

Healthy Anger

Dictionary definition of anger: “displeasure at a perceived injustice or unfairness.”

Displeasure=the actual feeling of anger

Perceived=as I see it, so it does not have to be based on what is real

Injustice or unfairness= a wrong to be righted

person to person or person to policy in society

Notice the definition is only about a *feeling*.

It says nothing about what to do next

The Zen emphasis is on being naturally human. We make mistakes. We screw things up. We get angry, become anxious, and do stupid things. This is the human situation. We can't escape it. But when we show up for it, with non-judgmental awareness, we can experience the wonderfully chaotic ocean of life surrounding, penetrating, and supporting us even when we feel overwhelmed by it.

-Tim Burkett: *Zen in the Age of Anxiety*

If we feel distress, embarrassment, or anger, we think we have really blown it. Yet feeling emotional upheaval is not a spiritual faux pas; it is the place where the warrior learns compassion.... It is only when we can dwell in these places that scare us that equanimity becomes unshakable.

You don't try to get rid of anything—you can still be sad or frustrated or angry. You recognize your humanity and the wide gamut of emotions you might be feeling.

Unconditional friendliness is training in being able to settle down with ourselves, just as we are, without labeling our experience as “good” or “bad.” ... Being with this continual succession of agreeable and disagreeable with an open spirit, open heart, and open mind, that's why I sit to meditate.

—Pema Chodron

My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,
Or else my heart, concealing it, will break.

—Shakespeare: *Taming of the Shrew*

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANGER AND ABUSE

HEALTHY ANGER	ABUSE (the shadow side of anger)
Expresses a feeling in an authentic way	Becomes a tantrum in a theatrical way
Communicates, reports an impact	Puts down, bullies, or dumps on the other
Asks for a change in how we relate	Demands change or else threatens retribution
Is part of an I-Thou relationship, subject to subject	Feels like an I-It relationship: subject to object
Takes responsibility for the feeling	Blames the other person
Is based on an intelligent assessment	Is based on judgment, making the other wrong
We see the other as a <i>catalyst</i> for our feeling	We see the other as the <i>cause</i> of our reaction
Is about an action or word that felt unfair	Is about indignation, a bruised ego
Focuses on the here and now	Is contaminated by similar past events
Is brief and let go of with a sense of closure (like a flare)	Is held on to as lingering resentment, hate, or grudge (like a smoldering fire)
May be expressed with a red face, excited gestures, and a raised voice	May be expressed with a red face, menacing gestures, and a screaming voice

HEALTHY ANGER	ABUSE (the shadow side of anger)
Informs the other or gently gives fair warning	Intimidates, threatens, and attempts to overpower the other
Is nonviolent, in control, and always shown within safe limits (manages temper)	Is violent, out of control, hostile, and punitive (loses temper)
Maintains good will at all times	Maintains a mean ill-will toward the other
Asks for accountability and amends to clear things up so forgiveness can happen	Seeks revenge, keeps holding something against the other, perhaps refusing repair of the relationship
Says "Ouch!" assertively and respectfully while seeking a dialogue	Is aggressive and adversarial, is an attack based on ill-will and perhaps with an intent to harm
We seek mutual transformation	We want to justify ourselves as in the right
Shows respect for the other as a peer	Shows contempt toward the other as a target
Aims at a deeper and more effective bond: an angry person moves <i>toward</i> the other	Wants to vent the rage no matter who gets hurt: an abuser moves <i>against</i> the other
We feel grief and acknowledge it	We feel grief but we mask or deny it
Coexists with love, maintains connection	Cancels connection, creates distance

HEALTHY ANGER	ABUSE (the shadow side of anger)
Is fearless	Is fear-based
<i>Is a form of addressing, processing, and resolving an issue. These listings are spiritual practices.</i>	<i>Is a form of avoiding one's own grief and distress about an issue with a refusal to work things out and thereby to grow spiritually</i>

David Richo: *How To Be An Adult in Relationships* (Shambhala, 2021)

The hope for revenge shall hide our inward woe.

What about when others show anger or abuse toward us?

When someone shows authentic anger, we feel safe so we stay put. We listen attentively and respond without defensiveness. "You are angry now and I will hear you out."

But when someone is abusive, our healthy response is to leave the premises: "It seems to me that you have crossed the line and are coming at me aggressively so I will leave now and come back when you calm down so we can have a useful conversation."

Dave Richo

davericho.com