

Civilly Speaking

A Curriculum on Civil Discourse

Curriculum by Joel Lurie Grishaver and Ira J. Wise

UNIT 5

Anger

Management



The Covenant Foundation

UNIT 5: Anger Management

Learner's Handout for Grades 6 to 10



1. Watch the segment from President Obama's speech at the 2015 White House Correspondents' Dinner that features Luther, the President's anger translator. Your leader will then ask you to answer the following questions:
 - a. What is the difference between what President Obama says and what Luther says? What is each person trying to communicate?
 - b. What is different about the manner in which each of them speaks?
 - c. What takes place during the final exchange about climate control?
 - d. Is the entire piece entertaining? Is it meaningful? What meaning do you take from it?
 - e. Barack Obama is known for his very even temperament and the fact that he is almost never seen as angry. Keegan-Michael Key (Luther) was not the only comedian to make fun of that reputation. What are your thoughts on the demeanor of Presidents of the United States in general?
 - f. Now look at your own life and your own behavior. What do you think of your own demeanor and that of those around you? How do you and/or should you behave?

2. Ben Zoma says: **Who is wise? One who learns from all people**, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (Psalms 119:99). **Who is mighty? One who conquers their (evil) impulse**, as it says, "slowness to anger is better than a mighty person and the ruler of their spirit than the conqueror of a city." (Proverbs 16:32). **Who is rich? One who is happy with their lot**, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (Psalms 128:2). "You will be happy" in this world, and "it will be well with you" in the world to come. **Who is honored? One who honors other people**, as it says, "For those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise Me will be held in little esteem" (I Samuel 2:30).

בן זומא אומר: איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר: (תהלים קיט, צט) מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיהיה לי. איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר: (משלי טז, לב) טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו, שנאמר: (תהלים קכח, ב) יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד? המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר: (ש"א ב, ל) כי מכבדי אכבד ובני יקלו:

Pirkei Avot 4:1

With your *chavruta* team, study *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 and answer the following questions:

- a. Ben Zoma asks about four kinds of people and tells us how to identify them by their behavior. According to the text, how can we identify someone who is:
 - Wise?
 - Mighty?
 - Rich?
 - Honored?
 - b. The description of each of those traits is based on a proof text from the *Tanakh*. Read each proof text and explain what it teaches us about the kind of person we are discussing.
 - c. Focus on the quality of being mighty and the way we can identify a mighty person. List all the reasons that anger can get in a person's way. Then list all the reasons that anger might be a useful tool. What must be true for anger to be useful?
3. As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת
הַעֲגֹל וּמַחֲלֹת וַיַּחַר אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ
מִיָּדוֹ אֶת הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הַהָר.

Exodus 32:19

- a. Was Moses' anger justified? Why or why not?
- b. How else might Moses have reacted?
- c. Have you ever had a similar experience when you exploded with anger about something? If so, what did that experience feel like for you?
- d. Sforno¹ read this text and made the following comment: "Moses' anger was aroused over the fact that people rejoiced over the damage to *themselves* they had caused. We find something parallel in Jeremiah 11:15; 'for you exult in performing your evil deeds.' At this point, Moses despaired of the people doing *teshuvah* (repenting) before being punished. They were no longer fit to receive the Tablets of the Law (Ten Commandments)." What does Sforno's comment add to the conversation about anger?
- e. Can being angry (and acting while still angry) be a good or useful tactic? Why or why not?
- f. Name some real-world examples of a leader getting angry. How did that leader act? Did they act appropriately? Would you describe that person as mighty?

¹ Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno was an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher, and physician who lived in the 16th century.

UNIT 5: Anger Management

Leader's Guide for Grades 6 to 10

BIG IDEA

Public conversation can become uncivil in many different ways. Our unscientific survey of public rants, social media trolling by public figures, and civil discourse violations suggest that anger is one of the more frequent bases for the kind of behavior we hope a civil, humane society would seek to end. Anger leads to poor decision making, seeing opponents as less than human, and publicly erratic and uncivil behavior. In this lesson, we will explore the role of anger and how Judaism suggests we move beyond it.

