

CHAPTER 8. Inflammatory Thoughts

Behind every angry moment is the belief that my suffering is caused entirely by another personal being with malicious intention towards me, and that personal being is acting unjustly and immorally. If I don't stop the undeserved actions of this adversary, something catastrophic will occur, so simply enduring the suffering is out of the question. In short, anger cannot emerge without the belief in an evil enemy. When I get angry, I am under the spell of the morality tale. In this type of story, there is a villain who is afflicting a victim, and a hero tracks the villain down and brings him to justice, rescuing the victim. Examples of this genre of story are the detective story, the western, medieval morality tales that revolve around a rescue from Satan, and war stories. The villain has no positive characteristics in this type of story—he is simply evil: a Nazi, an oppressive rancher in the western, a criminal mastermind in a detective story, or the devil.

This belief in an enemy is so fundamental to the existence of anger, I will often distort reality in order to sustain my anger. I will force reality into the form of the morality story, even if it does not fit easily into this form. I will transform complex, many-faceted individuals into the simple forms of innocent victims, scheming villains, and heroes, even if the individuals in question do not naturally conform to these roles. For example, in order to sustain anger, I will blind myself to any positive characteristics in the villain. Or I will blind myself to my own responsibility in creating my suffering. Or I will grossly exaggerate the danger of the situation, making it into an emergency that calls for drastic action.

There are several sorts of thought that make anger much more likely to occur. These thoughts are each basic conditions for the creation of anger, and they comprise something like an ecosystem

for anger. There are many elements in an ecosystem that make possible the survival of a horse, for example. There must be water, nitrogen for the soil, oxygen in the air, and edible plant species. If any of these factors were not present, the horse could not survive. Similarly, there are several conditions that play a significant role in the emergence of anger. Six core thoughts make up the ecosystem of anger. These six are the basic building blocks that transform experience into morality tale:

1. Targeting: My discomfort has an external source.
2. Personification: That external source is a personal being, as opposed to an impersonal force of nature.
3. Malevolent Intention: That external personal source which causes discomfort is a being with malevolent intentions towards me.
4. Extremity: During the angering process, reality seems built from extremes—all or nothing, good or bad, safe or dangerous—with no gray areas. For example, in the angering process, the external source of my suffering is entirely evil, without the slightest good in it.
5. Self-Righteousness: I know what is right, and I am right. Whereas it is basic to anger to believe that the other person is an enemy, full of malevolent intention, it is also basic to anger to believe that I am entirely innocent and good, and that I have been treated unjustly.
6. Empowerment: Anger can only emerge if I feel power of some kind—power to have some impact on the behavior of the source of my discomfort.

If any of these six core thoughts is absent or muted, it is difficult or impossible for us to sustain anger. I believe that four of the six thoughts are *necessary conditions* for the development of anger: 1) targeting, 2) personification, 3) self-righteousness, and 4) empowerment. This means that if any one of them is absent, I

cannot build anger. In an ecosystem, if I have all the conditions necessary for life except oxygen, life will not occur. Similarly, the absence of any one of these core thoughts is enough to prevent the development of anger. For instance, if I don't imagine my suffering as caused by something external, I can suffer, but I cannot get angry. If I do not believe that I have power to fight back against the source of discomfort, I may feel terror or devastation, but not anger. If I do not believe I am right in a given situation, I experience guilt or sadness or fear, but not anger.

The remaining two types of thought—malevolent intention and extremity—are *contributing conditions* to the development of anger. This means that they add significantly to anger's growth, but anger can still survive in their absence. I might become angry, for example, at someone who accidentally stepped on my foot. My anger would be significantly greater if I imagined that this person stepped on my foot on purpose, but I might still experience anger if I believed that the act was unintentional. I might also become angry with a person even if I did not believe that he/she was *totally* malevolent—without the presence of extreme thinking. Again, my anger would be significantly greater if I convinced myself that the individual was *totally* evil, that she *never* took my needs into consideration, or that he was *always* rude. But without extreme thinking, anger is still possible.

Let's look more closely at the six core thoughts that cultivate anger.

