EXPLORING THE NATURE OF ANGER AND RESENTMENT

Most of us experience some subtle forms of anger throughout the day. These may feel like defensiveness, disappointment, resentment, or regret. While normal, this will take a toll. There is a misperception that we need to "just let it out." This theory is called *catharsis*. However, research has consistently shown that catharsis is not effective at reducing angry feelings and actually escalates anger tendencies. **In one study, Bushman (2002) found that venting anger by hitting a punching bag actually increased the subjects' long term levels of anger. Moreover, the study found that when subjects ruminated over anger, their level of anger increased. We can conclude therefore that "holding it in" is as unhealthy as "letting it out."**

It is useful to recognize that the physical feeling of anger is simply the body's response to thoughts. In changing the thoughts we reduce the anger. Much of our motivation for staying angry comes from the misperception that it is useful. Many of us view anger as a motivator. It energizes us to take action, to be assertive, to get "pumped up." However, we can be assertive or energized without the anger. In fact, anger simply makes us less conscious in whatever we are doing.

But What if They Deserve It?
There is an old saying: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned." When we externalize our anger the effect is introducing more pain into the equation of the class. Using the hot coal analogy, what we have done is burned ourselves first when we let our thinking become angry. Then, in throwing that hot coal into the class, we burn our students. Rest assured that at some point, in some form, that coal will come back at us. When we externalize anger in the form of giving pain (e.g., lectures, guilt, shame, put downs, threats, punishments, etc.), we get burned at least twice. When our students make us mad, our minds want to get back at them because "they deserve it." However, it becomes clear that this reasoning is dysfunctional. If students have done something that calls for a consequence, they deserve a logical and related consequence (not pain). Any disciplinary action done in anger (and using a pain-based logic) will create less function in the room and drag us down the continuum toward 4-Style management.

When we experience anger it seems determined by the situation and inevitable. Actually, we have a great deal more control over it than we assume. Moreover, we see that the mechanism in our minds that prompts anger is predictable. The external context itself does not make us angry; it is our thinking regarding it. Events are just events; we can decide how we feel about them, we determine their value.

There are three parts to the anger mechanism, and understanding them can raise our awareness. First, to involve ourselves in anger we take an event out of the larger world context and narrow our focus to that event only. Second, we suppose or assign intentions to the object of our anger. As we examine anger (as well as all other forms of negativity), we recognize a strong relationship between the intentions we assign to others and the degree of harmful thinking that we experience. Third, we need to assume that the "anger just is," rather than see it as the result of something -- one of a thousand thoughts we could have attended to and only one of the many feelings that we could be feeling right then. Figure 16-3 outlines how perceptions relating these three variables translate into dramatically different results in situations that offer the opportunity to get angry.

Figure 16.3: Comparison of Healthy vs. Unhealthy Responses

	Dysfunctional/Unhealthy	Healthy/Functional
Setting the Context	Examine the event within a narrow context. Look at the event and the student in isolation. Let your ego do the talking (or more likely ordering), and let it bring your attention into a narrow, personalized event.	Acknowledge that the student is acting in a larger context. They may be reacting to something we or someone else has done. Open up your awareness and see that this is only one of the hundreds of events and choices going on right now.
Assigning Intentions	Assign the student bad intentions. Tell yourself that the student did what they did for a malicious reason. What they did or said was an attack on you.	Assign the student the appropriate level of unconsciousness. Keep in mind that our job is to be the conscious one in the equation. Assume that the student is doing the best that they can with the level of awareness that they have at this point in their lives. Somewhere in the back of your mind, recall your own level of consciousness at that age, and some of the things that you thought and/or said.
Choosing an Emotional State	Be unconscious and allow your ego's response to the threat take you over. Feel angry. Feel justified in being angry. Run the event over in your mind a few times and work yourself up, until you feel the emotion through your whole body.	Recognize the anger arising in you. Make a choice not to let it "become you." Choose to shift your awareness to something else. Recognize that you choose your emotions by what you choose to attend to. Forgive the student for being a little unconscious today, and move on emotionally.
Practical Considerations	Hold on to the feeling. Allow it to come out in the form of passive aggressiveness or hostility. Feel justified in getting the student back in the form of a put down, or teasing. Wish ill for the student, and put less effort into teaching him/her.	If the student has done something that has violated a class rule or expectation, give him/her a consequence. If not, make an effort to connect with the student when you feel less hurt. If you have something to say to the student, say it assertively using "I" statements and then let it go.
Example Scenario: You have created a lesson that you feel is highly valuable for your students. Early in the lesson, most students are responding well. They are on task and enjoying the lesson. However, one student seems to be disinterested and uncomfortable. You turn to the student and ask them a question and they say, "I'm sorry but I just think this is boring."		
Application to "Boring Comment" Scenario	Immediately narrow your focus and make your whole reality about this one event. Lose track of all the other students or the fact that the student may have a lot of reasons for being disagreeable today. Take the comment personally. Allow your disappointment to take over that the student expressed dislike for something you hold dear. Make it about you and them. Assume that they said this just to offend you and make you angry. Allow your feeling of anger to overwhelm you. Let the anger do the talking. Project onto the whole class your feeling that "they do not deserve your best effort, because you do not deserve to be treated this way." Find ways to get back at the students later in the day (e.g., brainstorm ways to lower their grade). Put less effort into your teaching.	Keep in mind that most students are enjoying the lesson, and it is going fine. Accept that not everyone is going to share your love of this topic. Give the student a break. It is okay that they get bored. Notice your temptation to get angry. Allow it to pass. Shift your focus to "what is important NOW (WIN). Stay positive, or at least internally find the "yes" mindset inside you. Comment to the student publically or privately that it is okay to be bored, but comments like that are not good for the class. You welcome constructive criticism, but that sounded like complaining and was not an effective way to express his/her feelings. Internally, forgive the student for being young and unconscious. Shift your energy back to doing the best job of teaching that you can.