SET INDUCTION: 20 Minutes

Introduce the following segment from President Obama's speech at the 2015 White House Correspondents' Dinner, featuring Luther, the President's anger translator. Your introduction should take into account what you know about the experience and knowledge base of the learners.

Explain that this dinner is meant to be both entertaining and meaningful. Tell the learners that most presidents who have spoken there in recent years have attempted to make their speech as funny as it is informative – often more so.

NOTE: Learners of all ages should find this piece funny. Although it does feature a partisan politician, the context is not a serious one. Furthermore, the video contains no implied advocacy for or against any past or current occupants of the Oval Office. If one or more learners do not find the piece funny, try to uncover why they feel that way. Don't let partisan concerns distract from the conversation about anger and its role.

Show the video of "Luther, President Obama's Anger Translator." You can find it at: <http://bit.ly/Luther-Translates>

After showing the clip, discuss the questions from the Learner's Handout (repeated below for the teacher/leader) as a group.

- a. What is the difference between what President Obama says and what Luther says? What is each person trying to communicate?
- b. What is different about the manner in which each of them speaks?
- c. What takes place during the final exchange about climate control?
- d. Is the entire piece entertaining? Is it meaningful? What meaning do you take from it?
- e. Barack Obama is known for his very even temperament and the fact that he is almost never seen as angry. Keegan-Michael Key (Luther) was not the only comedian to make fun of that reputation. What are your thoughts on the demeanor of Presidents of the United States in general?
- f. Now look at your own life and your own behavior. What do you think of your own demeanor and that of those around you? How do you and/or should you behave?

ACTIVITY: 30 Minutes

Chavruta Text Study

We will study the two texts found on the Learner's Handout, *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 and *Exodus* 32:19. In the first text, Ben Zoma, a rabbinical student who died early in the 2nd century C.E., asks about four kinds of people and how to identify them. We are ultimately interested in the "mighty" person who is identified as being slow to anger. The word "mighty" may refer to greatness in general or to a leader in particular. The term in Hebrew, *gibor*, is usually reserved for warriors and kings in most classic contexts.

Divide learners into pairs or triads to explore the two texts using the *chavruta* model. Ask them to answer the questions on the Learner's Handout (repeated below for the teacher/leader).

Pirkei Avot 4:1

1. Ben Zoma asks about four kinds of people and tells us how to identify them by their behavior. According to the text, how can we identify someone who is:
 - Wise?
 - Mighty?
 - Rich?
 - Honored?
2. The description of each of those traits is based on a proof text from the *Tanakh*. Read each proof text and explain what it teaches us about the kind of person we are discussing.
3. Focus on the quality of being mighty and the way we can identify a mighty person. List all the reasons that anger can get in a person's way. Then list all the reasons that anger might be a useful tool. What must be true for anger to be useful?

Exodus 32:19

1. Was Moses' anger justified? Why or why not?
2. How else might Moses have reacted?
3. Have you ever had a similar experience when you exploded with anger about something? If so, what did that experience feel like for you?
4. Sforno² read this text and made the following comment: "Moses' anger was aroused over the fact that people rejoiced over the damage to *themselves* they had caused. We find something parallel in Jeremiah 11:15; 'for you exult in performing your evil deeds.' At this point, Moses despaired of the people doing *teshuvah* (repenting) before being punished. They were no longer fit to receive the Tablets of the Law (Ten Commandments)." What does Sforno's comment add to the conversation about anger?
5. Can being angry (and acting while still angry) be a good or useful tactic? Why or why not?

² Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno was an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher, and physician who lived in the 16th century.

6. Name some real-world examples of a leader getting angry. How did that leader act? Did they act appropriately? Would you describe that person as mighty?

In the final five minutes, bring the group back together for a wrap up. Ask the students the following questions:

1. How does anger help or hinder someone who is considered a leader?
2. *Gibor* can also be translated as strong. Why does it take strength to be slow to anger?

ACTIVITY: 60 Minutes

Profiles in Courage?

The following activity allows the use of personal technology.

