



►► BEING A LEGAL PROFESSIONAL DOES NOT GIVE ANYONE A FREE PASS TO TAKE OUT OUR ANGER INAPPROPRIATELY ON OTHERS.



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Destructive Anger

When anger turns toxic, no one wins.

“When in anger, he thinks of the consequences.”
—Confucius (as translated from the Confucian Analects by Lionel Giles).

IN MY ROLE AS A CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST doing assessments on judges, lawyers, and law students, I often encounter what I refer to as “toxic anger.” In therapy, it can manifest in a variety of ways. It might be seen as an outward expression of an overtly aggressive sort of anger that is not respectful of others or their feelings and is viewed by the person exhibiting it as simply being assertive. Or it may manifest from unexpressed anger in the form of passive-aggressive behaviors such as hostility, cynicism, bullying, inappropriate humor, overt and subtle physical gestures, and/or microaggressions that make the recipient feel less valuable or worthy.

I call the overly assertive type of anger “hydraulic rage,” which, when expressed, usually feels good for the person expressing themselves but leaves a trail of innocent bystanders who are left feeling battered, overwhelmed, and confused by the sheer force and volume of this type of anger expression. Usually, the person exhibiting this type of anger does not view it as a problem and may even consider it a professional asset; such people also are more likely to use intimidation and incivility in the normal course of business. The use of hydraulic anger can also spill over into other parts of life, especially when confronted by personal frustration or emotionally difficult people, topics or discussions at home, while driving, long lines at stores, or other personal activities.

Unexpressed anger also can have negative consequences. Individuals who carry around unexpressed anger may view themselves as conflict avoidant, neutral, or devoid of negative personal attributes. However, the anger they are suppressing can transform into passive-aggressive behaviors. It may include indirect expression of unhappiness and is often manifested via subtle and overt cues such as rolling one’s eyes, crossing one’s arms when another person is speaking, inappropriate humor, long periods of angry silence, cynical comments, hypocrisy, or being demeaning to others. As these behaviors accumulate, they lead to high levels of conflict in interpersonal and work relationships. The person may then be viewed as negative and untrustworthy.

Recently, I spoke with the spouse of an attorney who described anger issues at home as overwhelming, frightening, and leading to emotional distance and distrust of their partner. When the topic of anger comes up in their personal discussions, the lawyer-spouse claims that anger is an asset in the profession and cannot be turned off at home. However, habitual anger has many negative side effects. It leads to greater personal and professional isolation and less emotional intimacy and connection. Individuals in an angry person’s orbit may fear and avoid them to avoid emotional landmines and explosive episodes.

Normal versus toxic anger

Although anger is a normal emotional state, it can vary greatly in intensity and expression among individuals. Some people may be predisposed to being touchy, irritable, and easily angered based on genetics. However,

in most people, anger is learned from environmental cues, family system behaviors, and community and cultural expectations. Research does show that people who are easily angered often grow up in family systems that lack healthy emotional communication skills. Culturally, anger may be encouraged or discouraged; gender norms may also play a role. As humans, we should all take inventory of how we display anger and unhappiness, whether this is learned or not, and whether our anger or unhappiness are causing problems in our day-to-day interpersonal and work lives.

The interesting part of being in the legal field is that anger is often equated with type A personalities and highly successful judges and lawyers who use anger to manage courtrooms, advocate for clients, or intimidate opposing counsel. Type A personalities are often easily frustrated, have high levels of emotional volatility, are “disrespect sensitive,” and can become even angrier and more combative when things do not go as planned. Toxic anger is closely linked to type A personality traits such as impatience, perfectionistic standards, and getting “things done right.” As I always

state in therapy, what makes us successful professionally may also highlight a vulnerable side of us that is not always healthy in daily living and relationships.

Losing control

Toxic anger is an inappropriate way to express overwhelming emotions and often signals an acute loss of emotional control. When in this highly agitated state of anger, the amygdala of the brain, which is the emotional center, hijacks the frontal lobe where reasoning and good judgment take place. Decisions that are made, words that are spoken, gestures that are expressed, emails that are sent, and phone calls that take place are never going to be in your best interests when one’s frontal lobe is being hijacked.

A hijacked frontal lobe diminishes one’s ability to assess a situation and engage in appropriate problem solving. It is as if a “temporary blindness in the brain” keeps an angry person from seeing reasonable paths to take. As the amygdala takes over and triggers “fight, flight, or freeze” instincts needed by our ancient ancestors to survive, we may lose awareness and even forget what triggered the event and all that was said or inferred.

Anger management tips

There are many ways to express our anger, and all have their pros and cons. But expressing anger can be healthy—when done appropriately. It requires vigilance and honesty about how our anger affects others and ourselves. In therapy, we teach people the following skills:

The power of the pause—allow time for the brain to recalibrate and go back to a more neutral state so that decision making is not compromised.

Engage in a personal “time out” using calming techniques to restore balance and achieve optimum behavioral control.

Make time your best friend and engage in a physical activity or meditative practice to reengage the frontal lobe so that it can solve problems at a higher, less emotional level.

Learn to communicate more effectively and with more emotional control so that you can make positive contributions to healthy workplaces and healthy interpersonal relationships.

It is incumbent on us all to recognize our strengths and weaknesses and manage our emotions. Being a legal professional does not give anyone a free pass to take out our anger inappropriately on others.

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