

# Introduction

***“For every minute you remain angry, you give up sixty seconds of peace of mind.”***

***~ Ralph Waldo Emerson***

It is often said that the aftermath of a storm is worse than the storm itself, and the same is true about anger, rage, and aggression. Unfortunately, the repercussions of anger can be extensive, and the cleanup process is often met with hefty consequences and vast destruction. I know the cost of anger, rage, and aggression too well because I had difficulty regulating my own emotions as a child.

The hole in the back of my childhood bedroom door is a steadfast reminder of a child who didn't know how to weather the turmoil of her emotions. To this day, I can remember being so angry (about what, I do not recall), marching into my room, picking up a book, and hurling it at the back of my door. I can still hear the splintering sound of wood when the book made impact, leaving a hollow hole in the door and the feel of an immediate surge of remorse and fear of getting into trouble. A glance into my past makes me wish I could somehow go back and help that younger me cope with the intensity and destructive surge of emotions. Although I can't change my past, I can take my experiences and help others who work with angry youth, hence creating this very book.

I am intrigued by anger, rage, and aggression because I know how easy it is to become a prisoner of its intense power. I have devoted much of my career to helping angry, enraged, and aggressive youth, training educators, and assisting parents in better understanding their child's emotions. Did you know many of your students want nothing more than to free themselves from anger's powerful grip? Unregulated anger, impulsive and aggressive anger in nature, does not feel good to the carrier because they are the ones who are most often hurt by the emotion.

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Did you know that anger-related issues are the most common reasons children are referred for mental health services?<sup>1</sup> Prolonged periods of anger and aggression have been linked with depression,

suicide, substance use, and more long-term psychological and physical health issues such as anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and premature death.<sup>2/3</sup> So, we have to help our students learn coping skills early. By doing so, we may be helping them live longer and more meaningful lives. I hope this book will help you better understand the scope of anger, rage, and aggression but, most importantly, support you in helping your students learn effective ways to manage anger, rage, and aggression.

Here are some suggestions to help you get the most out of this book:

- 1.** Read the book under the assumption that all behavior serves a purpose. Meaning students act out for a reason. Our job is to uncover that reason to assist them in coping with their emotions and feelings.
- 2.** Understand that perception is reality. What a student perceives to happen is their frame of reference and helps them justify their behaviors. If you want to help angry youth, you have to reach them from their perception of what occurred to provoke their anger.
- 3.** Follow the chapters sequentially. The book follows a natural progression that unveils the multiple dimensions of anger.
- 4.** Learn to identify the signs of anger, as well as the psychopathological symptoms that go well beyond anger, rage, and aggression.
- 5.** Apply strategies to help youth learn to manage their anger.

If we commit to helping our students early, we can teach them valuable lessons that they can carry with them throughout life. In addition, there is a reward in knowing that the seeds we plant today may help ward off future heart attacks, high blood pressure, stroke, and relationship difficulties. As the proverb goes, “all the flowers of tomorrow are in the seeds of today.”

Before we begin our deep dive into anger, rage, and aggression, I would like to share a story that touched my life and, more importantly, illustrates the importance of helping our students find peace from anger. At an event for one of my books, *The Anger Workbook for Teens*, an older adult

male approached me and said, “You know I was one of those angry kids.” Looking up and making eye contact, I saw he wanted to spark a conversation and share his story, so I obliged. “You were?” I asked, noticing he had used past tense in his introduction. “What changed you?” He looked me in the eyes and said, “A triple bypass when I was forty and losing my wife to a divorce.” I wondered how many other hurts he had experienced from his anger. “Hmm, that’s a lot,” I replied. He paused and said, “It took that to make me realize that I had to change. You see, I found something...” He left me with the curiosity of wanting to know his secret to release anger. Inquisitively I asked him what he found. He smiled and looked me square in the eyes and confidently said, “I found inner peace.”<sup>4</sup>

I know firsthand that with your help, your students can learn to calm the angry storm within. They don’t have to live full of rage; they can remember to use assertion not aggression; and most importantly, they can find their *own* inner peace.

# 1

## What Is Anger? Rage? Aggression?

*Anybody can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.*

*– Aristotle*

Odds are, when you think of anger, rage, and aggression you have an idea of what they entail, but how do you define them? Too often we couple anger, rage, and aggression into the same category. However, they have very distinct characteristics and vary in intensity, making them similar yet very different. In this chapter, we will explore the defining features of anger, rage, and aggression.

### What Is Anger?

Anger is an emotion that most often surfaces when we aren't able to get our way, or we feel that someone has done something wrong. According to Dr. Paul Ekman, it is an emotion that falls into one of the seven basic universal emotions, along with joy, disgust, surprise, fear, contempt, and sadness.<sup>5</sup> Meaning that no matter where we are in the world, our facial expressions provide clear clues to how we are feeling, and others can interpret those feelings regardless of whether we speak the same language or not! Think about it. If we see someone who is seething mad, we may keep our distance because we don't want any part of their

wrath. When you look at the seven emotions it's interesting that five are considered unpleasant.

## The Seven Basic and Universal Emotions



Emotions create an impulse or urge to act. For example, when we are angry, we may have the urge to raise our voice, curse, or hit. If we are sad, we may resort to crying, sulking, or withdrawing. Emotions such as sadness, shame, guilt, and fear are often labeled as being unpleasant and uncomfortable because they leave us feeling vulnerable and out of control. Rather than feeling powerless and helpless, we may use anger to mask what we are really feeling. This emotional concealment is why anger is often referred to as a secondary emotion. Anger often becomes a first line of defense because it's an energy-producing emotion that creates a sense of being in charge. Plus it's easier to admit to being angry than feeling hurt, ashamed, or guilty.