A word of caution: Although many students in this age group will have a smartphone, some may not. In some cases, parents have chosen to put off their children having access to the internet in their pocket until a later age; other parents do not feel they can afford to buy a smartphone for their child. If possible, make internet-accessible devices available, rather than relying solely on the learners' own devices.

You may be able to make use of tablets or other internet-enabled devices that your institution owns. You could also invite parents to make devices available for the session. In any case, make conscious choices that will avoid embarrassing students who do not have smartphones.

Be sure that WiFi is available in your learning space. Some devices do not have independent direct access to the internet, while others may incur a data usage charge that may be undesirable. As with all technology issues, check it out thoroughly well before the day you plan to teach the lesson.

1. Equip three teams of learners with internet-enabled devices – ideally at least one for every two teammates. Choose 3 or 4 URLs (internet addresses) to which they will be limited (so that they don't get sidetracked in their web searching). Choose the URLs from well-known news sites. We suggest including sites that lean both left and right, while avoiding ideological extremes.

Following are some suggestions (but by no means limitations):

<i>The New York Times</i>	www.nytimes.com
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	www.wsj.com
<i>CNN</i>	www.cnn.com
<i>Fox News</i>	www.foxnews.com
<i>MSNBC</i>	www.msnbc.com
<i>National Public Radio</i>	www.npr.org

2. Tell the learners that *Profiles in Courage* is a book that was written in 1956 by then-Senator John F. Kennedy. It consists of short biographies that describe acts of bravery and integrity by eight United States Senators who defied the opinions of their party and constituents to do what they felt was right. They suffered severe criticism and losses in popularity because of their actions. Senator Kennedy won the Pulitzer Prize for this book. In addition, his authorship of the book contributed to his being perceived as a viable candidate for the 1960 presidential election.

3. Ask the teams to find stories about leaders. They can be leaders of governments or governmental agencies, political parties, the military, businesses, labor movements, religious organizations or denominations, social movements, schools or universities, or anyone who leads more than a few people. These leaders can come from or live in any part of the world.

The stories need to show these leaders in moments of crisis, pressure, or stress and need to give a clue as to how they responded to those pressures. Some of the leaders might be seen as courageous, like those profiled in Kennedy's book, while others might be seen as not measuring up.

4. Give the teams 12 minutes to find one story on which all members can agree. Ask them to prepare to share a brief profile of the leader. Copy the questions below and give them to each team, telling the learners what to include in their profile.
 - a. Which person did you choose?
 - b. Whom does or did that person lead, and in what context?
 - c. How did this person become a leader? (Did they volunteer? Were they elected, or did they simply fall into a position of leadership?)
 - d. Name three leadership qualities that this person has.
 - e. What crisis did this leader face?
 - f. What stress factors, competing demands, or dire consequences did this person have to consider?
 - g. What choices did the leader have?
 - h. Whom else did this leader involve, impact, or consult in trying to resolve the crisis?
 - i. What did this person do?
 - j. What values did this leader uphold in making their decision/resolving the dilemma?
5. Invite each group to share its profile and its answers to the questions, using the protocol below. Timekeeping is essential.

Protocol

- a. Search one or two news websites to identify someone who is known as a leader and who faced a crisis or pressure situation. The website should include information on how this leader dealt with the situation. (12 minutes)
- b. Answer the questions provided to help you prepare to present your story. (8 minutes)
- c. The first group presents its profile and conclusions, with no interruptions from others. (3 minutes)
- d. Other groups ask clarifying questions to better understand the profile; the presenting group answers. (3 minutes)
- e. Other groups then ask probing questions and debate whether this leader was courageous, and whether he or she managed his or her anger. (7 minutes)

- f. The second group presents its profile and conclusions, with no interruptions from others. (3 minutes)
 - g. Other groups ask clarifying questions to better understand the profile; the presenting group answers. (3 minutes)
 - h. Other groups then ask probing questions and debate whether this leader was courageous, and whether they managed their anger. (7 minutes)
 - i. Third group presents its profile and conclusions, with no interruptions from others. (3 minutes)
 - j. Other groups ask clarifying questions to better understand the profile; the presenting group answers. (3 minutes)
 - k. Other groups ask probing questions and debate whether this leader was courageous, and whether they managed their anger. (7 minutes)
6. The teacher summarizes the conversation and asks learners to share any conclusions they have reached.