Examining the Need to Be Right

Much of stress and/or problem-making comes from the need to be right. You could counter, "I am the teacher; don't I need to be right?" Yes, certainly, we should know what we are talking about, and be accurate and well informed. We need to be subject experts and a source of good information. In one sense then, we should try to be correct most of the time. We can separate "being right" into two different categories: 1) having good information and helping students arrive at sound, well-informed conclusions; and 2) the ego's need to mentally defend itself from a perceived threat.

A good way to recognize the difference will be in the body. How do we feel as we discuss or defend our position? Are our minds clear and light, our breathing easy and our bodies relaxed? Or do we feel our heart rate increase and the level of adrenalin rise? Do we feel awareness narrow as desire to win the point surges? Think back on situations in which you have articulated views different from others; what were you feeling?

First, consider a scenario in which you are engaged in casual chat with some students and one suggests that the school would be better if it were not so purple. You are confused because the school is clearly beige. You are pretty confident that your senses tell you that the school is not in the least bit purple. Imagine yourself in this situation. How would you feel and react? The student is clearly wrong and you are confident in your knowledge. But it is likely that you would feel little or no defensiveness as you tried to help the student recognize that the school is really beige rather than purple, or as you simple walked away feeling concerned for the student's ability to perceive color accurately. In this case, it is likely that your physiology would remain unchanged, and your awareness would shift quickly to something else.

Then recall a recent situation in which you felt personally challenged, For example, a student or colleague may have disagreed with your opinion or someone took exception with the way that you were doing something (maybe a classroom management strategy). How did you feel? It is likely that you felt adrenalin rise and a great desire to defend your ideas in the strongest terms. Hours later, you were probably still feeling offended, and running your argument over and over in your mind, long after the students had gone home.

In both scenarios, our view of reality was challenged directly. What another said was in direct conflict with our views. In the first scenario there was little if any ego reaction. However, in the second scenario, the ego was likely very involved. As a result, our mental reaction to the comment became personal. Our ego insisted in effect that our very self was under attack; what it hears is, "If I am proven wrong, I will cease to exist." Our ego also tells us that we will feel better when we win the argument (either mentally or actually). While the ego feels very motivated to engage the argument, and tells us that it is a good thing to do, our body is telling us that it is not. The body is the true indicator of the emotional state, and our body is telling us that the need to be right is making us miserable.

If when presented with conflicting information we engage in a rational process of inquiry, we are using our minds. If, on the other hand, we find that hours later we are still fighting the mental argument or defending ourselves, it is evident that our ego is locked in a struggle for survival and we are being taken along for the ride. We are unconscious passengers and our ego has the keys. As Eckhart Tolle (2001) suggests, "Most of the time we are not using our mind at all, it is using us."

To remedy this normal but highly destructive pattern, we need to be intentional about bringing a change to our thinking. First, we will need to become skilled at noticing the feeling of defensiveness. At first this may seem impossible, but over time it gets easier. Second, we want to introduce a healthier set of thoughts when we feel the urge to defend. It may be effective to keep perspective on how small the argument is and how there are so many other matters that could warrant our attention. If our argument is with a student, we might want to bring to mind how much our views have changed since we were their age, and how even experts might disagree on this point. Third, we will want to try to stay in the moment and conscious. As we do, we will be aware of the reaction going on in our body, the tendency for our focus to narrow, and the transparency of the message that our ego is giving us to dig in and win. Finally, get used to not taking yourself or your thoughts so seriously.

Chapter Reflection 16-n: When you are in an especially peaceful state of mind, reflect on the last time that you felt the need to argue or cycle a defensive thought through your mind continuously. Resist the temptation to revisit the argument; instead, just reflect on what you were feeling at the time. What were you defending? What did you fear would happen if you could not convince yourself or the other person that you were right? Why did you NEED to be right?

The ego-driven aspect of any disagreement is often much easier to see in others. The next time you see someone arguing what you believe to be a very small point with great energy (and then having trouble letting go of it later) reflect on the degree to which their need to be right was ego-driven.