1. Targeting

Anger always begins with some form of discomfort—sadness, shame, anxiety, or envy. However, these feelings are not sufficient by themselves to produce anger. The first necessary addition is a target: someone or something that I judge is the source of my discomfort. For example, if I am experiencing

anxiety, but have no one I can identify as a cause for it, I am unable to experience anger. But if another driver suddenly cuts me off, I have a presumed cause for my anxiety, and I can then make this into anger at the other driver. My thought process is something like this. “I am feeling anxious, and I hate that. That driver just cut me off, and that caused my anxiety to go up. If I stop that driver from doing things like cutting me off, my anxiety will stop.”

There are times when a person might say, “My anger was mainly towards myself.” This is common in situations of guilt and shame. For example, when a person makes a dumb mistake, he might call himself names, smack himself in the head, give himself long lectures about being more careful, etc. Doesn’t this instance mean that it is possible to get angry without an external target? I don’t think so. I suggest that when I feel anger towards myself, I have divided myself into three parts—1) myself-as-victim, 2) myself-as-culprit, and 3) myself-as-righteous-avenger. In the angry moment, I am identifying with the righteous avenger, contemplating the misdeeds of myself-as-culprit to avenge what has happened to myself-as-victim. I am regarding myself as something other, so there is still a target involved.

A targeting thought presumes an external source of my suffering, and sets the stage for a battle against that source, with the ultimate aim of ending my suffering. It is a thought that makes possible a declaration of war, challenges the warrior in me to don armor and go to battle. However, suffering is not only due to something outside of me. The Buddhists claim that suffering is a basic part of all existence, and would continue even in the absence of some external source. If I fully grasp this—that my suffering is not fundamentally due to the actions of another person—then my susceptibility to anger would reduce dramatically. In that case, I would simply experience my suffering, owning it as a normal part of all experience.

2. Personifying

In a memorable episode the British TV series *Fawlty Towers*, John Cleese plays Mr. Fawlty, who becomes furious with his auto for failing to start while he is dashing about on some desperate hotel errand. He jumps out, points menacingly at the car and shouts, "I've warned you!" then runs off screen and returns with a tree limb, then thrashes the obstinate car. This is funny precisely because we know that an Austin Mini can't have malicious intent, can't be disobedient, can't have planned a breakdown on Mr. Fawlty's busiest day, and can't feel the pain from the punishment he inflicts. Yet in spite of this knowledge, we routinely direct anger at objects.

I suggest that anger is not possible unless I personify. When angry, I assume that my suffering is the result not of impersonal forces of nature, but rather of an external agent or being. Sometimes, it is easy to find an agent who, I presume, is responsible for my pain. When the utility company shuts off my electricity, I can direct my anger towards the indifferent employee on the other end of the telephone line. But when there is no obvious being towards which I can direct my fury, I will assemble one in imagination, because without a personal source, there can be no anger. When I bump my head on the pipe in the basement and instinctively hit the pipe, I am behaving on the assumption that the pipe intentionally hit my head and caused me pain, and that it is capable of feeling pain when I hit it. It is impossible to get angry at an inanimate object, *unless I make it into a being capable of malevolent intention towards me, able to feel pain, and able to change its behavior in response to my anger.* An object is just an object, without feelings, intentions, or sense perceptions.

In the study of religions, the belief that inanimate objects have a soul is called *animism*. In traditional societies, for example, people may believe that the wind and trees are beings with intentions, emotions, and personalities. We generally regard

ourselves as beyond these primitive beliefs: we know that rocks and mountains are objects and not persons. However, whenever we feel anger towards an object, we inevitably revert to animistic beliefs.

3. Malevolent Intention

If I imagine that another person has entirely positive intentions towards me, it is virtually impossible to get angry. That is obvious—it would make no sense to be angry towards someone who, I imagined, cares for me, loves me, and admires me. It is difficult to sustain anger if I imagine that another person has mixed intentions—that they are partly positive and partly negative towards me. That might cause me confusion, “cognitive dissonance.” However, if I convince myself that a person’s intentions are malicious towards me or towards a loved one, then I can easily sustain anger.