UNIT 5: Anger Management

Learner's Handout for Grade 11 to Adult



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 - e. Barack Obama is known for his very even temperament and the fact that he is almost never seen as angry. Keegan-Michael Key (Luther) was not the only comedian to make fun of that reputation. What are your thoughts on the demeanor of Presidents of the United States in general?
 - f. Now look at your own life and your own behavior. What do you think of your own demeanor and that of those around you? How do you and/or should you behave?
2. Ben Zoma says: **Who is wise? One who learns from all people**, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (Psalms 119:99). **Who is mighty? One who conquers their (evil) impulse**, as it says, "slowness to anger is better than a mighty person and the ruler of their spirit than the conqueror of a city." (Proverbs 16:32). **Who is rich? One who is happy with their lot**, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (Psalms 128:2). "You will be happy" in this world, and "it will be well with you" in the world to come. **Who is honored? One who honors other people**, as it says, "For those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise Me will be held in little esteem" (I Samuel 2:30).

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Pirkei Avot 4:1

3. As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּרְא אֶת הַעֲגֹל וּמַחֲלֹת וַיַּחַר אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדוֹ אֶת הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הַהָר.

Exodus 32:19

Sforno³ read this text and made the following comment: “Moses’ anger was aroused over the fact that people rejoiced over the damage to *themselves* they had caused. We find something parallel in Jeremiah 11:15: ‘for you exult in performing your evil deeds.’ At this point, Moses despaired of the people doing *teshuvah* (repenting) before being punished. They were no longer fit to receive the Tablets of the Law (Ten Commandments).” What does Sforno’s comment add to the conversation about anger?

4. Anger is an exceptionally evil tendency and it is proper that one move away from it and adopt the opposite extreme. One should teach oneself not to become angry even over a matter when it seems fitting to be angry. If one should wish to arouse awe in their children and household—or within the community, if one is a communal leader—and wishes to be angry at them to motivate them to return to the proper path, one should present an angry front to them to punish them, but he should be inwardly calm. One should be like one who acts out the part of an angry person but is not actually angry. The sages said, “One who becomes angry is like one who worships idols.”

וְכֵן הַכַּעַס - דְּעָה רָעָה הִיא עַד לְמַאֲד, וְרֵאיוֹ לְאָדָם שִׁיתְרַחֵק מִמֶּנָּה עַד הַקְּצָה הָאַחֵר, וַיִּלְמַד עֲצָמוֹ שְׁלֹא יִכְעַס, וְאִפְלוּ עַל דְּבַר שֶׁרֵאיוֹ לְכַעַס עָלָיו. וְאִם רָצָה לְהַטִּיל אִימָה עַל בְּנָיו וּבְנֵי בֵיתוֹ, אוֹ עַל הַצִּבּוּר אִם הִיָּה פְּרָנָס, וְרָצָה לְכַעַס עַל־יְהוָה כְּדֵי שִׁיִּחְזְרוּ לְמוֹטָב - יִרְאֶה עֲצָמוֹ בְּפָנֵיהֶם שֶׁהוּא בּוֹעֵס, כְּדֵי לִיִּסְרָם, וְתִהְיֶה דַעְתּוֹ מִיִּשְׁבֵּת בֵּינוֹ לְבֵין עֲצָמוֹ, כְּאָדָם שֶׁהוּא מְדַמָּה אִישׁ בְּשַׁעַת כְּעָסוֹ, וְהוּא אֵינוֹ בּוֹעֵס. אָמְרוּ חֻקְמֵי הָרֵאשׁוֹנִים: כֹּל הַכּוֹעֵס - כְּאֵלוֹ עוֹבֵד עֲבוּדָה זָרָה.

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah,
Sefer Maddah, De'ot 2:3*

5. Rabbi Elai said: In three matters a person’s true character is ascertained; in his cup, i.e., his behavior when he drinks; in his pocket, i.e., his conduct in his financial dealings with other people; and in his anger. And some say: A person also reveals his real nature in his laughter.