As with other emotions, anger has some identifying characteristics that are important to understand. Research has noted anger undergoes a series of affective, cognitive, and behavioral processes. Each are explained in more detail.

- Like other emotions, anger has an **affective** factor, meaning it has a specific **feeling** attached to it. It feels different from other emotions

such as happiness, which is on the opposite spectrum from anger. You know how it feels to be happy and elated about something. Now imagine feeling frustrated and angry. You probably felt the complete shift of thoughts. Anger and happiness are totally different feelings. One feels good and the other one not so much. This extreme dichotomy of feelings is why it's almost impossible to experience happiness and anger at the same time.

- After the anger makes its appearance, we begin to fuel our thoughts in justifying why we are mad. These thoughts are referred to as the **cognitive** process of anger. Angry thoughts have a purpose to prepare us to act. When we are angry our thoughts help us make plans to make a wrong right. Our thoughts don't cause a problem because thoughts are powerless unless we buy in to them.
- Again, our thoughts aren't a problem unless we act on them. Rather, it's our actions that can lead to big consequences, and that leads us to the **behavioral** process of anger. <sup>6</sup>

## Try This!

Anger varies in intensity. For example, most of us don't go from 0 to 10 instantaneously, but instead, we go through a series of escalations. That series can be described in words, and the vocabulary we use can show how angry we are. For example, words like *agitated*, *frustrated*, *irritated*, *irate*, and *hostile* are words that vary in intensity. You can use a technique known as scaling to help assess their experience in terms of steps. Let's give scaling a try with anger and words.

MILD			MEDIUM				HIGH		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
_____			_____				_____		
_____			_____				_____		
_____			_____				_____		
_____			_____				_____		

On the anger intensity scale, write the words you use to describe your anger. Level one on the scale is a word that you use when becoming angry, and level ten is when you are at your angriest. For example, some of the words that I use include *annoyed*, *irritated*, *mad*, or *ticked off*. Scaling is a great way to help students express the feelings they have when their anger is escalating. Recognizing the early signs of escalation can help them step outside themselves and put in words how they feel. It also helps build self-awareness and links thoughts to feelings and behaviors.

## What Is Rage?

***Rage is a form of intense anger...*** Rage is a form of intense anger, and it can be either productive or problematic, depending on how it's handled. If we think about anger

in terms of intensity, rage would be at the top of our scale. People who are filled with rage often struggle with self-awareness and emotional regulation. They lack communication skills and struggle to express their thoughts and feelings. Does this description bring any students to mind?

Students who experience chronic anger and rage are at risk for health problems. For example, intense levels of anger and rage have been associated with heart disease, high blood pressure, and even premature death—a few of the many reasons to help students with emotional regulation.

On the flip side, rage can be proactive when used constructively and create needed change. For example, cultural rage has been described to combat social injustice, inequality, and systemic oppression. Both anger and rage can be used to prepare us to fight the good fight.

## What Is Aggression?

Aggression is an intent to harm. It often occurs with anger, but it doesn't have to. You can be aggressive and not angry, and you can be angry and not aggressive. Aggression provides us with a sense of power and can fuel our anger. Aggression coupled with rage can be catastrophic. When paired together, you may see a student hitting another student, throwing a chair across the room, cursing out a teacher, shouting obscenities in the

hallway, or even breaking things. Students who have difficulty regulating intense emotions like anger can be challenging to manage. For example, consider the case of Dylan.

## A Student's Story

Dylan, a sophomore, was escorted into my office by the principal. Unsure of what was happening, I quickly assessed the situation. Dylan's fists were clenched at his side, he was breathing heavily, and sweat was dripping from his brow. The principal, in a stern tone, commanded Dylan to "Have a seat, and I'll get with you once I get a statement from the other student." The air seemed to be sucked right out of my office at that moment. I recognized my senses were on alert. Looking into Dylan's eyes, I thought, "This student is going to explode!"

You see, Dylan had just been pulled off another student in a fight, and I was fortunate to be his next stop before making his way into the principal's office. I had heard that it took multiple people to peel him off the student, so I knew he was off the Richter scale of anger. Quickly assessing Dylan's behaviors, I decided to help him do something he didn't know how to do for himself: *calm down*.

I knew that Dylan was in no mood to talk. Reliving or contemplating what had just happened would only escalate his anger, taking him in the opposite direction of where I needed him to be. I decided to change the environment. I got up from my desk, dimmed the lights, turned on some soft background music, and told him to just hang with me for a few minutes and catch his breath. I will never forget the look on his face. He looked confused because, wasn't I supposed to ask him about what happened? Isn't that what we all do when there's an altercation? *Not this time, Dylan*.

I continued working on my computer, gently tapping the keyboard. Eventually, Dylan either got bored or calmed down enough to talk. Regardless of the reason, the cool-down tactic had worked, unbeknownst to Dylan. He looked at me and said, "He just made me so mad that I blacked out. I don't remember anything." It was his vocabulary "blacked out" that let me know Dylan's anger had escalated to the dangerous point of rage. Language does matter. I wondered how often had he "blacked out" in his life?



QUESTION  
to  
CONSIDER

1. Can you identify the differences between anger, rage, and aggression?

2. Describe the feeling (affective), thought (cognitive), and action (behavioral) processes that occur in anger?

3. How can anger and rage be productive in creating change?

KEY  
POINTS

- Rage is an intense form of anger.
- Anger isn't the problem; it has never been. The problem occurs in how it's handled.
- Problems are the result of our actions.
- Aggression is the intent to harm another person or thing.