

Mindfulness in Practice: Anger Management

Part I: Anger and How Mindfulness Can Help

Clear your mind. What thoughts, images, feelings, and bodily sensations come into your awareness when you read the following word: ANGER? Whatever the response, I bet it's negative.

When did anger become the grim reaper?

FEELING ANGER

Hedonistic by nature, we don't like anger because it makes us feel bad, and it makes us feel bad to a large degree because we learn to judge our experience of anger as negative. In our culture and in most of our families, we develop an aversion to anger. We learn to shirk, run, hide, bury, freeze, resist, redirect, or create more creative methods for dealing with anger. While these anger-management tactics often work to keep anger out of our awareness to some degree, to a large degree the use of such tactics results in greater suffering than we would have had if we'd just felt the anger in the first place. Some very wise teachers early on in graduate training said, "You can either deal with chaos [meaning out of control emotions such as anger] now or greater chaos later." Not dealing with anger as it arises is like going to the bathroom after being constipated for days at a time. There's going to be a lot of anger stored up.

Are you one of those people who either feels no anger most of the time and then too much some of the time? Not sure? Think about how intense your anger is when you finally feel it...Do you go from 0 to 10 in no time? Do you feel no anger and then punch fists through walls when you finally feel angry? Does it take your anger being at level 9 or 10 for you just to recognize that you're angry? If you answered yes to any of the above questions or if you know that you do things you regret when you're angry, how about improving your anger management skills by cultivating mindfulness?

WHY MINDFULNESS FOR ANGER MANAGEMENT?

Mindfulness teaches us how to recognize anger before it becomes explosive, before you lose control, so that you can release it and return quickly to a calm, rational state in which non-reactive and generally better decisions and communication can occur.

Mindfulness is a centuries-old practice usually cultivated through meditation. It is experiential, meaning that you must experience it in order to understand it. Just talking about it only gets you so far. This is why meditation is so important in cultivating a more mindful life. Meditation is the formal practice of cultivating mindfulness, while everyday life gives us plenty of opportunity for applying the practice.

Part II: How to Apply Mindfulness to Manage Anger

Let's pick up where we left off. At this point, usually the following question comes up:
How do you become aware of anger before it becomes that intense?

Meditation, meditation, meditation
which leads to
Awareness, awareness, awareness.

And not just any meditation, mindfulness meditation (also called Vipassana, Insight, or Awareness Meditation) specifically.

What is Mindfulness Meditation?

Mindfulness meditation is using the breath to inform us of how we are living our lives. It is in theory a very simple practice. However, it is precisely the inherent simplicity of meditation that makes the practice difficult.

To be mindful is to be conscious, more awake, more informed about how one lives one's life. Being more mindful, therefore, allows us to make more awake or informed choices in every moment. Our words and actions would be more mindful if we were more awake or conscious in those moments in which when we choose them.

How Does Anger Work?

Learn how anger works so you can work with it and not be worked by it. I found the following basic explanation of how anger works in *Men's Fitness* online, (Davis, S. E.; "Playing Mad – Use of Anger to Stimulate Athletic Performance", July, 1998). The article cites psychotherapist Richard Pfeiffer, Ph.D., who describes anger as a chain reaction starting with a situation that causes you physical or emotional pain. He explains that pain triggers thoughts that cause you to blame someone or something for that pain, while your brain is sending signals to other parts of your brain to prepare you for fight or flight.

How Does Mindfulness Help?

I'll try to explain how it helps, but if you really want to know, you have to experience it for yourself. Explaining how mindfulness works is like trying to explain to people how to swim. It doesn't necessarily make a whole lot of sense when you explain it, and even if it makes logical sense, it doesn't quite capture what the experience of swimming is really like, but they'd just get in the water, they'd get it.

The more you experientially understand mindfulness meditation, that is, the more you experience being more awake in every moment, the more of yourself you will experience, and the more awareness you will have about what your internal experience really is. Maybe what you experience as your experience is actually something else if you really allowed it to show you what it is as opposed to you naming an experience and Mindfulness meditation is not goal-oriented; it is process-oriented. The focus is not on reaching some future point in time; the focus is always on just being here in the present moment, being with whatever our experience is in the here and now. And when I say "our experience", I mean our global internal experience—what we are thinking, feeling, sensing, and noticing.

Some of you reading this might respond to what you've just read with "Well, I already know most of the time or all of the time what my experience is, but so what? How is that going to help me when I'm angry?"

Mindfulness meditation increases your awareness and slows everything down so that you understand even more about yourself than you did then, opening up new possibilities, new choices. For instance, you may already know how you go from Point A, totally calm, to Point Z totally enraged, but you will likely start seeing the subtle shifts that occur bringing you through Points B through Y. Time will slow down as you start to notice Points A, B, C, D in the moments themselves, as these shifts occur, offering new points in time at which you can work with your anger until you reach the point of no return.

We will go to the point of no return and beyond in Part III of this series on Anger Management.

Part III: How to Apply Mindfulness When You're Really Angry

In the last newsletter, Part II focused how mindfulness meditation over time allows us to see things more clearly in the moment because we are more present in each moment, better able to understand what is happening as it's unfolding as opposed to after the moment has transpired and we've already done or said something without much consciousness. Part III, the last of this series on anger management, focuses on how mindfulness helps once you're too angry to be calm or rational, past of point of no return.