אָמַר רַבִּי אֵילְעָאִי: בְּשִׁלוֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים אָדָם נִיכָר - בְּכוֹסוֹ וּבְכִיסוֹ וּבְכַעְסוֹ. וְאָמְרוּ לֵיהּ: אַף בְּשַׁחֲקוֹ.

Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 65b

³ Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno was an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher, and physician who lived in the 16th century.



6. We get angry in situations that are unpleasant, that feel unfair, where our goals are blocked, that could have been avoided, and that leave us feeling powerless. This is a recipe for anger. But you can also tell that anger is probably not the only thing we're feeling in these situations. Anger doesn't happen in a vacuum. We can feel angry at the same time that we're scared or sad or feeling a host of other emotions.

Ryan Martin, Psychology Department Chair, University of Wisconsin at Green Bay

UNIT 5: Anger Management

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BIG IDEA

Public conversation can become uncivil in many different ways. Our unscientific survey of public rants, social media trolling by public figures, and civil discourse violations suggest that anger is one of the more frequent bases for the kind of behavior we hope a civil, humane society would seek to end. Anger leads to poor decision making, seeing opponents as less than human, and publicly erratic and uncivil behavior. In this lesson, we will explore the role of anger and how Judaism suggests we move beyond it.

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NOTE: Learners of all ages should find this piece funny. Although it does feature a partisan politician, the context is not a serious one. Furthermore, there is no implied advocacy for or against any past or current occupants of the Oval Office. If one or more learners do not find the piece funny, try to uncover why they feel that way. Don't let partisan concerns distract from the conversation about anger and its role.

Show the video of “Luther, President Obama's Anger Translator.” You can find it at: <http://bit.ly/Luther-Translates>

After showing the clip, discuss the questions from the Learner's Handout (repeated below for the leader/teacher) as a group.

- a. What is the difference between what President Obama says and what Luther says? What is each person trying to communicate?
- b. What is different about the manner in which each of them speaks?
- c. What takes place during the final exchange about climate control?
- d. Is the entire piece entertaining? Is it meaningful? What meaning do you take from it?
- e. Barack Obama is known for his very even temperament and the fact that he is almost never seen as angry. Keegan-Michael Key (Luther) was not the only comedian to make fun of that reputation. What are your thoughts on the demeanor of Presidents of the United States in general?
- f. Now look at your own life and your own behavior. What do you think of your own demeanor and that of those around you? How do you and/or should you behave?

ACTIVITY: 30 Minutes

Chavruta Text Study

We will study texts #2 and #3 from the Learner's Handout, *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 and *Exodus* 32:19. In the first text, Ben Zoma, a rabbinical student who died early in the 2nd century C.E., asks about four kinds of people and how to identify them. We are ultimately interested in the "mighty" person who is identified as being slow to anger. The word "mighty" may refer to greatness in general or to a leader in particular. The term in Hebrew, *gibor*, is usually reserved for warriors and kings in most classic contexts.

Divide learners into pairs or triads to explore the two texts using the *chavruta* model. In presenting these texts, suggest that the *chavruta* groups focus on the impact of anger on leadership.

Given the age of the students, you may not need to provide guiding questions, although you may choose to do so. If you would like to use some, you can take them from the questions provided on the Learner's Handout for Grades 6 to 10 (repeated below). We recommend using some of them to review the *chavruta* work with the whole class.

Pirkei Avot 4:1

1. Ben Zoma asks about four kinds of people and tells us how to identify them by their behavior. According to the text, how can we identify someone who is:
 - Wise?
 - Mighty?
 - Rich?
 - Honored?
2. The description of each of those traits is based on a proof text from the *Tanakh*. Read each proof text and explain what it teaches us about the kind of person we are discussing.
3. Focus on the quality of being mighty and the way we can identify a mighty person. List all the reasons that anger can get in a person's way. Then list all the reasons that anger might be a useful tool. What must be true for anger to be useful?

Exodus 32:19

1. Was Moses' anger justified? Why or why not?
2. How else might Moses have reacted?
3. Have you ever had a similar experience when you exploded with anger about something? If so, what did that experience feel like for you?
4. Can being angry (and acting while still angry) be a good or useful tactic? Why or why not?
5. Name some real-world examples of a leader getting angry. How did that leader act? Did he or she act appropriately? Would you describe that person as mighty?

