

Anger

is a Secondary Emotion



■ by Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

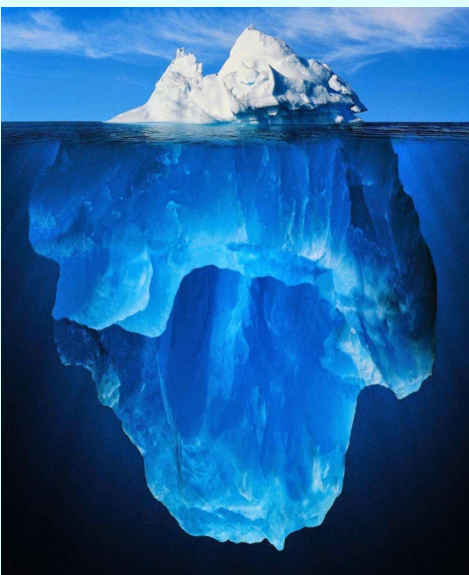
Anger is a secondary emotion. What does that mean, exactly? A secondary emotion is an emotion you feel in response to another emotion.

Anger is often misunderstood because it takes different forms. Anger that is loud and explosive draws more attention to itself. If anger is not the primary emotion, then this attention-drawing emotion leaves the 1st and primary emotion unnoticed, unnamed, and unattended to. This spells danger for you and those you are in relationship with.

We cannot control feelings; when and how they manifest is quick and sudden. However, we can control what we do in response to them. What would happen if we choose to attend to the primary emotion instead of allowing anger to run the show?

When anger is primary

It is important to determine if the emotion of anger matches the situation. Anger is a passionate emotion that has many gifts. Anger can warn us when there has been a violation of a moral standard or when we have been treated in a way that we have previously said is not ok. Anger can give us the energy needed to make a change. When these things have occurred, then anger is most likely the primary feeling and we would do well to attend to it right away.



When anger is secondary

When anger is secondary, we need to dive deeper to see what lies beneath. Think of anger as an iceberg. Only a very small part of the iceberg is visible above the water. The majority of its body is hidden below the surface. The emotion and expression of anger is often that visible part that everyone sees. The expression of anger as the “tip of the iceberg” looks different on everyone and may include a loud voice, screaming, explosive words, throwing of objects, withdrawal, sulking, etc. Paul tells us to “be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...” (Ephesians 4:26, NIV). It’s as if Paul knew that there was a tendency to bury things and not address what’s really going on, and he was warning against this! We are more likely to sin when we react emotionally, rather than let the emotions offer data, to which we choose a response.

Discovering what lies beneath anger

For some people, the discovery at what lies beneath anger begins by completing this

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simple sentence:

I am feeling anger. I am also feeling _____, _____, _____ (use feeling words such as fear, hurt, shame, guilt, frustration, etc.).

Jonah expressed feeling anger and what might be frustration, self-pity, depression or despair when he said to God, "I am so angry, I wish I were dead!" (Jonah 4:9, NIV). We are multifaceted people with layers and levels of emotions.

Uncovering other emotions in addition to anger allows you to see more fully all that you are dealing with. You can only deal with what you know. We react in anger and out of anger because we are not aware of all the contributing factors, including other feelings.

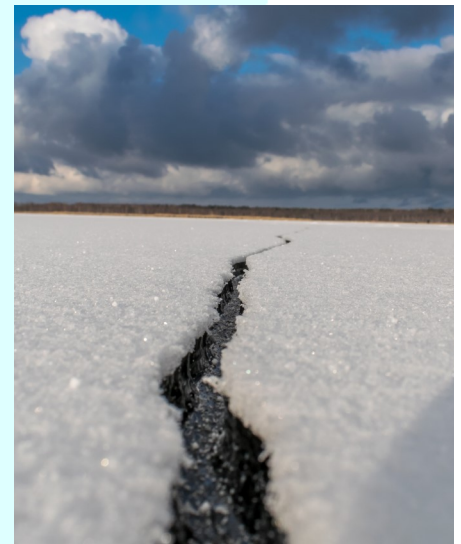
Too often we see the anger as the beast that needs taming when it may be the flare calling for help. Perhaps addressing the hidden emotions will dissolve the anger. That would be wonderful. But even when the anger remains an active party, the other feelings need identification, validation and attention as well. Anger may call for an action such as a rebuke or re-establishing a limit or a boundary. Or, the other hidden emotions, like hurt, may call for grieving and comfort. There is a lot of work to be done here!

The next time you notice the emotion of anger rising up in you, ask the Holy Spirit to help you see what the anger is really in response to. Pray God will reveal what other emotions are coming up in addition to anger and invite Jesus to come and be with you as you feel ALL of the feelings. Is there something you are not getting that you believe you really need, want or deserve? Go to the God who promises to supply all of your needs. Ask the God of justice how to respond or how he wants to respond. Is there something that you are fearful of losing? Bring your fears to the Lord and ask him to settle your heart before you choose your next step.

Do not let the iceberg of anger wreak havoc on you as you travel through life. You are worth knowing and understanding, and you are worth the work it takes to grow, recover and change. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Today is the day to get to work. ■



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