

**“Anger, Imagination and EMDR” presentation: EMDR Europe, June, '08: EMDR Canada, May, '09
Just because You Could, Doesn't Mean You Would
All about Anger**

Katie O'Shea, MS, LMHC

My anger education started in childhood, as it does for most folks. Dad had the classic Irish temper. He wasn't abusive but he'd frequently blow up about minor things and “be mad” every Sunday afternoon before he went away to work. Mom never got angry, even though she was half Irish too. Expressions of anger, like the three of us girls openly fighting with each other, were never tolerated. Seeing only excessive and destructive forms of anger – no healthy release of irritation or frustration – probably resulted in my developing an ulcer during my senior year of college. Thank goodness I chose psychology and learned that tension in my stomach meant something was bothering me. If I took a deep breath and decided what to do about the problem, my stomach relaxed. It took less than a year for my ulcer to go away, allowing me to eat whatever spicy foods I want. Thank goodness! My ulcer diet was more restrictive than my sister's diabetic diet. That was back in 1976. It took twenty more years and the opportunity to observe clients processing their anger with EMDR to really understand how anger works, discover how to clear the misinformation from my own anger circuitry ((yours too) and realize our imaginations can automatically call our attention to harm and release anger nondestructively if we don't actually need to defend ourselves or others. Here's what I've learned.

Anger is one of our Basic Biological Circuits

Jaak Panksepp, in his book, *Affective Neuroscience* (1998), explains why we organize our experiences via emotion. Summarizing recent brain research, he writes: “Various environmental challenges were so persistent during brain evolution that psychobehavioral tendencies to respond to such challenges have been encoded as emotional neural circuits within the mammalian brain (page 50). My shorthand version is “Emotions call attention to what's important and accelerate learning.”

Panksepp identified four Basic subcortical circuits. Anger is one of them. His description follows.

“The RAGE System mediates anger. RAGE is aroused by frustration and attempts to curtail an animal's freedom of action. It has long been known that one can enrage both animals and humans by stimulating very specific parts of the brain, which parallels the trajectory of the FEAR system. This system not only helps animals defend themselves by arousing fear in their opponents but also energizes behavior when an animal is irritated or restrained. Human anger may get much of it's psychic energy from this brain system.”

Our RAGE Circuit is part of the whole biological system devoted to activating our response to stress. You may have learned about your Sympathetic Nervous System in Health or Biology class. It was first identified by Walter Cannon, Chairman of the Department of Physiology at Harvard Medical School. In 1915, he coined the term “*fight or flight*” to describe an animal's response to threats. Anger gives us the energy to *fight*. Fear provides the energy to *flee*.

Holding Anger in, Hurts Our Bodies

Back when I had ulcers, I didn't know about dissociation. I didn't realize I was disconnecting from feelings that were built into my biological system to call attention to something threatening and provide whatever level of energy I needed to do what needed to be done. If that energy can't be released in our behavior or in our imaginations, it stays in our bodies and causes problems. When it's not safe to release anger energy, physical problems such as high blood pressure, fibromyalgia, hemorrhoids, skin disorders, even some cancers may be the result. Anger directed toward yourself can cause hurtful behaviors such as nail biting, trichotillomania, and cutting or injuring oneself in some other way.

Imagination and Dream Sleep Release Anger Nondestructively

I spent a lot of years trying to find safe and effective ways for clients to release angry feelings, originally because I was working with wife batterers, doing anger management groups, and later with Vietnam veterans. Believe me, I've tried them all: pillows, punching bags, empty chairs and other Gestalt techniques, to name a few. Then, with EMDR reprocessing, I saw the spontaneous release of anger, even rage, in the imagination! It was amazing! And fast! But it only happened when clients weren't afraid of their anger and didn't believe it had to be destructive. As I watched how it worked, I began thinking that imagery, during dream sleep and spontaneous imagination, might be built into our systems as a way to acknowledge how harmful something is, yet release that anger without causing additional harm. Apparently, we need to feel physically capable of

protecting ourselves and/or others. Imagination and dreams seem to lock this awareness into the body so we actually could, if we needed to in the future. Just *thinking* we could doesn't seem sufficient.

What people typically imagine can't be acted out in my office. In fact, they usually don't even *want* to do what they imagine themselves doing, even though, at the moment, they may *feel* like doing it. The images don't reflect intent. They fall into two categories:

1. How big, strong, mad they needed to be to protect themselves or others.
2. What it would take to get through to the person(s) who caused the harm.