It is most easy to sustain anger with offenses that I judge to be intentional: sins of commission. It is still possible to become angry at sins of omission—if I imagine that a person caused my suffering unintentionally: stepped on my toe by accident, or unwittingly paid too little of the restaurant bill. In these situations, the anger arises due to the person’s lack of vigilance and care. The anger is significantly amplified if I imagine that the suffering was caused intentionally, however. Anger is a defensive emotion, and surfaces in order to go to war, to engage an enemy.

4. Extremity

When I experience suffering, and believe that my suffering is caused by an external being with malevolent intention towards me, I can exacerbate the anger by thinking in terms of extremes: always or never, all or nothing, *totally* your fault, *complete* jerk. When we think in an all-or-nothing way, there is no middle ground. A person either loves me or despises me, I either succeed or I fail, I’m either at the top of the mountain or lying miserably at

the bottom. We have difficulty seeing ourselves or others in between, have eyes that cannot perceive the gray tones between the white and the black.

In reality, in most aspects of life, there are many degrees of difference between things. On a scale of one to ten, she might love me at level five. I may not have gotten a perfect grade on the exam, but I didn't get a zero, either. The world is a world of mixtures, gradations, betweenness, nuances, and degrees. If I see it in this way, I am much less prone to the sort of thinking that sees good and evil, black-hatted enemies, and hostile acts. If I think in terms of gradations, I can see a small amount of positive potential within every negative act or word.

As in the case of Malevolent Intention, it is still possible to sustain anger in the absence of extreme thinking. If I see things in terms of grays and gradations, however, the anger is generally moderate—proportionate to the situation, not exaggerated. Extreme thinking takes a number of different forms: a) Blaming, b) Catastrophizing, or exaggerating the dangerous consequences of an action, and c) Labeling.

a. Blaming

A blaming thought attributes 100% of the fault to one person when there is some problem. It finds a single, simple cause for every experience of discomfort. Let's say I am walking down the aisle of a bus and trip over a man's foot, causing me to fall. I might quickly generate anger towards the man whose foot was in the aisle. However, if I examine this situation with some care, the causes of my falling are in fact multiple. While I was walking down the aisle, a friend waved at me from the back of the bus, indicating that there was a vacant seat. If the friend had not waved just then, I might have noticed the foot in the aisle, and I wouldn't have tripped. So the friend is a partial cause of my fall. I could have easily taken a seat closer to the front of the bus, rather than

walk back towards my friend. I could have also decided to watch the aisle more carefully as I made my way to the back. Therefore I am partly responsible for my fall. The bus driver had pulled away from the curb before I reached my seat, and the lurching movement of the bus made me more unsteady while I walked, so the bus driver bears partial responsibility for my fall. I was carrying a bag of groceries that my wife had asked me to purchase, and the bag partially obstructed my view of the floor of the bus. So my wife is a partial cause of my fall. The designers of the bus made the decision to squeeze two extra seats on the bus in order to allow for more passengers—an important economic factor when the bus company purchased the buses in their fleet. As a result of these decisions, it is often difficult for tall people to sit comfortably on the bus without putting a foot in the aisle. So the bus designers and the transit company that purchased the bus are partially responsible for my fall. My bank turned me down when I applied for an auto loan, and if I had been driving my new car, I would not have been riding the bus that day, and would not have fallen. So my bank, and the Federal Reserve which establishes the interest rates that the banks pass onto customers, were the partial causes of my fall.

This judicious inquiry into the causes of my fall very quickly becomes a wide net, a net which may eventually include the founding fathers of America, the inventors of the internal combustion engine, and the personal deity (if there is one) who decided that the universe would be improved by the inclusion of the force of gravity. After my fall, I whirled around and directed my anger on that poor man with the foot in the aisle. If I imagine that I had whirled around and had instead seen the vast assembly of persons and forces, numbering in the thousands or millions, which had collaborated to cause my fall, I doubt whether I could have sustained anger at such an enormous crowd.

When I get angry, I attribute blame for my discomfort in a quick, crude way—oversimplifying the situation drastically. I only see those things or persons that are in the foreground, and the larger causal matrix remains entirely invisible to me.