As a final summary of this activity, ask the learners the following questions:

1. How does anger help or hinder someone who is considered a leader?

2. *Gibor* can also be translated as strong. Why does it take strength to be slow to anger?

ACTIVITY: 30 Minutes

Group Text Study

In this activity, we will study texts #4 and #5 from the Learner's Handout.

As a group, answer the following questions about *Rambam*, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Maddah*, and *De'ot 2:3*:

1. Why should a person fake anger rather than becoming angry?
2. People advise against talking "politics and religion." However, civil discourse involves nothing but politics and religion. Why is this an important text for civil discourse?
3. Why did the rabbis of the Talmud compare anger to idolatry?

Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 65b

1. Do you agree or disagree with the message of this text? Why?
2. In what way is a person's true character revealed in anger?
3. How could this method of revelation be good/bad? Does it have implications for us in our work, relationships, etc.? If so, how?

ACTIVITY: 40 Minutes

Video and Conversation: "Why we get mad – and why it's healthy"

Anger researcher Ryan Martin, Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay, draws from a career studying what makes people mad to explain some of the cognitive processes behind anger. He also explains why a healthy dose of anger can be useful. "Your anger exists in you...because it offered your ancestors, both human and nonhuman, an evolutionary advantage," he says. "[It's] a powerful and healthy force in your life."

The transcript of Martin's TED Talk follows. We suggest you read through it before showing students the video. You can find it at <http://bit.ly/PositiveAnger>. Ask the students the following list of questions and add some of your own.

1. What makes you angry? (Compile a list of the students' responses.)
2. What other emotions do you feel when you are angry?
3. The speaker suggests anger can serve an important and useful purpose. What do you think? In what circumstances is anger appropriate and useful today?
4. What do we need to do in order to make anger work *for* us and not against our own best interests?
5. Give some examples of anger that you have seen in which the anger got the better of the person, leading them to act in ways they or others might regret?

6. Give some examples of anger that you have seen in which the person who was angry was able to channel that anger and accomplish remarkable things.
7. When have you been able to channel *your* anger and accomplish remarkable things? OR When do you wish you had been able to channel *your* anger and accomplish remarkable things?
8. What can you or I do to channel anger? How can we encourage others to do the same?

TRANSCRIPT

Alright, so I want you to imagine that you get a text from a friend, and it reads ... “You will NOT believe what just happened. I’m SO MAD right now!” So you do the dutiful thing as a friend, and you ask for details. And they tell you a story about what happened to them at the gym or at work or on their date last night. And you listen and you try to understand why they’re so mad. Maybe even secretly judge whether or not they should be so mad.

And maybe you even offer some suggestions. Now, in that moment, you are doing essentially what I get to do every day, because I’m an anger researcher, and as an anger researcher, I spend a good part of my professional life -- who am I kidding, also my personal life -- studying why people get mad. I study the types of thoughts they have when they get mad, and I even study what they do when they get mad, whether it’s getting into fights or breaking things, or even yelling at people in all caps on the internet.

And as you can imagine, when people hear I’m an anger researcher, they want to talk to me about their anger, they want to share with me their anger stories. And it’s not because they need a therapist, though that does sometimes happen; it’s really because anger is universal. It’s something we all feel and it’s something they can relate to. We’ve been feeling it since the first few months of life, when we didn’t get what we wanted in our cries of protests, things like, «What do you mean you won’t pick up the rattle, Dad, I want it!»

We feel it throughout our teenage years, as my mom can certainly attest to with me. Sorry, Mom. We feel it to the very end. In fact, anger has been with us at some of the worst moments of our lives. It’s a natural and expected part of our grief. But it’s also been with us in some of the best moments of our lives, with those special occasions like weddings and vacations often marred by these everyday frustrations -- bad weather, travel delays -- that feel horrible in the moment, but then are ultimately forgotten when things go OK.