Becoming big enough, strong enough, mad enough seems to be necessary if a person hasn't been able to be self-protective. These, sometimes violent images, often persist for a while, in response to current frustrating situations, as we clear feelings of vulnerability that typically go back to childhood. They may look real or be cartoon-like. In addition to reprocessing past trauma, self-defense classes are sometimes needed to provide the confidence necessary to know "I can fight back if I need to." Talking back or speaking up then become more typical than aggressive images.

Once we realize we have the capability to protect ourselves and others, and no longer fear our anger, the imagination seems to shift to showing us what would be necessary to have an effect on the person doing the harm. The fact that we're imagining it rather than doing it means we've chosen not to, for some valid reason, and it happens automatically. The first time I noticed my imagination was working this way, I was driving home on the most lethal highway in Washington state. A car pulled out of the on-coming lane to pass where there wasn't enough room and barely missed hitting me. The fellow driving just cruised on by, without seeming to be disturbed by what he's almost caused. I immediately had an image of him having to swerve out of the way because someone did the same thing to him, then hitting a tree. As I continued to notice what came to mind in situations where it wasn't wise or possible to say or do anything, I realized my mind was automatically assessing what would be necessary to make those who were frustrating me, realize what they'd done. My most frequent image, when doing or saying something would only make the situation worse, is lifting the frustrating person (no matter how big they are) up off the floor, shaking them and saying, "Don't you realize what you're doing?"

Releasing Anger Leads Directly to "Compassion with Protection"

What was even more amazing than watching anger be so easily released with EMDR< was seeing that afterwards, there was an automatic shift to understanding, even compassion, for whomever had caused the harm. This usually became apparent after the next set of eye movements. I would hear statements like, "I wonder what happened to him to make him act that way." As I saw this happen over and over, it became clear that allowing anger to be felt and released resulted in greater compassion and empathy, instead of vengeance or even resentment. I can now provide the reassurance that it's safe to feel anger in my office because I'll make sure we continue processing until we get to "Compassion with Protection." I call it that because it differs from the compassion for others that motivates us to care for them at risk to ourselves. When we reach this point, blood is available to our cortex (no longer rushing to our arms and shoulders to fight back). We then become capable of creatively finding ways to protect ourselves, even while caring for others. This is especially important if family members haven't changed their abusive or neglectful behavior. We still need to be good sons and daughters, even when our parent's haven't been able to become the parents we needed. People often refer to this as "forgiveness." Once we've let our system register how harmful it was as see we have the power to protect ourselves or others now, we can safely feel compassion for those who caused us harm. Certainly, this has global implications as well.

It's also been comforting to see that angry images can't result in some kind of energetic harm to others unless there is actual intent to harm them.

When Anger is Misdirected, It Boomerangs Back

Anger has to be directed toward the actual (usually original) cause of the harm or it will just wipe out whoever triggers it and boomerang back, ready to be triggered again. A good example of this is "road rage." We aren't made to be continually frustrated by the same things. If we get angry over and over about the dangerous ways people drive, we're probably mad at somebody else. Emotions exist to call our attention to a problem. Once they've been felt and released, we know the problem exists and don't need to waste energy on it. We just take firm action, if we can. If not, we accept it and try to avoid similar circumstances. So actually, the more we let our anger call attention to harm, feel it and do what we can about life's problems, the less often we'll need it. Anger can actually become an investment in future peace of mind.

Intensity Matters

In 1976, I learned from a wonderful psychologist named Paul Hauck, that anger is like water. Just as water changes form when it reaches certain temperatures, anger looks and feels very different when it becomes intense. Using the Subjective Units of Distress Scale (0 = no distress to 10= as strong as it can be) with EMDR, it looks like 5 is the “temperature” at which anger changes form. It becomes something different inside us, but even more important is the effect on the person(s) we’re mad at. Below 5, they can feel their behavior being rejected. Above 5, though, they feel rejected. Most of us know what that’s like because we’ve been on the receiving end ourselves. It doesn’t matter whether we’re exploding or holding it in and burning with resentment: other people can feel it. Anger has the power to destroy relationships. That’s why we want to clear up old anger and be able to release present anger in our imagination when there’s no need for protection. I often suggest to parents that, “If they’re feeling angry above a 5, go into the next room and imagine what you feel like saying or doing to your child. Then, when it drops down to a level at which you can be FIRM, go back and deal with the child’s behavior.” This chart describes how anger changes when it reaches a SUD level of 5.