The Blame-Game takes aim, then shames someone else. It is negative, focused on the past, either-or, and looks outward for the source of problems. An alternative to blaming thinking is responsibility thinking. Responsibility thinking is a different way of attributing cause when there is a problem. In Figure 28, an alternative to blaming thinking is responsibility thinking. Responsibility thinking is a different way of attributing cause when there is a problem. In Figure 28, two people are carrying the weight of the problem, and the weight is distributed to both. We have no way of knowing if the weight is distributed exactly equally, but that is not the point. One person may be 55% responsible, the other 45%, but each has some role in the problem. Responsibility thinking does not get caught in the past. It glances at the past as one would glance in the rear-view mirror, but is focused primarily on the future. It is positive, not negative: it feels bad to say I'm to *blame*, but good to say I'm *responsible*.

b. Catastrophizing

One core belief at the root of anger is the belief that something *matters*. If I believe that the offense, slight, or discomfort is insignificant, it is easy to let it pass. "No big deal--it's a small thing." But if I convince myself that the event is of great and lasting consequence, I can easily create anger. I can declare war on whomever is the source of the offense.

Chicken Little ran around the chicken coop, shouting to all who would listen that the sky was falling. She was *catastrophizing*, making molehills into mountains. This is a way of thinking big, and it excites anger because it makes our emergency signals light up, suggests that we need to respond *right now* to a situation because it is a disaster in the making. This style of thinking

emerges from anxiety. By catastrophizing, a man can easily convince himself that his wife is planning to leave him if she is only suggesting that she spend some time every week with her girl friends. One can convince oneself that one must act quickly and decisively to correct a child's misbehaviors, because unless one acts promptly the child may become a drug abuser or a criminal. If one catastrophizes frequently, it is important to practice observing things dispassionately as they are, and not making hypotheses about where these things might eventually lead.

c. Labeling

Labeling is a type of extreme thinking that involves seeing a person as a Nothing-But. Each person is a mixture of many characteristics: In Figure, Person A has a sense of humor, is a worker, is loyal to friends, and is at times kind and courageous. He or she also has negative characteristics we could refer to as his or her *shadow*. Person B has the same mixture of characteristics.

Usually, when a person acts negatively towards another, this negative can be placed in the context of the other, more positive characteristics the person possesses, and no severe damage is done to the relationship. If we were friends and you shouted at me, I might simply say, "He's having a bad day," and that would be the end. At times, however, a negative deed or word can cause me to label the other person as "nothing but" a jerk, idiot, or something more colorful. When I do this, I am placing a negative label on the person and losing sight of all their other diverse characteristics.

The labeling process can become a problem in a relationship, because after I label someone, *I entitle myself to act towards him or her as one may act towards a jerk, idiot*. As long as the label is in place, my license to act negatively is in place, so I can become the source of a stream of negative, hostile, suspicious actions. If the other person attaches a label to me in response to the stream of negative actions, we may develop a *shadow-dominated relationship*. The other person entitles himself to act in a

consistently negative way towards me as long as his label for me is in place. I see only his shadow, and he sees only mine. Labeling is central to racism, classism, and sexism, and is the basis for the process of enemy-formation, which precedes any war.

Changing a shadow-dominated relationship is very difficult. It always involves breaking down the labeling process by recalling the positive aspects of the other person, reminding oneself that the other person is loyal to his friends, loves her family, or is kind to animals—whatever we can recall that might be positive. Gradually the rigid walls surrounding the shadow-dominated relationship can be dissolved, and the warfare can calm down.

5. Self-Righteousness

a. Shoulds

There is no angry event that is untouched by a sense of self-righteousness. At the time of the anger, a person believes God (or some other supreme power) endows him or her with the duties of a prophet to judge the world and decide what is right and wrong. He is Moses, carrying the tablets, castigating the children of Israel. Even a man who goes to work with his guns and kills several fellow employees believes at the moment of anger that he is justified. It may be that after the fact, when he reflects on his actions, he may reconsider the virtue of his act: “Perhaps I was too harsh.” Shoulds are invariably a dangerous addition to the chemistry of anger.

