

## Healthy Anger - What is it? Why have it?



*Please note the author of this blog post, Dr. Walter Matweychuk, condemns, in the strongest possible terms, all acts of police brutality against the African American community and all people of color. He is entirely in favor of nonviolent, peaceful protest aimed at honoring the memory of Mr. George Floyd. Dr. Matweychuk sincerely hopes that Mr. Floyd's death will lead to the immediate end of police brutality directed towards the African American community. He strongly favors equal justice for all.*

***The angry man will defeat himself in battle as well as in life.  
- Samurai Maxim***

***To move the world, we must first move ourselves. – Socrates***

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, REBT, is a philosophy of personal power. A rational attitude in REBT is one that helps you get more of what you want and less of what you dislike, with all your competing goals and values in mind. When a great injustice occurs, we can choose between a healthy angry response or an unhealthy angry response. The English language does not give us a useful word to distinguish between a healthy state of anger and an unhealthy one. Nevertheless, these two states are quite distinct. I will differentiate between them by referring to "healthy anger" vs. "unhealthy anger."

Over the millennium, many wise observers have commented on the self-defeating aspects of unhealthy anger. For example, the Buddha said, *"You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger."* The ancient Greek dramatist Euripides wrote, *"Those whom God wishes to destroy, he first makes angry."* Unhealthy anger is deceptive. It can occur in a flash and seems both useful and justified. It can lead to poor judgment, hurtful name-calling, impulsive self-defeating behavior, and sadly violence. Even when unhealthy anger produces some short-term benefits, it almost always carries with it a longer-term cost. This cost may very well be quite high. Closer examination of unhealthy anger reveals that the overall utility for productive change is less likely than that of healthy anger.

Healthy anger like unhealthy anger is a call to action. It is a recognition that something has occurred that goes against our highest values, most important rules, and cherished goals. It can happen quite quickly and very intensely. Sometimes healthy anger results immediately after a person takes notice of an

unacted upon flash of unhealthy anger and actively transforms it into healthy anger. Healthy anger motivates us to take steps to make right a wrong. Healthy anger leads to prudent action as it does not compel one to act immediately or in a shortsighted way. It often includes a commitment to engage in activities to accomplish one's goal or correct a social injustice. It can and will be a powerful emotion when another party's deplorable actions have produced a great injustice or undermined one of our significant values. Healthy anger does not possess the quality of hostility towards a person or a group of people, as in unhealthy anger. Healthy anger is focused on the transgression and is firmly opposed to and targeted at this transgression. Healthy anger can lead to violence, but such violence is limited to self-defense. When violence in self-defense is the only option, it is always in strict proportion to what is sufficient for warding off the attack.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy teaches children and adults how to transform unhealthy anger into healthy anger. Unfortunately, we do not teach our children Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. The result is that most people do not know how to opt for healthy anger in the face of transgressions. People naturally opt for either suppression of unhealthy anger for fear of its consequences, or expression of it resulting in self-defeating verbal or physical aggression. Paragons of healthy anger include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. With this said, I will now address the difference in attitudes that underpin healthy and unhealthy anger.

Unhealthy anger results from holding our most important goals and values rigidly. An example might be, *"I strongly value justice for all people, and this absolutely must exist."* Frequently, this excellent value held rigidly unwittingly leads to an extreme attitude such as *"...and injustice is unbearable and intolerable."* Unhealthy anger almost always gives rise to an extreme derivative attitude that is a global rating of the perpetrator of the transgression as a wholly bad or evil person.

The emotion of healthy anger results from holding our most important goals and values, both firmly and flexibly. For example, *"I strongly value justice for all people, but unfortunately, it is obvious this does not exist right now nor unfortunately must it. Very sadly, the conditions are not in place, requiring justice for all. However, because I hold justice for all to be essential, I will immediately strive to do all I can do to change this state of injustice!"* People need to acknowledge adversity and live through it to implement the change they want to accomplish and healthy anger allows for this to occur.

Frequently, a flexible attitude sets the stage for a non-extreme attitude, focusing one's judgment at the transgressor's unjust action. Here the individual recognizes the egregious crime and their ability to withstand the burden of it only for as long as it takes to bring about the critical and necessary changes to right the wrong so that it never happens again. An example would be *"Injustice is deplorable and extremely important to eradicate immediately. I can withstand this burden for as long as I need to bring about justice. Not acknowledging I can withstand it while I need to will serve to render me less able to bring about important change. I can and will carry this burden to eradicate injustice now. I commit to being a tireless agent of change in the service of justice for all!"* Healthy anger does not give rise to an extreme derivative attitude that globally rates the perpetrator of the

transgression as wholly bad as a person. *The author deems it essential for the reader to note what follows.* The individual holding a non-extreme attitude will continue to condemn the perpetrator's actions and continues to hold him entirely responsible for the deplorable transgression or crime. Never in REBT philosophy is an egregious action excused by avoiding rating globally the perpetrator of that action. REBT always emphasizes personal responsibility for one's actions, the emotions that mainly lead to those actions, and their consequences.

Although it may not be evident at first glance, attitudes that give rise to healthy anger are empirically correct. They also are internally logical and, most importantly, exceptionally useful in the production of social change. These attitudes can be adopted, but they require thoughtful training and practice by the individual who experiences unhealthy anger. Adopting attitudes leading to healthy anger is very challenging as we face transgressions and crimes of the worst kind known to humanity. Despite this difficult emotional challenge, perhaps it is at these very times that the benefits of healthy anger are the greatest while the consequences of unhealthy anger are the most painful and self-defeating.

**Conclusion and Summary:** REBT helps people learn how to transform counterproductive, unhealthy anger into productive, healthy anger. Doing so will enable the individual to achieve their long-term goals and values more effectively. Disciplining oneself to adopt and maintain attitudes that underpin healthy anger is not quickly developed and requires committed practice. The benefits of healthy anger can be enormously beneficial to oneself and society. In contrast, the dangers of unhealthy anger can be equally self and other harming.

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### ***REBT Works When You Work It!***

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