I have a lot of conversations with people about their anger and it’s through those conversations that I’ve learned that many people, and I bet many people in this room right now, you see anger as a problem. You see the way it interferes in your life, the way it damages relationships, maybe even the ways it’s scary. And while I get all of that, I see anger a little differently. Today, I want to tell you something really important about your anger, and it’s this: anger is a powerful and healthy force in your life. It’s good that you feel it. You need to feel it.

But to understand all that, we actually have to back up and talk about why we get mad in the first place. A lot of this goes back to the work of an anger researcher named Dr. Jerry Deffenbacher, who wrote about this back in 1996 in a book chapter on how to deal with problematic anger. Now, for most of us, and I bet most of you, it feels as simple as this: I get mad when I’m provoked. You hear it in the language people use. They say things like, “It makes me so mad when people drive this slow,” or, “I got mad because she left the milk out again.” Or my favorite, “I don’t have an anger problem -- people just need to stop messing with me.”

Now, in the spirit of better understanding those types of provocations, I ask a lot of people, including my friends and colleagues and even family, “What are the things that really get to you? What makes you mad?” By the way, now is a good time to point out that one of the advantages of being an anger researcher is that I’ve spent more than a decade generating a comprehensive list of all the things that really irritate my colleagues. Just in case I need it.

But their answers are fascinating, because they say things like, “when my sports team loses,” “people who chew too loudly.” That is surprisingly common, by the way. “People who walk too slowly,” that one’s mine. And of course, “roundabouts.” Roundabouts --

I can tell you honestly, there is no rage like roundabout rage.

Sometimes their answers aren’t minor at all. Sometimes they talk about racism and sexism and bullying and environmental destruction -- big, global problems we all face. But sometimes, their answers are very specific, maybe even oddly specific. “That wet line you get across your shirt when you accidentally lean against the counter of a public bathroom.”

Super gross, right?

Or “Flash drives: there’s only two ways to plug them in, so why does it always take me three tries?”

Now whether it’s minor or major, whether it’s general or specific, we can look at these examples and we can tease out some common themes. We get angry in situations that are unpleasant, that feel unfair, where our goals are blocked, that could have been avoided, and that leave us feeling powerless. This is a recipe for anger. But you can also tell that anger is probably not the only thing we’re feeling in these situations. Anger doesn’t happen in a vacuum. We can feel angry at the same time that we’re scared or sad or feeling a host of other emotions.

But here’s the thing: these provocations -- they aren’t making us mad. At least not on their own, and we know that, because if they were, we’d all get angry over the same things, and we don’t. The reasons I get angry are different than the reasons you get angry, so there’s got to be something else going on. What is that something else? Well, we know that what we’re doing and feeling at the moment of that provocation matters. We call this the pre-anger state -- are you hungry, are you tired, are you anxious about something else, are you running late for something? When you’re feeling those things, those provocations feel that much worse. But what matters most is not the provocation, it’s not the pre-anger state, it’s this: it’s how we interpret that provocation; it’s how we make sense of it in our lives.

When something happens to us, we first decide, is this good or bad? Is it fair or unfair, is it blameworthy, is it punishable? That’s primary appraisal; it’s when you evaluate the event itself. We decide what it means in the context of our lives and once we’ve done that, we decide how bad it is. That’s secondary appraisal. We say, “Is this the worst thing that’s ever happened, or can I cope with this?”

Now, to illustrate that, I want you to imagine you are driving somewhere. And before I go any further, I should tell you, if I were an evil genius and I wanted to create a situation that was going to make you mad, that situation would look a lot like driving.

It’s true. You are, by definition, on your way somewhere, so everything that happens -- traffic, other drivers, road construction -- it feels like it’s blocking your goals. There are all these written and unwritten rules of the road, and those rules are routinely violated right in front of you, usually without consequence. And who’s violating those rules? Anonymous others, people you will never see again, making them a very easy target for your wrath.

So you’re driving somewhere, thus teed up to be angry, and the person in front of you is driving well below the speed limit. And it’s frustrating because you can’t really see why they’re driving so slow. That’s primary appraisal. You’ve looked at this and you’ve said it’s bad and it’s blameworthy. But maybe you also

decide it's not that big a deal. You're not in a hurry, doesn't matter. That's secondary appraisal -- you don't get angry.

