

‘Too little’ anger

It’s sometimes assumed in British culture (and many others, for that matter) that being angry is bad or problematic in some way. In fact, we have lots of idioms in English that point towards the potentially explosive, negative aspects of anger (e.g. ‘she was like a bear with a sore head’, ‘don’t bite my head off’ and ‘don’t blow your top’, to mention just a few). Growing up, for a variety of reasons, I thought that experiencing anger – and certainly expressing anger – was a bad thing, something that *I should try not to do*. But what about having too little anger? How could that be a problem? Surely not being angry is a good thing? Well, let’s take a moment to think about this with a thought experiment. Imagine that I could completely remove your capacity to experience anger – so that you could never be angry again. What would life be like? Think in particular about a couple of situations. Imagine that, with no access to anger, someone did something really unpleasant to you, to your child or to someone else you love. Imagine they stole something from you that you cared for deeply, or they cheated you of something that was rightfully yours? If you didn’t have any anger, how would you respond? Would you feel OK not being able to access anger in these situations?

Reasons to be angry

You might have noticed feeling unhappy about the thought of not experiencing anger in the above scenarios. What this may tell you then is that anger is a crucial emotion, one that we would not want to be without, particularly in certain situations. As far as we understand, anger evolved to energise us and help us take action, particularly in the context of other people treating us (or others) unfairly, when we experience a transgression, or are blocked from something that is important to us. It can also help to signal threat to others, and deter them from treating us (or those we care for) in an unfair or harmful way. But we can believe that anger is

a negative, destructive emotion, and this can cause problems in blocking us from learning how to experience and express anger in a helpful, healthy way.

Let's look at an example of someone who struggled with experiencing and expressing anger. Tomas came to therapy initially presenting with high levels of anxiety. In particular, he found himself feeling anxious around people in authority positions, and when others had high expectations or demands of him to do something. This included his boss and colleagues at work, and also family members (particularly his father). Tomas has learned over the years that the best way to prevent himself from feeling anxious and incurring anger and criticism from others, was to avoid doing anything that might upset, disappoint or contradict people. Unfortunately, acting in this passive, submissive way meant that other people often took advantage of him, asking him to do lots of things for them, speaking down to him and taking credit for work that he'd done. Over time, he described feeling tired, low in mood, and 'a bit stressed'. When we first discussed whether Tomas felt angry about the way he was being treated by others, he very quickly denied this: 'No, I'm not an angry person; actually, everyone says that I'm a really nice, gentle person.' We explored his association of anger and being 'not nice', and where this came from (he told me that his Dad was an angry person, who could be cruel and unkind to him and his mum). He also told me that he viewed anger as 'the emotion of bullies', and that it involved 'shouting, screaming and hitting people'. It took some time for Tomas to take a different perspective about anger, recognising that he had learned a skewed version of it from his father's hostility and rage, and that it was unsurprising that as a consequence, he had done what he could to avoid becoming angry in the way his father was. Through building his compassionate mind, he learnt that there was much more to anger than just violence and shouting, and to recognise that it was something he sorely lacked in his life (as he went on to describe, anger was 'like vegetables that don't taste very nice, but are healthy