Does this mean that one needs to give up all his values? Of course not. Even if this were desirable, it would not be possible. Every instant of our lives we make choices: Should I go to work this morning? Should I eat a low-fat lunch or binge on burgers and fries? Should I watch a sitcom or the game? We are valuing creatures, and values are an ever-present aspect of every waking moment. But it is helpful to re-state these values not in the high

moral language of Moses descending from the mountaintop, but in the language of *preferences*. Rather than thinking, “No woman should ever yell at her husband” or some such pronouncement, it is less anger-provoking to think, “I would *prefer* she not shout at me.” This allows one to hold onto values without tacitly assuming that these ideas are right and should be followed by all.

b. Avenging

At its best, anger is a search for justice, righting what is wrong. One primitive idea of justice is contained in the motto, “Don’t get mad, get even.” This contains the seeds of dangerous escalation, because it basically says that one should not express one’s anger verbally, one should instead act it out in a search for justice. Anger places itself in the position of the avenging angel, defending my rights and the rights of those I love.

What is wrong with justice? Nothing, except this sort of thinking doesn’t produce justice; it produces revenge and dangerous intensification of conflict. Imagine a situation where two people each have the idea that one needs to “get even” for every insult or injury. In that case, we would have a recipe for rapid escalation, World War III breaking out in our midst. This is playground morality that needs to be eliminated if we are to slow the escalation process in arguments.

6. Empowerment

If I don’t believe that I have power, anger is an impossibility. The seat of anger in the brain is the amygdala, which is something like a primitive computer whose role it is to make a simple decision in regard to threat: do I kill it, or do I run away? Fight or flight? The amygdala is center of anger, but is also the center of anxiety. Anger and anxiety represent opposite ways of responding to threat. Anxiety represents a retreat from the threat, while anger impels us towards it, with the goal of stopping the threat. In the

evolution of our species, the amygdala has had an essential role to play in survival. The lightning-fast judgment it makes involves sizing up the threat, assessing its power, assessing my own power relative to it, and assessing the possibilities for escape. Anger can only occur if I assess that I have some power to stop or change the threatening behavior.

When I am stopped by a state police officer, I am not very likely to show my anger, even though I may judge that the officer treated me unfairly in choosing me from all the drivers that were hurtling down the highway. I may also judge that his manner was rude, that he was picky and sarcastic. In spite of these judgments, I am likely to be on my best behavior, to hand him my license and registration and follow instructions carefully. The reason for this submissive behavior is my quick judgment that I am less powerful than he is.

I am most likely to show anger in situations where I judge I have the greatest power. At work, I may be quiet, cooperative, and obedient to policies I may believe are unreasonable and demeaning. I may show anger only rarely in that part of my life, because the consequence of anger may be the loss of my job. At home, however, where I judge that I am more powerful relative to family members, I am much more likely to show anger. I may erupt towards my dog in a way I would never do towards a co-worker, because I judge that I my power is greater than my dog's.

Anger is a heroic emotion. When angry, I anoint myself as hero, battling the enemy who threatens a loved one or me. During anger I use whatever power I can to stop the threat, to achieve justice and righteousness. I am Achilles at Troy in the heat of the battle, possessing a divine energy that makes me invulnerable to pain and fear. It is common in traditional societies for warriors to believe that they assume divine power during battle. The word *berserk* comes from the same etymological root as the word *bear*. During the late Roman period in Europe, there was a class of

German warriors called Berserkers, who were highly prized in warfare because of their unique ferocity. They believed that during battle, they were taken over by the divine power of the bear, and were able to fight with a bearlike fury, which made them invulnerable to enemy weapons. During any angry incident, I am possessed by a similar aura of heroic power.

At the core of the Empowerment thought is the presumption that the main route to power is through anger. During anger, I believe that the maintenance of my power is dependent on my asserting myself over the threat. I believe that I must undertake this battle to maintain dominance and control in my life. However, as we have seen during the discussion about vicious circles, the belief that anger produces power is largely a delusion. The power that anger brings is temporary at best. The route to true power is a much more gradual building process, not the adrenaline-bathed tidal wave of energy that anger produces.

***Inflammatory Thoughts Assignment:** Look through the entries on the anger record, and note the types of inflammatory thought that tend to be common in the Thoughts column. Write down abbreviations for the types of thoughts you notice—MR for mind-reading, AN for all-or-nothing, etc.*