

ANGER

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There are several common myths about anger which cause confusion, lead to mistakes in thinking and are frequently used to excuse violent or abusive behaviour.

Myth 1: Other people make us angry

We often talk about (and *think* about) other people **causing** us to get angry by their behaviour: “You make me so mad!”; “I couldn’t help it, she made me so angry!” Although we may also speak about people causing other emotions (“my little bundle of joy!”) we are **more** likely to say this when the emotional reaction in question is anger. We clearly can choose whether or not to let someone else’s behaviour make us happy or sad yet we frequently talk as if anger is **directly caused** by other people’s behaviour. This is probably because we use anger as an excuse for **our** worst behaviour.

Sometimes it is clear that we **can** choose to get angry or not. We **choose** whether or not to get angry about social problems, injustice, politicians, sports commentators, game-show hosts, etc. Even with provocative, insulting behaviour from strangers most of us know that we can choose how we will react. Picture a drunken teenager trying to provoke a group of older men. Although the teenager’s behaviour may be totally unacceptable, different men will react quite differently and they may say things like, “He’s not worth bothering about!” or “Don’t let him get to you!” They realise they have the choice of getting angry or not.

Now imagine that the provocative teenager is your son. If you react violently you may say afterwards that his behaviour caused you to get angry and that this caused your reaction. However, what if your son’s girlfriend had dumped him, his favourite uncle had just died and he had then got drunk for the first time. You may not feel angry at all, though the behaviour is the same.

It is mainly with regard to close relationships that we assume that others **cause** our anger. However the same behaviour by others will produce markedly different reactions depending on who does it, how we feel, what the circumstances are, etc.

Imagine the worst insult anyone could give you. Is it **inevitable** that you will get angry? What if you and your best friend were taking part in a play, or a game, that involved him or her saying this to you? What if the person you love most said it while delirious from a fever?

These examples should make it clear that it is not the other person’s **behaviour** that makes us angry. It is **always** their **intention** that is important. To be precise it is **our interpretation of their intention**. We can always choose how we interpret someone else’s behaviour (although we may not consciously think about the choice). If we are feeling very irritable (perhaps due to lack of sleep, a headache, stress, low self-esteem) we are much more likely to interpret someone else’s behaviour negatively or as an attack. A paranoid individual may challenge complete strangers with “Who are you looking at?” interpreting almost any behaviour as a personal attack.

Thus our feelings are never **caused** solely by someone else. Their behaviour is a major influence but our habits, attitudes and how we think about things (what we say

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to ourselves – “self-talk”) will affect how we interpret their intention and this is always **just as important** as the actual behaviour.

Myth 2: Feelings cause behaviour

After a violent act, people will often say things like: “I just saw red!”, “I was so angry I couldn’t control myself!”, “When I’m in a rage I can’t stop!”.

The implication is that strong feelings **force us** to behave in particular ways – that we **cannot** control our behaviour in such circumstances.

About 95% of men who are violent towards their partners will immediately stop if the police appear on the scene. If their emotions are in control of their behaviour what is it about the presence of the police that causes them to stop being angry? Are the police so soothing? In fact the arrival of the police is quite likely to make many men more, not less, angry but the consequences of the violent behaviour suddenly become quite different. Of the remaining 5% of men, who are not afraid of the police or prison, most would stop abusing their wives if their mother (or someone) arrived.

Another interesting question is if people are really “out of control” why are there not many more murders? Few men assault their wives in the same way they would fight or assault another man and most show some pattern to their behaviour: such as not leaving visible bruises, never punching, etc. Both children and adults may smash things or throw things about in a rage and usually claim to be “out of control” when they act in this way. Some individuals smash only their own property, sometimes only their partners or parents, sometimes only things of value, sometimes things of low value but in my experience there is **always** some pattern to what they choose to throw or smash. These patterns show that their behaviour is never completely uncontrolled even when in a rage.

We talk (and think) about anger as being different to other emotions. We do not assume that sadness or happiness will **cause** a particular behaviour. “I couldn’t go to work today, I was too happy” would not sound like a reasonable excuse. Even severe depression does not **inevitably** lead to suicide or **any** other specific behaviour. No sane person would accept strong sexual urges as an excuse for rape! It is **only** with anger that we talk as if our feelings force us to act in particular ways, and except in our close relationships this excuse often sounds obviously feeble (e.g. if it is used to excuse violent assaults in public places or an assault at work).