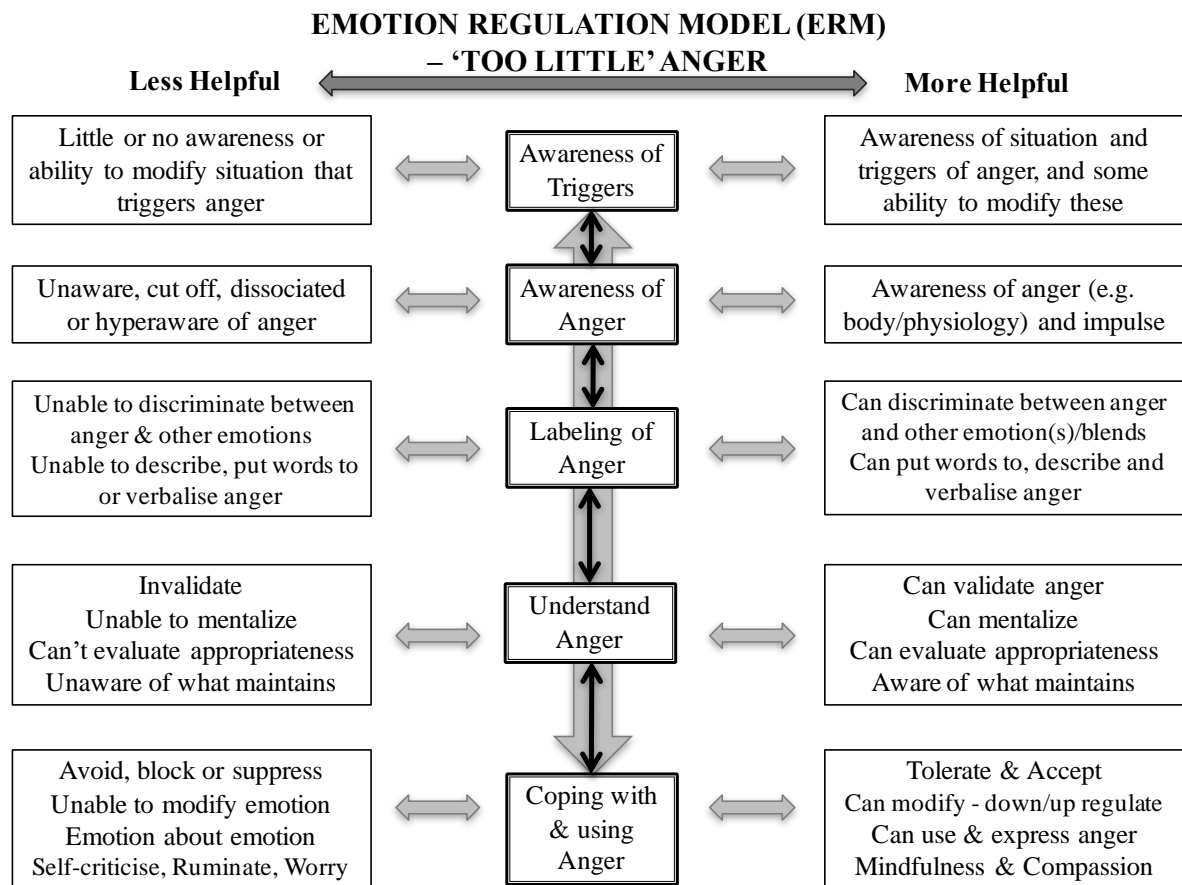
for you to eat'). We then embarked on a programme of helping him to learn how to be open to angry feelings, and use these as a helpful source of assertiveness, dignity and confidence.

How to work with 'too little' anger

There are a number of steps that we can work on together here. It's worth remembering though that there isn't a 'right' amount of anger to experience or express, and that it's likely all of us have different set points to which we're triggered into anger. Rather, the following steps will help you to consider how and why anger may be a difficult emotion for you to experience, and what you can do to begin to feel safer in experiencing and expressing anger in a helpful and balanced way.

Step 1: What is blocking anger? Turning to the emotion regulation model

Take a look at the emotion regulation model below, that we've been working with in the book. In regard to your difficulty with too little anger, which step of the model do you find yourself tracking to the left-hand side of the model? As you do this, it's helpful to hold in mind common contexts or triggers for anger. For example, as a response to a transgression where we or someone else (such as a loved one or vulnerable person, like a child or elderly person), have been mistreated, cruelly or in a way that goes against our societal or cultural code.



When Tomas looked at this, he recognised that his feelings (anxiety, shame) about anger at Step 5 of the model (coping), put a dampener on all of the other steps of the model. Because he had such a strong sense that anger was bad, he had little awareness of which situations or triggers might be associated with it. He was unaware of what it was like when it showed up inside him, was unable to describe and put words to different types of anger, and would invalidate and struggle to comprehend why anger could be understandable, given a particular situation.

Based on which steps of the emotion regulation you feel are most difficult for you, it's useful to return to the chapters in the main book that specifically refer to how to develop skills with that 'step' (Section IV, Chapters 12 to 16). Take your time to go through this, building skills and confidence as you do so. It's also worth noting that sometimes with anger, people can feel quite blocked generally, but then flip into high levels (maybe including aggression) on

rare occasions. If this is the case, it's worth taking your time to work through the emotion regulation model for both 'ends' of this anger spectrum and to explore this chapter (toning anger up in a controlled way), but also to work through the online chapter that covers working with 'too much' anger.

In the remainder of this chapter, we're going to focus on how your compassionate mind can help you learn to practise a wise, balanced version of anger that will help you stand up for yourself and your needs. There are many different ways that this could be done, but we'll just focus on two main ones here.

Step 2: Focusing on anger-inducing situations

Given that anger can be associated with experiences of transgression and mistreatment, we can use this to help you to engage with and experience anger. Take some time to bring to mind scenarios that you associate with transgression – maybe there has been something that you've seen or read in the news recently, or something a politician has said or done. Maybe something at work, for example, a colleague who comes into the office late each day, or seems not to pull their weight for the team. Or maybe it could be a day-to-day situation, like someone jumping the line in a queue (especially if you're British!); or taking a car parking spot that you've patiently been waiting for; or someone promising and then forgetting to do something for you. This could be something that's happened to you (so working from memory), or just general situations that are related to transgression and unfairness. Take some time to think about this, and if it helps, make a few notes on a piece of paper.