But now imagine you're on your way to a job interview. What that person is doing, it hasn't changed, right? So primary appraisal doesn't change; still bad, still blameworthy. But your ability to cope with it sure does. Because all of a sudden, you're going to be late to that job interview. All of a sudden, you are not going to get your dream job, the one that was going to give you piles and piles of money.

Somebody else is going to get your dream job and you're going to be broke. You're going to be destitute. Might as well stop now, turn around, move in with your parents.

Why? "Because of this person in front of me. This is not a person; this is a monster."

And this monster is here just to ruin your life.

Now that thought process, it's called catastrophizing, the one where we make the worst of things. And it's one of the primary types of thoughts that we know is associated with chronic anger. But there's a couple of others. Misattributing causation. Angry people tend to put blame where it doesn't belong. Not just on people, but actually inanimate objects as well. And if you think that sounds ridiculous, think about the last time you lost your car keys and you said, "Where did those car keys go?" Because you know they ran off on their own.

They tend to overgeneralize, they use words like "always," "never," "every," "this always happens to me," "I never get what I want," or "I hit every stoplight on the way here today." Demandingness: they put their own needs ahead of the needs of others: "I don't care why this person is driving so slow, they need to speed up or move over so I can get to this job interview." And finally, inflammatory labeling. They call people fools, idiots, monsters, or a whole bunch of things I've been told I'm not allowed to say during this TED Talk.

So for a long time, psychologists have referred to these as cognitive distortions or even irrational beliefs. And yeah, sometimes they are irrational. Maybe even most of the time. But sometimes, these thoughts are totally rational. There is unfairness in the world. There are cruel, selfish people, and it's not only OK to be angry when we're treated poorly, it's right to be angry when we're treated poorly.

If there's one thing I want you to remember from my talk today, it's this: your anger exists in you as an emotion because it offered your ancestors, both human and nonhuman, with an evolutionary advantage. Just as your fear alerts you to danger, your anger alerts you to injustice. It's one of the ways your brain communicates to you that you have had enough. What's more, it energizes you to confront that injustice. Think for a second about the last time you got mad. Your heart rate increased. Your breathing increased; you started to sweat. That's your sympathetic nervous system, otherwise known as your fight-or-flight system, kicking in to offer you the energy you need to respond. And that's just the stuff you noticed. At the same time, your digestive system slowed down so you could conserve energy. That's why your mouth went dry. And your blood vessels dilated to get blood to your extremities. That's why your face went red. It's all part of this complex pattern of physiological experiences that exist today, because they helped your ancestors deal with cruel and unforgiving forces of nature.

And the problem is that the thing your ancestors did to deal with their anger, to physically fight, they are no longer reasonable or appropriate. You can't and you shouldn't swing a club every time you're provoked.

But here's the good news. You are capable of something your nonhuman ancestors weren't capable of. And that is the capacity to regulate your emotions. Even when you want to lash out, you can stop yourself and you can channel that anger into something more productive. So often when we talk about anger, we talk about how to keep from getting angry. We tell people to calm down or relax. We even tell people to let it go. And all of that assumes that anger is bad and that it's wrong to feel it.

But instead, I like to think of anger as a motivator. The same way your thirst motivates you to get a drink of water, the same way your hunger motivates you to get a bite to eat, your anger can motivate you to respond to injustice. Because we don't have to think too hard to find things we should be mad about. When we go back to the beginning, yeah, some of those things, they're silly and not worth getting angry over.

But racism, sexism, bullying, environmental destruction, those things are real, those things are terrible, and the only way to fix them is to get mad first and then channel that anger into fighting back. And you don't have to fight back with aggression or hostility or violence. There are infinite ways that you can express your anger. You can protest, you can write letters to the editor, you can donate to and volunteer for causes, you can create art, you can create literature, you can create poetry and music, you can create a community that cares for one another and does not allow those atrocities to happen.

So, the next time you feel yourself getting angry, instead of trying to turn it off, I hope you'll listen to what that anger is telling you. And then I hope you'll channel it into something positive and productive.

Thank you.



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