

BRINGING EMPATHY TO YOUR ANGRY INTERACTIONS

We struggle with empathy when we're angry and may have great difficulty seeing things from another person's point of view. But understanding things from a different perspective isn't just for the benefit of other people: without empathy, it's easy to be confused about why others are behaving the way they are. This makes it hard to understand the impact we (and our angry words and behaviors) are having on others, which in turn makes it easy for us to harm others without even knowing that we're doing it. We may think we're just expressing ourselves.

Let's consider someone who had been abused as a child and, as an adult, experienced rapid, extreme mood swings. (I'll call her Jessica.) She was quick to feel rejected and alone and had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Jessica tended to take things very personally and would become very angry with her children if she felt they had disobeyed her. She took their behavior as a sign that they didn't respect her and didn't care about her. At times, she would blow up in anger and would yell at them, calling them names and then storming out of the house to leave them terrified and alone. It wasn't until Jessica connected with how she had felt when her own mother had acted in the same way that she began to consider and understand how her behavior affected her own children. At this point, Jessica began to let go of the self-justifying thoughts that she had used to support her angry behavior, and committed to working with her emotions compassionately. Once Jessica understood the distress that her actions caused her children (and the regretful feeling of heartbreak that this created in her), she couldn't continue allowing herself to act this way. She began taking parenting classes to learn new, more effective ways to deal with her children's defiant behaviors (which occurred far less frequently as Jessica's own behavior changed).

Allowing ourselves to connect with others' experience of our anger allows us to see it, and ourselves, in a new light. Again, the key is to use these perceptions as fuel for change—as motivation to develop our compassionate selves.

Exercise 11.4: Becoming the Other

This exercise, developed by Paul Gilbert, is designed to help you consider, in a safe and semiplayful way, what others might feel in response to your anger:

- Set up two chairs facing each other. Sit in one of the chairs (we'll call this the "angry chair") and imagine that the person you've been angry with is sitting in the chair opposite.
- Direct your anger toward this person, and say the sorts of things to him (or her) that you said during your interaction (or if you're planning the interaction, the things you plan to say to him). Express your anger to him.
- Now, take a breath, get up, and sit in the other chair. Imagine that you are the person on the receiving end of your anger and accusations. Notice how you might be feeling, how you might want to react. Imagine the facial expression of the angry self. Allow yourself to experience what you might feel as this anger is directed at you. Consider the thoughts and feelings that come up for you.

This exercise can give you the opportunity to think about what you sound like and look like, and the impact you have on the other person when you're angry. The exercise can also be used to practice different ways of dealing with difficult interactions. For example, in chapter 10 I offered a number of ways to communicate assertively. The exercise above can allow you to try out different ways of approaching a situation. Using role-play first in one chair and then the other, you'll have an opportunity to imagine how the other person might feel, think, and respond to your efforts at communication. This exercise is nice because it gives you the chance to practice your assertiveness and empathy skills all at one time.