



## When anger's a plus

**Despite its mixed reputation, anger can play a constructive role at home, at work and in the national consciousness, psychologists are finding.**

**BY TORI DeANGELIS**

**"At the same time anger...provides a sense of certainty and prepares people for action, it also simplifies their judgment processes and leaves them prone to bias."**

*Jennifer Lerner  
Carnegie Mellon University*

If you believe the Bible, the great philosophers and Chinese fortune cookies, anger rarely pays.

Yet the red-hot emotion has a positive side, say psychologists who study anger. In studies and in clinical work, they find anger can help clarify relationship problems, clinch business deals, fuel political agendas and give people a sense of control during uncertain times. More globally, they note, it can spur an entire culture to change for the better, as witnessed by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the earlier women's suffrage movement.

"Imagine what the women's suffrage movement would have been like if women had said, 'Guys, it's really so unfair, we're nice people and we're human beings too. Won't you listen to us and give us the vote?'" says social psychologist Carol Tavris, PhD, author of *"Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion"* (Simon & Schuster, 1989). "To paraphrase Malcolm X, there's a time and a place for anger, where nothing else will do."

While there is no one definition of constructive anger--experts say it varies according to situation and context--psychologists are examining how its use can aid intimate relationships, work interactions and political expressions, including the public's response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The concept of constructive anger is also gaining empirical support from a recently validated measure developed by Mount Sinai Medical Center psychologist Karina Davidson, PhD, and colleagues. Described in the January 2000 issue of *Health Psychology* (Vol. 19, No. 1), the instrument explores factors like people's propensity to calmly discuss their angry feelings and to work toward solutions. Indeed, use of the scale with male heart patients high in hostility suggests that constructive anger may have health benefits as well.

## **Everyday anger**

Anger gets a bad rap partly because it is often erroneously associated with violence, experts note. "In fact, anger seems to be followed by aggression only about 10 percent of the time, and lots of aggression occurs without any anger," notes Howard Kassinove, PhD, co-author with R. Chip Tafrate, PhD, of "Anger Management: The Complete Treatment Guidebook for Practice" (Impact, 2002).

But a number of studies show that in the places where anger is usually played out--especially on the domestic front--it is often beneficial. "When you look at everyday episodes of anger as opposed to more dramatic ones, the results are usually positive," says James Averill, PhD, a University of Massachusetts Amherst psychologist whose studies of everyday anger in the 1980s found that angry episodes helped strengthen relationships about half the time, according to a community sample.

Echoing those findings, a 2002 study in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* (Vol. 58, No. 12) by Tafrate, Kassinove and Louis Dundin, found that 40 percent of a community sample of 93 people reported positive long-term effects of angry episodes, compared with 36 percent that reported neutral and 25 percent that reported negative long-term outcomes. Similarly, a 1997 study by Kassinove and colleagues in the *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* (Vol. 12, No. 2) found that 55 percent of a comparative community sample of Russians and Americans said an angry episode produced a positive outcome. Almost a third of them noted the episode helped them see their own faults.

"People who are targets of anger in these studies will say things like, 'I really understand the other person much better now--I guess I wasn't listening before,'" comments Kassinove. "While assertive expression is always preferable to angry expression, anger may serve an important alerting function that leads to deeper understanding of the other person and the problem."

## **A positive feedback loop**

Several factors can make the difference between constructive and destructive anger, say psychologists who study and treat everyday anger. For one, constructive anger expression usually involves both people, not just the angry party. In the best-case scenario, the angry person expresses his or her anger to the target, and the target hears the person and reacts appropriately.

"If the anger is justified and the response is appropriate, usually the misunderstanding is corrected," notes Averill. Relatedly, anger can be constructive when people frame it in terms of solving a mutual problem rather than as a chance to vent their feelings, says Tavis. "The question is not, 'Should I express anger or should I

suppress it?' It is, 'What can we do to solve the problem?'"

Likewise, it is helpful to understand that anger is contextual and social, Tavris adds. When anger fails to fill a constructive framework, however, it can morph into undesirable expressions of the emotion, anger experts say. Anger externalized can turn into violence and aggression; anger internalized can cause depression, health problems and communication difficulties, they note.

### **Power plays**

Anger also plays a powerful and arguably positive role in the workplace and in politics, finds Larissa Tiedens, PhD, of Stanford University. These are arenas, she notes, where anger is often used for status, power, control and strategic purposes rather than for emotional expression.

In a paper in the January 2001 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 80, No. 1), Tiedens showed across four studies that people grant more status to politicians and to colleagues who express anger than to those who express sadness or guilt.

And a study in this month's *Psychological Science* (Vol. 14, No. 2) by social psychologist **Jennifer Lerner**, PhD, Roxana Gonzalez, Deborah Small and Baruch Fischhoff, PhD, of Carnegie Mellon University, finds that anger served an empowering function following the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The first part of the study, conducted nine days after the attacks, gathered baseline data on a representative sample of 1,786 people concerning their feelings about the attacks and their levels of anxiety, stress and desire for vengeance.

The second part, conducted two months later, randomized 973 people from the original sample into a condition that primed fear, anger or sadness (the study reports only on the fear and anger conditions). People in the anger condition, for instance, elaborated on their feelings of anger following the attacks and viewed photos and listened to audio clips designed to provoke anger. For example, they watched Arabs celebrating the attacks. They then assessed the threat of future terrorist attacks in the United States.

Participants primed for anger gave more optimistic--and, as it turns out, realistic--risk assessments on 25 possible terrorist-related risks than those primed for fear. For example, participants primed for anger estimated a 19 percent personal chance of being hurt in a terrorist attack within the next year, compared with 23 percent of those primed for fear. Because virtually no Americans were hurt by terrorist attacks in the 12 months following Sept. 11, the angry participants' estimates were more accurate, explains Lerner.

Anger is probably beneficial in this context because it increases people's sense of control, comments **Lerner**, who also has looked

at this aspect of the phenomenon. In a study reported in the July 2001 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 81, No. 1), she and Dacher Keltner, PhD, of the University of California, Berkeley, found that angry people had a stronger sense of control and certainty than fearful people. That's not to say these tendencies are always justified or helpful, she adds: Angry people also are less likely than others to think they'll have a heart attack or get a divorce, when they're actually more likely to experience these negative events.

**Lerner** believes such studies have implications for the current "war on terrorism." They suggest that President Bush's angry, tough-guy stance may affect public reaction by reducing uncertainty and increasing a sense of control, she says.

However, if the enemy continues to prove elusive, the tactic may prove maladaptive, **Lerner** speculates. "At the same time anger effectively provides a sense of certainty and prepares people for action," she says, "it also simplifies their judgment processes and leaves them prone to bias."

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