ANGER										
0	annoyed	irritated	frustrated	5	mad	angry	enraged	10		
CONSTRUCTIVE					DESTRUCTIVE					
EFFECT ON ME WHEN I’M ANGRY:										
My belief: “I want my way.” (a wish or desire					“I have to have my way or I can’t handle it.” (a demand)					
Is a reaction to: harmful behavior					- behavior perceived as threatening, destructive or dangerous					
Provides: energy to try to correct harmful behavior					- energy to defend myself or others, fight back					
EFFECT ON THE PERSON(S) I’M ANGRY AT:										
REJECTS THEIR BEHAVIOR					REJECTS THEM					
Their belief: “My behavior was bad.”					“I’m bad.”		or	“You’re bad.”		
Their reaction: “I did something harmful.” or “I didn’t do anything wrong or harmful.” and “I can change my behavior.”					“I deserve to be punished.” Guilt/Shame Depression		“You deserve to be punished.” Revenge			
Result:					(worst case scenario):					
Self-improvement or Suffer the consequences					Suicide		Homicide			

Beliefs Make a Difference

As the chart above illustrates, beliefs affect intensity. If there's no real threat, but you think there is, anger in an adult is just like a temper tantrum in a child: "I have to have my way or I can't stand it." For fifteen years, particularly doing anger management work, I tried to help people change those beliefs using Cognitive Behavioral methods, but learned that doing so had little effect on their automatic emotional response, particularly when it was intense. With practice, it can have an effect, but requires a lot of time and effort. Finding where you learned to react with anger; or shut your anger down, then reprocessing those experiences is easier, and, in my experience, much more effective. Identifying the beliefs can help find those experiences, though. Until then, you will either over-react or under-react in similar situations.

Anger May Cover More Vulnerable Feelings

Anger can also be like an iceberg – the tip (anger) is obvious, but the biggest part, usually hurt and disappointment, is under the surface. This happens when it's become a way to feel powerful. When bad things happen to us, there's always some aspect that we're powerless to do something about. The best way to learn from those experiences, is to allow ourselves to feel helplessness, so we can identify and accept what we can't change. If we do that first, we'll quickly focus on what we **can** change and get busy doing it. Men, especially, may have been taught they should be able to handle everything and never feel powerless. Letting ourselves feel helpless and vulnerable to the hurtful behavior of others first, actually allows us to see what power we **do** have. Firm action usually follows and has more potential than aggression or a temper tantrum.

Anger Circuits Can Be Reset/Updated

In the spring of 2001, I happened on a way to reset (recalibrate) or clear our emotional circuits and have been using it with clients ever since. I was checking my internal, imaginary "Conference Place" (we don't do "rooms" in rural, northeast Washington), to see if there were any "parts of myself that I wasn't connected to. What I got was an image of a witch crouched in a corner, who reached out with her long fingernails and scratched whoever walked by. Immediately, I realized this must be my anger, which I typically didn't feel or display, but had had a mean statement pop out of my mouth, unbidden, at times. It made sense because of my Dad's temper. Even though he'd never been abusive, I don't want to be like that, so I'd blocked that circuit, that part of myself. As I watched the image, she stood up and the witch costume fell away, to reveal a strong-boned Scandinavian woman standing with her feet firmly planted and looking like she wasn't going to budge. I thought, "Firmness is the healthy outcome of anger. We only need anger to call attention to harm. I can be firm." Then she reached down, picked up the witch costume and hung it on a peg beside the door of my Conference Cabin. I recalled what we taught in Assertiveness classes way back in the late 70s: "If someone is being aggressive toward you, aggression ("my needs are more important than yours") may be your only defense." I concluded, "I can act witchy if I need to, but that's not who I am" and didn't think much of it at the time. This all seemed to be happening automatically, without any conscious attempt to change my behavior.