Okay, assuming you've now read parts I and II of this series on mindfulness for anger management, you're probably wondering how meditation is going to help when you are too angry to be calm or rational, past of point of no return.

Unleashing Anger, Reactive

If you've reached that point of no return, you probably remember feeling so incredibly angry you couldn't stand it, you didn't care about anything except releasing your anger, and possibly even unleashed your anger on the person, creature, or thing that seemed most deserving of it at the time. You were not calm and rational and most likely not particularly mindful either; therefore, you may not have been able to stop yourself from doing or saying something you later regretted. You were what's called highly reactive.

Being with Anger, Non-Reactive

When you exercise mindfulness, you exercise non-reactivity or the capacity to stay centered, grounded, and unshaken in response to a stimulus. Now, don't confuse non-reactivity with non-feeling. Let's use road rage as an example. You're driving, and someone cuts you off, and in response to being cut off you flip the driver the bird. You've just behaved reactively.

Contrast that with what non-reactivity would look like in that scenario: You are cut off by the driver, and rather than focusing your attention on the event itself, you focus it on you. You focus it on the sensations you are feeling in your body, most likely a fast heart rate, perhaps a tightness in the chest, or constricted breathing. Then you shift your attention to your breathing, sending

the breath into the parts of your body that are feeling the anger—your heart, your chest—wherever it is for you. In the time it took you to do this exercise, you never even thought about flipping the driver the bird because you were too busy focusing on your reaction; that driver has probably gone on his or her merry way by now. This is non-reactivity.

Non-reactivity allows us to feel all of our feelings but not react to them. We feel them until we organically feel something else or until we decide mindfully, with awareness and choicefulness, that either we want to focus on something else or we want to act.

Feeling vs. Expressing Anger

Learning how to express anger mindfully requires that you understand that feeling does not equal expressing emotions, be it anger or any other emotion. You can feel anger without expressing it, but if you don't express it, then you will become beholden to your defense mechanisms to manage your anger for you. Find a healthy way to express your anger mindfully because if you don't, you will suffer over the long-term. Keep in mind that anger is not just a feeling or state of mind; anger is energy that stimulates our system, preparing us to focus and fight. Expressing anger, then, is often not a matter of just communicating but also releasing the energy itself (physically). It's helpful to know that up front so you can plan for those moments in which you feel energized by anger. Next time you feel that powerful surge of energy, expend it wisely by exercising, working, or releasing it in some form that does not injure yourself or wreak havoc on your relationships.

Expressing Anger Mindfully

In general, there are two types of people: those who do anger, and those who don't. Which are you?

If you do anger, then your challenge is in doing it better, learning how to stay present enough to recognize when you are about pass your threshold into the point of no return. Have strategies for releasing your anger constructively—through exercise or some kind of physical movement like walking, running, hitting a punching bag, or letting out a primal scream in a safe place like your car. If you're in a conflict and feeling angry past the point of being able to hold a calm, rational, mindful discussion, it's probably best to kindly and gently remove yourself from that conversation by simply stating, "I'm feeling (really) angry, so I think it's best if I remove myself from this conversation until I cool off." If it's not socially appropriate to say this outloud and to excuse yourself from the conversation, then put your attention on your breathing and refrain from doing anything until you are in greater control of your words and actions and then perhaps excuse yourself from the room without making a dramatic grand exit in anger.

If you don't do anger, meaning that anger is not familiar to you or a feeling you avoid, repress, or deny, then your work is in allowing yourself to feel it in the first place. Warning: If you are just learning how to get in touch with your anger, the anger will likely feel very intense until it is given its necessary time and space—this could mean months. Individual or group therapy would be enormously helpful for you if your anger is scaring you or those around you because it offers a safe container in which you can explore your anger with guidance. So if you have difficulty giving yourself permission to feel angry, work on becoming aware of how you do anger—When and how does it arise, and what happens then to make sure you don't have to feel it? Where does

the anger go? As you begin to learn about how you've been doing (or not doing) anger, try opening to it instead of fighting it. When you open to it, what happens? Does it immediately become too intense for you or can you tolerate it for a little while focusing on your breathing? The more space you allow the anger, the more you will start to feel liberated from it the more energy you will have.

Let me now summarize for you as succinctly as possible how you can better manage your anger: 1) Learn and practice mindfulness meditation; 2) Reduce reactivity; 3) Give yourself permission to feel and access your anger; 4) Learn how to express anger and to release anger's energy in a non-destructive way; 5) Stay as present as possible in every waking moment, especially when you feel your temperature rising; 6) Shift your attention to your breath to calm yourself until you are past the point of no return; 7) Once you've reached boiling point, mindfully remove yourself from conflict and only return to the discussion once the anger has been released and you feel calm; 8) Find a therapist for extra support and guidance in learning how to work with your anger.

To conclude this series on mindfulness practice for anger management, I'd like to highlight a few key points. First, change can be quite scary, so if you're feeling resistance to changing how to manage your anger, give yourself time. Second, no matter how hard you try to do anger better, know ahead of time that you will most likely fall back into old habits in certain situations. Embrace those moments as reminders of how far you've come, of how deeply ingrained our habits are, and then apologize, forgive yourself, and let go of the past, returning your attention to the present. Finally, recognize that there are often pressures (familial, cultural) on many of us not to show anger. Learn to recognize what those pressures are and how they affect you so you work with anger as mindfully possible.