Understanding the Link Between Depression and Anger

by ERIC PATTERSON

Depression and Anger

Depression triggers a multitude of symptoms in the sufferer. Some people fit into the stereotype of someone with depression by being sad and tearful as they lack energy and motivation to accomplish the most basic of tasks. They have low self-esteem and generally see the world as a negative and dangerous place. These people are easier to identify and treat, since their depression fits the common understanding of the mental illness.

There is another group of people with depression that do not fit into this mold. These people do not express their depression in the form of sadness or isolate themselves in their homes. Instead, this second group is typically energetic and motivated. They are driven, but the drive does not come from hope or desire to make a positive change. The energy comes from anger.

What is Anger?

Anger tends to be a misunderstood symptom in the world of mental health. You likely know people who have problems with anger, or perhaps you struggle with anger management yourself, but there is no diagnosis for anger issues that a mental health professional can give you. This is because professionals widely believe that anger is a branch of depression. Think of anger and depression as the same feeling. When it is turned towards you it is depression, but when pointed out towards the world, it becomes anger.

To know anger, you must know the different forms anger takes. Anger is defined as an emotional, affective and antagonistic response to a situation. This means that anger is a reaction to an unwanted/undesirable event that creates changes in your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Anger is immediate and ranges from mild annoyance, to high levels of fury and rage.

Rage is the most extreme form of anger. It is more difficult to manage because it usually takes over your body as well as your mind. The last important definition associated with anger is hostility. Someone that is hostile has an attitude towards others or the world that breeds anger. Hostility is an angry version of pessimism.

Negatives of Anger

As mentioned, when people think about anger, they think of violence, aggression and disruption. Overall, anger does create many problems, including:

- Anger limits your ability to think clearly and use good judgment.
- Anger increases your physical tension. In the long term, tension will have unwanted effects on your physical health.
- Anger leads to you hurting yourself or others physically or psychologically.
- Anger leads to a lack of social awareness as it forces you to be more egocentric and selfish.

Next page: positives of anger and how to manage it.

Positives of Anger

People have a negative impression of anger, but like any other feeling, anger is neither good nor bad. It is only a feeling. What is important is what you choose to do with the feeling. At times, it is very appropriate to become angry. There are actually several positive aspects of anger including:

- Anger alerts you to a problem that needs to be addressed. Some people are not efficient at noticing their thoughts and feelings. Anger can serve as a warning to you that a situation is triggering unwanted feelings in you.
- Anger tells other people that you are feeling upset. Experts refer to this as the rattlesnake effect. A rattlesnake makes others aware of its presence so that they can stay away until the situation is resolved. This can reduce the likelihood of negative situations unfolding during periods of anger.
- Anger gives you increased energy to act. Feeling angry pumps your body full of adrenaline. Think about the last football game you watched. Before the game, the coaches work to trigger an anger response in the players. Then, the athletes are able to direct these feelings in ways that help the team to accomplish the ultimate goal of winning the game. In some cases, anger can also improve mental energy in the form of focus and attention.
- Anger lets you know a conflict needs to be addressed. If a situation or relationship continually triggers anger, it is an indication that you must act to change the situation. The feeling of anger will point you in the right direction but you must act appropriately.

How Anger Develops

How does depression turn outward and become anger? Surely, there is no single answer but the themes of power and control are common. Depression makes people feel powerless and out of control. People feel so uncomfortable with these feelings that they take severe actions to avoid them. They work to control and have power over every aspect of everything in life. They learn that becoming angry will give them what they seek. If anyone resists, the angry person will only increase the frequency and intensity of anger. An unwanted habit forms to overcompensate for fear and powerlessness.

How to Manage Anger

Managing the unwanted effects of anger is not an undertaking to approach lightly. The person will lose the sense of power and control that they work so hard to maintain. Ideally, the person with anger will have had enough negative experiences caused by anger to see the error of their ways and seek change. Once committed, changing anger is as easy as A, B, C. Here's how:

- **Track your anger** – To change anger, you must first understand your anger and what makes you angry. Look for themes, people, time of day, locations and other trends that emerge from your anger. To create a tracking sheet, simply find a piece of paper and include the day, time, situation, how you felt and how you responded. Rate your experience of anger on a scale from 0 to 100 and ask trusted people in your life to review the information with you. Their perception of your anger will likely be unique and give you needed insight.

Once you become proficient at tracking and understanding your triggers, you can begin breaking them down in terms of their A,B,Cs.

Next page: 'ABCs' of anger.

How to Manage Anger

- **Activating event** – The activating event is the situation that triggers the anger response. It could be something someone did or did not do, bad news, an unexpected change or anything else that breeds anger.
- **Beliefs and thoughts** – This is your belief about the activating event. The most important thing to remember when working to improve anger is that the activating event doesn't trigger anger. Instead, it is your beliefs about the events that create anger. This means that you control your anger. No one “makes” you angry. Some people resist this way of thinking while others find it to be quite freeing. Since anger is all about control, taking responsibility for your anger gives you total control.
- **Consequence** – This is the result of your beliefs and thoughts. The consequence could be the behaviors completed or feelings expressed. Consequences include feeling angry, punching a wall or yelling aggressively.

This is likely a completely new way to conceptualize anger, so let’s look at some examples.

- **Example #1** –In this scenario, someone gives you $10. You expected to only get $5 so you are happy, satisfied and content. There is no anger and the relationship is strengthened. In the other scenario, someone gives you $10, but this time you are angry because you expected $20. The situation did not change as the activating event stayed the same. Only your beliefs in the form of expectations change.

- **Example #2** – Your boyfriend is late from work. Your belief is that he is a lying, cheating, no-good excuse for a man. When he arrives home, you will be angry, upset and frustrated. Maybe you will throw a vase at him or maybe you will give him the silent treatment. In either case, he will be confused and surprised by your reaction. In the other scenario, your boyfriend is late from work. Your belief is that he is a hard working, honest man that loves you. When he arrives home, you ask about his day and what kept him. Perhaps, he was delayed because he stopped to pick up some flowers.

Looking at your beliefs is the best way to reduce anger. Chances are good that you will find many beliefs that are fuelled by irrationality. Irrational beliefs are ones that are based on feelings instead of objective facts. Irrational thinking is a cornerstone of depression so you must gain awareness of thoughts. Rational thoughts will be logical, based on fact and agreeable to other people. Rational thoughts lead to rational beliefs. Ask yourself, what evidence do I have to support this? Is this true all the time? What is the worst that could happen? Why do I think this way? If you can change your beliefs, you can change your anger.

Conclusion

Anger is a common effect of depression. Understanding what it is, its negatives, its positives and its development will give you the background needed to manage your anger response. Look at your ABCs to gain awareness of your power to change your responses, and change your beliefs to be angry no longer.