Now, spend some time bringing this situation to mind. Try to hold an image of it in your mind's eye. Play the scenario through a few times, a bit like a DVD, slowly replaying each step of what happened. Now, as best as you can do, imagine making contact with a part of you that is angry about what happened. It doesn't matter if you didn't actually feel angry at

the time, or even if you think ‘but I wouldn’t get angry about this’ – the most important thing here is to try and imagine ‘as if’ your angry part was online and reflecting on this situation. Take 30 seconds or so to connect with this part of you, and then from its perspective, think about the following questions:

- Try to notice where in your body you can feel your angry part
- If this angry feeling were to grow and get stronger, where would it move into in the body? Where does its energy want to move in your body?
- If this angry part was in complete control, what would it want to do in this situation (for example, shout, complain, challenge)?
- What would this angry part want to say, given what happened? If it could speak, what would it say?
- What does it want to happen? What would be a good outcome for your angry part, given the situation?

It’s important to take time at this step, exploring your ‘angry part’ for different transgression-related scenarios that might help you to explore and experience anger. Some people find it quite helpful to spend 5 or 10 minutes writing about these situations from the angry part of them, just allowing the pen to flow, documenting thoughts, feelings and reactions to the situation. It’s important to try this exercise with different anger-inducing scenarios, allowing yourself to practise stepping into this angry part of you again and again. Notice what it feels like to start stretching into anger – moving around in it, exploring how it feels in your body to experience it, how it patterns your thinking, attention and urges.

If you find aspects of these exercises difficult, look back again at the emotion regulation model, and see which step might be inhibiting your experience of connecting with anger. If you do identify a step of the emotion regulation model that you’re struggling with, take some

time to turn to the chapter that helps to work through and develop skills in that area (Chapters 12 to 16 of the main book).

Step 3: Anger in the moment – using triggering situations purposefully

In the previous step, we looked at how to get you in touch with anger through transgression-based memories or scenarios, and off the back of these, explore various aspects of your angry self. Once you feel more confident with this, it can be useful to set your intention to experience more anger in the ‘here and now’. Here’s how to practise this.

Given the scenarios that you identified in Step 2 that you associate with anger, it can be useful to bring to mind situations that might emerge in the coming days or weeks that may hold the possibility for you experiencing a transgression, or being mistreated. These could be many things – for example, a team meeting with a colleague who is often rude or disrespectful to you or others, or going to a supermarket where the staff members are often rude and dismissive. It could be on your drive to work, where other motorists are unthoughtful or do not reciprocate your acts of kindness in letting people out first. It might be in walking past your teenager’s messy bedroom after you’ve asked them to clean it for the umpteenth time!

Once you have a couple of scenarios in your mind, it’s time to set your intention. Given your wisdom in why it’s helpful to start experiencing more anger in life, think about how you can remember to be more aware of your feelings during these situations. Now, it may be that you do this, and you don’t notice any anger, which is fine. But the intention here is to be more aware of your feelings – to track them and be mindful of their shape and texture – during situations that *may* be triggering of anger. Some people that I’ve worked with find it helpful to set reminders for this (one person had a note on their phone each week that said ‘angry meeting!’ to remind them to keep an eye out for their feelings).

If you do notice angry feelings ‘in the moment’, it can be useful to make a few notes afterwards. Try to note answers to the following questions:

- Where do you notice anger in your body?
- If this angry feeling were to grow and get stronger, where would it move into in your body? Where does its energy want to move in your body?
- If this angry part was in complete control, what would it want to do in this situation (for example, shout, complain, challenge)?
- What would this angry part want to say, given what happened? If it could speak, what would it say?
- What does it want to happen? What would be a good outcome for your angry part, given the situation?

In the coming weeks, try out this step on a number of situations that may be anger-triggering. See what it feels like to become more familiar with your angry part, experiencing and learning its pattern and shape.

Step 4: Expressing anger and assertiveness training

Whilst getting more in touch with anger is helpful, it’s also important for us to consider what to do with angry feelings when they emerge. In Chapter 16c of the main book, we looked at how to practise expressing emotions and assertiveness skills to help get our needs met. In relation to ‘too little’ anger, it can be useful to spend some time returning to this chapter, exploring the steps that are outlined and using this as a way to start to ‘hear’ your angry part and to consider how it could be expressed. Try not to worry if this feels artificial to start with; like with many things in life (think about learning to drive a car), at first it can feel like we will never be able to master a skill, but with time and practice, you’ll find embodying and

expressing your angry self easier. It might also be worth re-looking at Chapter 16b, which looks at increasing the intensity of emotions, and see if you can use this alongside the work that you've started to do in this chapter.

Key reflections

- Many people find anger a tricky emotion to experience in a healthy and useful way, and in fact, can be blocked to it
- Holding in mind why anger is a valuable emotion can help us see things from a different perspective
- Finding scenarios – both through memory but also with an awareness of triggers upcoming in life – can help to train you how to become more aware of the shape and experience of your angry self
- Practising how to express and be assertive can be a useful way of putting anger into a helpful shape or form