can be done.

Julia: What about people who have been hurt so deeply that they can't forgive or get over what happened to them? What do you advise?

Jim: I have dealt with many people who have been abused sexually or raped as children, and I think they are probably among the most victimized of my patients. And I don't think that there is such a thing as being hurt so badly that we can't recover.

We may never be able to forgive, but we can deal with the anger and the hurt. When we have dealt with these feelings, we can find a place where we can begin to forget and go on with our lives. No one wants to carry these kinds of feelings throughout life.

They say that "Living well is the best revenge," but forgiving and forgetting are the truest form of revenge. If we truly want revenge, then forgiving and forgetting is the goal to which we should aspire.

Julia: From what I've read, self-esteem often benefits from anger management. It seems that some of the issues one has to accept in dealing with anger, such as poor communication skills, would be difficult for someone with low self-esteem. Can you tell me about that?

Jim: First of all, we have to see the idealism that is involved in low self-esteem. Idealism is a concept of perfection, and it stands in the way of self-esteem because the idea of being perfect isn't rational. Everyone is imperfect.

When we stop trying to be perfect, then we can look at some of the rational issues. There actually are only three things we can control in life: the way we think, the way we feel, and the way we act.

So we have to learn to think in a more rational way. Instead of saying, "Why did that person make me angry?" we learn that we allowed ourselves to be angry.

As far as feelings are concerned, we learn to express our positive emotions, like elation, pleasure, and enjoyment.

We are getting out negative emotions with the anger work-out, so we can focus on positive feelings. We learn to do positive things, to create more pleasurable recreation.

When we begin to have more positive feelings, we become more receptive and this receptivity is imparted to others. People begin to want to talk to us and share their thoughts with us. We become more proactive and less resentful. We learn how to tell the people we are involved with how we feel. These actions build self-esteem.

Julia: We've talked about dealing with our own anger, but what about other people's anger. What do we do when other people are raging at us?

Jim: We each express our thoughts and feelings differently when someone is in a rage, so the best thing to do is to them to cool off and come back later to discuss the issue. If we can't get the person to calm down, we can leave or ask the person to leave.

Finally, there is detachment. If we don't have the interest, then we don't have to get angry, we can say, "Oh, well, that's how it is." We can practice detachment. Detachment

is a powerful tool in anger management. It's another form of acceptance.

Julia: What is the effect of developing these different attitudes and behaviors?

Jim: When we exhaust our storehouse of old anger through new strategies like the ones we've discussed, our lives change. As we let go of anger, hurt, and transgression, serenity begins to find a place in our lives. We stop thinking that people, places, and things are causing our discomfort, and let go to a Higher Power. Letting go and believing in a Higher Power is important for all of us. This is a part of serenity.

Julia: Is there anything else we want to say about anger or anger management?

Jim: People say, *Why did this or that happen?* But that's not the issue now. It's already happened. The issue is, *How will we get on with our lives?*

Adversity — the cause of so much anger — is the crucible through which we gain strength. Adversity can bring about great transformation of the self if we learn to accept it.

James J. Messina, PhD, worked for thirty years as a licensed psychologist. Although retired, he now serves as chief psychologist of the Polk County Youth Development Center. He may be reached at 813-631-5176 or by email at JJMess@TampaBay.rr.com.

He has created a website that offers the Tools for Coping Series — a set of onsite manuals for coping with a variety of life stressors. For more information or to access the Tools for Coping Series go to Coping.org.

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