Although anger often accompanies violent and abusive behaviour it does not necessarily do so. It is quite possible to be violent and abusive without feeling anger. Many parents use physical punishment of children (even excessively) without feeling angry. Some men treat their wives in a quite similar fashion, using physical force or verbal aggression to control them in a more or less deliberate way. Even if they do get angry while acting aggressively (or in building up to an aggressive act) it is wrong to claim that the anger causes the aggressive behaviour.

Some individuals get very angry without **ever** acting violently or abusively. For a particular individual the amount of violence will vary with many factors other than anger. Other factors such as consequences, relationship, responsibility, attitudes, understanding, mental state, etc., will be as important, or more important, than anger in determining violent behaviour.

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Since it is possible to be very angry without being violent and also possible to be very violent without being angry we clearly cannot use anger as an **explanation** of violence. It is even more important that we do not use anger as an **excuse** for violence.

Anger **never** directly causes violent or abusive behaviour. There is **always** an element of choice. Naturally there are situations where we **feel as if** our emotions are almost over-whelming and choosing another course of action is very difficult. Though the choice may be difficult there still exists a choice even when seriously provoked, drunk, drugged or even (in most cases) mentally ill.

Once in a rage it may be extremely difficult to maintain self-control but in most cases the rage is the end result of a process of escalating confrontation and of escalating angry “self-talk”. We work ourselves into a rage. There are many points along the way where self-control is easier than once we are in a rage.

Myth 3: Anger builds up inside and has to be released

There is a common idea that anger is something like a fluid or substance that “builds up” inside us so that we have to “get it out”. This idea (sometimes called the “hydraulic theory of anger”) was popularised by Freud and his followers. It is not a theory with any scientific basis but is really only an analogy or rough comparison. This analogy is popular for the simple reason that it often matches how we actually feel (“He makes my blood boil!”). We talk about anger (and sometimes other feelings) as if it was some kind of substance that increases in pressure within our bodies. This may seem a harmless simplification but it has implications that are wrong and sometimes dangerous.

Imagine that you are waiting for a lift to an important job interview. Your friend has sometimes been late in the past but knows how important this is to you and has promised to be early. As the time for the interview approaches you feel mounting anger. You can feel the anger building up like a pressure inside your head. Then the phone rings and you are told that your friend was in a car crash. Instantly the anger is gone. Anger is not a substance or some kind of physical energy but is more like an idea, one which causes physiological changes in your body (your heart races, your palms sweat, the blood pumps in your veins).

Not only can an external environmental change cause us to see things differently but it is always possible that we may suddenly see things differently because of our thought processes. Thus we may almost instantly cease to be angry if we suddenly see the funny side of a situation or work out a more helpful way of looking at things (body changes such as heart beat may take longer to get back to normal). This change in our point of view happens less when we are in a rage because we become blinkered and our thoughts tend to become focussed on the perceived source of our anger. We become much more rigid in our thinking when in a rage and generally at that point we do not **want** to calm down or see any other point of view.

One implication of the idea of anger as a substance is the idea that we can get rid of it by acting angrily (or even by watching violence). This idea is known as “catharsis” and some professionals still believe in it despite the lack of any scientific evidence! It is suggested, for instance, that watching violent movies or sports somehow gets rid of aggression. The evidence is actually overwhelming that these activities make people **more** aggressive not less (there is an increase in murders in America immediately after a major boxing match is shown on TV!). People who have plenty of opportunity

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to act out their aggression (e.g. police, soldiers, boxers, footballers) do not generally become more passive and gentle! During and after wars the rate of crime and domestic violence goes up rather than down.

Generally speaking acting violently or aggressively leads to more aggressive thoughts, more anger and more aggressive behaviour. Aggression becomes a habit and violence can be very habit-forming.

It is important to realise that there **are** things which can **build up** over time which may result in anger.

1. Resentments can accumulate, especially if they are not discussed or acknowledged.
2. Since thinking angry thoughts and acting abusively can be habit forming these can “build up” over time.
3. There can be downward spirals in relationships where A’s negative behaviour produces more negative behaviour in B (not necessarily aggressive, B may withdraw or be more passive) which produces more negative behaviour in A, etc. Such patterns are more likely where there is poor communication. They can be complex and can span time-frames of minutes, months, years, even decades.

Anger itself cannot “build up” but resentments, habits and deteriorating relationships can all build up over time and can result in increasing anger.

Expressing anger by talking about it often stops the build up of resentments. **Being violent** or abusive can only produce short term changes which may result in a decrease in anger, perhaps by decreasing the resentment on the part of the abusive individual (while increasing resentment in the victim) or else by masking the deteriorating relationship (if the victim becomes more passive or the abuser's guilt makes him act differently for a time).

