

Successful Anger Management

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We tend to be unaware of the many ways we unconsciously suppress emotions, especially those labeled “unacceptable” by our parents or society. We learn at an early age to use defenses instead. The well known psychotherapist, writer and researcher Leigh McCullough Vaillant, in her book *Changing Character*, writes “People do not spring from the womb conflicted about crying. The 2-year-old is not initially conflicted about saying **no**”. However, children who grow up in a household where the caretakers do not tolerate healthy emotions will cause the child to feel anxiety every time a “forbidden” emotion comes up. Such experience can teach them enormous fear of real feelings like anger. For example, one may have learned to be afraid of one’s father’s outbursts of anger when growing up and made a conscious decision never to be like that. One learned very quickly to put a defense in its place. Defenses consist of cognitive and emotional strategies that one puts in place in the mind, almost like a screen, behind which one hides one’s real emotions. One puts screens in place in order not to feel all the anxiety provoking feelings that would otherwise come up. Instead of experiencing anger one might smile or “shut down”, get a headache or suffer from chronic irritable bowel syndrome or anxiety. Feelings do not exist in a vacuum, they always arise towards or in reaction to other people or situations.



In the 1960s psychiatrist Habib Davanloo, of McGill University in Montreal, developed a special technique over a period of 30 years. He designed a method by which to help patients overcome their resistance to painful feelings. In this model, the counselor brings issues rapidly to the forefront and the patient quickly receives tools that can be life changing. This intensive, challenging but also extremely rewarding work, can offer relief from emotional suffering which, for some people, has lasted for years.

This article is going to focus on anger, the most misunderstood emotion in our society. When fully experienced, anger can feel enormously powerful and grounding. But it is generally considered “bad” because it is often demonstrated in inappropriate behavior. It is powerful and comes with aggressive impulses that we work hard to keep submerged so we are liked, accepted, approved of and, often, safe. We distance ourselves from angry feelings and get anxious or down on ourselves instead. We learn at an early age, to subconsciously channel the anger into more “acceptable” feelings. But what happens to the anger? It has to go somewhere and can cause harm to the body. Lucky is the child who is taught to deal appropriately with this difficult emotion from the start!

These defenses must come down if the patient is to feel better. The counselor will point them out, challenge them and help the patient change this dysfunctional way of dealing with real emotions. For example, in a session when a patient is asked how she feels about a situation that makes her angry, she may smile or laugh (defenses against feeling her anger). When the counselor points this out, she may resort to crying or vagueness (two more defenses). Concrete situations need to be discussed to help the patient become more aware of these mechanisms for avoiding the anger. This is not an intellectual process. Insight alone is not enough. The behaviors that need to be changed must be clear to both the counselor and the patient so that the two can work on them together. Once the patient understands

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this stage of the process, she can focus on learning how to fully experience the whole range of emotions in a functional way without automatically using defenses. Painful memories that surface are worked through in order to find links to current issues. In this process the therapeutic goal is, for the patient to be able to recognize and understand her anger and to learn how to deal with it in a healthy and appropriate way. The interesting thing is that truly experienced anger feels energizing and relaxing at the same time. An observer may not even know that anything is going on. All anxiety disappears and the angry person is in complete control.

I make a practice of videotaping my sessions because, should the patient wish, he can see on tape how his body deals with emotions, a process that can aid in understanding.

The following list demonstrates how defense mechanisms work. When you are angry, do you feel **powerful** or:

- anxious and guilty?
- stressed and depressed?
- disconnected?
- compliant with a smile?
- sullen and shut down?
- do you want to lash out?
- do you get a headache?
- do you want to sleep?
- do you want to cry?
- Do you feel tight and small?
- helpless?
- meek and shamed?
- numbed out?
- bad about yourself?
- explosive?

According to Gabor Maté In his book *When the Body Says No*, studies at the U.S. National Cancer Institute found that natural killer (NK) cells, an important class of immune cells, are more active in breast cancer patients who are able to express anger, to adopt a fighting stance and who have more social support. On the other hand, he found that extreme suppression of anger was the most commonly identified characteristic of breast cancer patients in a 1974 British study.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory believes strongly in the connection between emotions and physical wellbeing. Particular emotions affect the energy within each major organ of our bodies, contributing to its health or illness. I have been practicing TCM for 20 years and have seen the effects of suppressed emotions on a person's health. Acupuncture can be helpful to a degree but, no matter how many treatments you have, they can't always solve the problem where there are deeper, underlying issues that need to be resolved. When the patient decides to enter EDT, I put aside the needles and use a different approach. We work actively together to discover what emotions(s) are being masked. We challenge the defenses, explore options, realize choices and learn to put boundaries in place.

I believe Leigh McCullough Vaillant puts it best when she wrote "...the more one can laugh when happy, cry when sad, use anger to set firm limits, make love passionately, and give and receive tenderness fully and openly, the further one is from suffering. And the fuller one is with the joy of existence, the more generous one can be toward others."

This is the first in a four-part series on dealing with emotions. Following articles will focus on guilt, fear of closeness and sadness.

Published in **Your Health Source** November 2005
And **Vitality magazine** January/December 2005/06