



The Anger Funnel

How to Master the Destructive Emotion

By Dr. Travis Bradberry

"Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured," said Mark Twain.

If you enjoy Twain quotes as much as I do, you appreciate their profound ability to simplify things that are easy to overcomplicate. It's hard to argue with the fact that anger does great damage to the vessel in which it's stored, yet this knowledge isn't enough for most people to keep their anger in check. Just because most of us aren't running around keying cars and chucking our smart phones into the trash doesn't mean we're immune to the ill effects of anger. But if anger is such a destructive emotion for the person in whom it burns, then why do we feel it so often?

Anger is experienced so frequently that it is considered one of the five core emotions, but emotional intelligence black belts know that 99 percent of the time, anger is not really a unique emotional state. Unless you are experiencing anger that enables you to ward off immediate physical harm, your anger is simply a replacement for another, less palatable emotion.

Why Replace an Emotion with Anger?

We live in a society where emotional expression is generally feared and avoided. We're taught to bottle emotions up or avoid them all together. Anger is considered more socially appropriate than other (presumably weaker) emotions such as fear or shame. This makes the experience of anger far more tolerable for most people than what they are really feeling. So, they funnel their fear, shame, regret, apprehension, guilt, embarrassment, sorrow, or other emotions into anger. It's much easier—and far more tolerable—to get angry and point the finger at someone else than it is to sit with a powerful, negative emotion.

A beautiful illustration of the anger funnel at work comes from an event that occurred at a press conference with Cardinals quarterback Derek Anderson after his team had suffered a humiliating loss to the 49ers.

Anderson's laughter on the sidelines while his team was being slaughtered would have registered as only a blip on the public's radar had he shown composure during the post-game interview. There certainly wasn't anything about the reporter's questions to warrant Anderson's angry response. The reporter provided Anderson with ample opportunity to explain his reaction by asking difficult questions carefully and respectfully. At first, Anderson was merely defensive, trying to avoid shame by denying that he had been laughing on the sideline. When the reporter revealed that the laughing had been broadcast on television, Anderson immediately funneled his profound shame and embarrassment into anger. This sequence shows how quickly and easily strong emotions can morph into anger.

It's as if we're all walking around with funnels around our necks, just waiting for our emotions to be poured into them. In Anderson's case, a little self-awareness would have helped him realize he was heading down this path before he exploded, and self-management would have enabled him to tolerate the embarrassment of being caught red-handed, knowing that getting angry would serve

only to make things worse.

Putting Away the Funnel

The question we all need to ask ourselves is not, "Do I funnel my emotions into anger?" Rather, it is, "When, where and how do I funnel my emotions into anger?"

Turning off the anger funnel comes down to educating yourself on the sources of your anger. Emotions are funneled into anger in an instant. It's unrealistic to assume that you'll stop yourself as you are pouring your emotions into the funnel. Instead, you can turn off your anger as soon as it's aroused by asking yourself three simple questions. To illustrate, I've put my own answers to these questions from a recent incident in which I was cut off abruptly by another car on the freeway.

1. Why am I angry?

The answer to this question is usually going to involve some finger-pointing. That's okay; it's part of the process. Usually something or someone around you helped you to begin moving toward anger. In my case, my answer was, "I'm angry because that car almost ran me off the road."

2. How did this incident really make me feel?

As long as you're willing to feel vulnerable, the answer to this question should come pretty easily. In my case, the answer was obvious: fear. Getting cut off made me feel intense fear. The fear was so intense that a fuming, smoke-out-my-ears anger came out the other side of the funnel. I knew it was time to ask myself these three questions, as opposed to giving in to my road rage. My anger was like a big red balloon that was going to pop, but as soon as I realized this anger was a substitute for fear, it sent all the air rushing out of the balloon. I went from shocked that I couldn't get the car in front of me out of my mind to shocked that anger this intense could simply evaporate.

3. Why was this feeling so intolerable?

By the time you get to this question, your anger will have largely subsided. In my case, I felt silly for being so angry and so vulnerable to fear. So I asked myself, why? I've been driving for decades and getting cut off is a regular occurrence. So why did this one get me going? The answer is that I'm now a father. My need to remain safe and be there for my son magnified my fear. What was really intolerable was the thought of not being there for him.

The answer to the third question isn't intended to help your anger subside—at least not this time. This question improves your self-awareness so that you're less likely to use that funnel the next time someone cuts you off.

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