At the same time, I had a teenage patient who would tolerate other students making fun of him, yet periodically write angry rap songs, and play violent computer games. So I decided to see if his anger could be reset in a similar way. I just asked him, "What does anger look like?" and added bilateral stimulation. He got an image of a rock star strutting around a stage, then taking off his shirt and throwing it into the crowd. In the third and final image he was wearing a muscle shirt. From then on, with additional education about how his imagination could help when he was being taunted, he stopped writing angry music and no longer needed violent games. That was the beginning of my confidence in our body's ability to reset itself when emotions aren't looking the way they're intended to work. Sandra Paulsen renamed it, *Clearing Affective Circuitry* when we presented together at the EMDR International Conference in 2007. She was also the one who introduced me to Jaak Panksepp's work. How delighted I was to learn, in February of 2007, that he'd identified subcortical circuitry in all mammals, explaining why my "resetting" (recalibrating) method worked and identifying the same Protective emotions I'd been resetting since 2001!

There's a Predictable Sequence to Learning from our Experiences

Soon after Francine Shapiro began using her EMDR Protocol for resolving trauma, a consistent sequence became apparent. Correct **Responsibility** had to be assigned before a feeling of **Safety** was reached, and only then could **Choices (Power and Control)** for the future be identified. When I learned this in 1993, I was impressed. Over the previous twelve years I'd developed a group treatment program for sexual abuse victims. My written assignments followed the same sequence, but I couldn't have articulated it so clearly.

EMDR reprocessing was fast enough to make it obvious. We know our bodies respond to a cut or injury with a specific sequence of events: blood flows to the wound to clean it, then clots to close it, white blood cells come to fight infection and so on. It's not surprising that we also have a sequential way to learn from our experiences so we'll have increased protection from future dangers. Describing what happens at each point in the sequence is a whole chapter in itself. What I want to emphasize here is the presence of a healthy, sequential process. If we can trust ourselves to feel what we feel, it will lead to knowledge that's useful for the future, greater protection for ourselves and others, including Compassion for those who caused the harm. The sequence of feelings looks like this when our circuits are clear and we can focus on a threatening experience soon after it occurs. If we wait, parts may be addressed out of order.

Denial → Shame/ Self-Pity → Fear → Anger → Compassion with Protection → Sadness → Relief/Appreciation

We simply need to feel what we need to feel until the feelings release and facts remain. We don't have to do anything with those feelings. All we need to do is "notice them" and "let them be as strong as they need to be." The intensity tells us how important an experience was.

Feelings Become Facts

We can't change what happened. It did. That's a fact. But we don't have to keep feeling upset about it. Once we've learned all we need to learn from the experience, we won't have any upset feelings left. We'll automatically do what is needed now and take whatever precautions are needed in the future. EMDR taught us that.

Using Your Imagination to Release Anger

Imagination works wonderfully when we need to clear unnecessary anxiety, fear, and panic, plus worries about the future. It works equally well for anger and resentment. If an imaginary scene doesn't come to mind as soon as you focus on angry feelings, ask yourself, "What do I feel like doing?" and imagine doing it without judging whether it's okay or not. As soon as the anger is released, other emotions may surface, e.g. compassion, hurt and disappointment, or sadness for what's been lost, what could have been, if things had been different, especially when trauma/neglect have been ongoing. Make sure you keep noticing the feelings until they're gone or replaced by pleasant ones. Adding your own bilateral stimulation e.g. eye movements or alternating taps may accelerate the process even more.

If anger isn't releasing, you haven't gotten back to the roots of what you're feeling. Many people fear angry images, thinking they stimulate and support destructive actions. That only happens when a person is directing anger at someone who isn't responsible for all of it. If there's old anger that needs to be released, it won't go unless it's directed (safely in your imagination) at the person who originally caused the harm. You may need your therapist's help to discover who that is and safely release the feelings.

In Summary...

We need anger to call attention to harm, and to let others know we won't tolerate their threatening behavior. Dog's growl when there's a reason to. It warns others that they will take whatever firm action is necessary. Anger only becomes a problem when it's ignored or suppressed or we've learned it's the only way to feel strong. Hopefully, what I've learned will help you embrace your angry feelings as an important part of our innate ability to protect ourselves and others. When it's not denied or suppressed, and necessary, anger can motivate each of us to do all we can to make our world safe and better.

REMEMBER

Anger calls our attention to harm and provides the energy we need for protection.

What we resist persists, so it's better to let it be felt and released.

Imagination and Dream Sleep safely release Anger.

When Anger is released, Compassion follows.

Firm action is then possible.

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