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**Benefits to Coping with Anger**

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**My Techniques for coping with Anger**: **A Summary**

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**Introduction**

The first of the four questions “Do you ever get angry?” struck me like a thunderbolt. It baffled my imagination to think of a person who never gets angry lifelong. In wondering, I discovered that it is possible to have such a person who is incapable of feeling anger or frustration. *The* *Center State of Acquired Brain Damage* is investigating the symptoms of a disease called “ataraxia,” which “is the inability of the human being to experience emotions such as anger or frustration. In other words, a person with ataraxia is totally incapable of ever feeling angry at any point in their life.”[[1]](#footnote-2) The question for me is not whether I get angry, but what I do with my anger, how I cope with my anger and my coping techniques. One of my favorite scriptural passages on anger is Paul’s letter to the Ephesians “If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day. Don't give the Devil a chance” (Eph. 4:26-27). St. Paul is often called the “Apostle of anger”[[2]](#footnote-3) because in his theology of anger, he acknowledges how natural it is for a person to be angry if provoked. Hence he puts it in the imperative; be angry (*Orgisesthe* in the Septuagint) but do not let the devil capitalize on the anger and lead you to sin. This spiritual understanding or the spirituality of anger was my first coping technique before understanding anger as a physiological (body) and psychological (mind) phenomenon. My coping techniques with anger shall reflect the three aspects of my humanity.

Anger has a social dimension, apart from the spiritual, physiological and psychological dimensions, because its trigger and target are directed both to self and others. Since it affects both health and relationships, I shall be depending on medical, social and religious norms in formulating my coping techniques with anger. Even the thoughts that trigger anger in me consist of personal and communal “beliefs, assessments*,*assumptions*,*evaluations*,* and interpretations of situationsthat makes people thinkthat someone else is attempting (consciously or not) to hurt them*.”[[3]](#footnote-4)*

Anger is also a positive motivational factor which creates a sense of power, righteousness and control in a situation where prior to anger these positive, motivating feelings did not exist. “The feelings of control and righteousness that come from anger can motivate you to challenge and change difficult interpersonal and social injustices.”[[4]](#footnote-5) It is a form of righteous anger that motivated crusaders and civil rights activists (such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi to seek equal rights and freedom. Even Jesus, the Christ out of rage drove out the money changers from the Temple (John 2:15). In these questions, I shall focus on the positive value of anger, how it has motivated me to be a better version of myself instead of negative reactions to the persons or institutions frustrating my efforts or trying to hurt me.

**Do you ever get angry?**

Charles Lamb once wrote a poem titled: Anger, which captured the positive and negative effects of anger that is worth quoting in full here:

Anger in its time and place  
May assume a kind of grace.  
It must have some reason in it,  
And not last beyond a minute.  
If to further lengths it go,  
It does into malice grow.  
'Tis the difference that we see  
'Twixt the serpent and the bee.  
If the latter you provoke,  
It inflicts a hasty stroke,  
Puts you to some little pain,  
But it never stings again.  
Close in tufted bush or brake  
Lurks the poison-swellëd snake  
Nursing up his cherished wrath;  
In the purlieux of his path,  
In the cold, or in the warm,  
Mean him good, or mean him harm,  
Whensoever fate may bring you,  
The vile snake will always sting you.[[5]](#footnote-6)

“Anger” he said “in its time and place, May assume a kind of grace” and have reason/justification in it, but furthering its length in time grow into malice. My experiences of anger is both short lived and in perpetuity because the triggers have become institutionalized. In this essay, I will overlook the trivial issues of everyday anger because they are the bees in the poem that sting only once with little pain and focus on those fundamental “angers” that have wounded, disfigured and still shaping my life and earthly existence such as the divorce of my parents, the scholarship saga and cultural violence in Nigeria.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Anger according to Charles Spielberger (1983) is an "emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage" It is often considered as a common experience in everyday life (Averill, 1982).[[7]](#footnote-8) Everybody get angry at any point of his or her life. So it is a fact that I and everyone get angry (except persons with ataraxia), but why do we get angry? And what do we do with the anger? Dr. Weisinger in his “*Anger Work–Out Book*” attempted to answer why we do get angry? For him, “We are predisposed to become angry when we appraise an event or a person as a threat to one of our basic needs such as food or shelter, or more mature needs such as identity, recognition, achievement, and social affiliation.”[[8]](#footnote-9) The separation of my parents almost destroyed me and my siblings. It happened around my tenth birthday and rocked the foundations of my world. It threatens my basic needs for food, nurturance and shelter, as well as my needs for security, certainty, acceptance, belongingness and love.

The annoying situation of their divorce was further complicated when they both remarried. I and my siblings became second-class children in both homes as their attentions were focused on the immediate children. My half-brothers and half-sisters were taught by my step-father and step-mother to tolerate the inconvenience that we have become in their homes. I had to change schools over and again while staying with grandma, uncles and aunts. At some point I became rebellious which gave them more reasons to maltreat me and deny me of basic needs and supports. My anger was directed at every member of the family for labeling me with a self fulfilling prophecy of doom. I started hanging out with street kids, school drop outs and substance abusers. Thus my first attempt at coping with anger was the negative unhealthy “coping abuse.” My dysfunctional coping strategy include: disassociations with family members, eating disorder, self- neglect, alcohol abuse, and violent outburst. In protest to parental abandonment and rejection, I dropped out of school and seek menial jobs. Like the prodigal son, I soon discovered that the larger society was more toxic than my hash family environment. I returned home with a forgiven attitude and a determined zeal to right the wrong. My anger had been transformed into a constructive force motivating me into overcoming past mistakes and redeeming the future. Consequently, I chose the celibate priesthood while some of my siblings were resolved to avoid polygamous marriage in order to save future generations from parental neglect and sibling rivalry in polygamy. My anger with the religious authorities is a blessing in disgust which I termed the scholarship saga.[[9]](#footnote-10)

When I volunteered to accompany young seminarians in my *alma mater*, I knew the aspersions people cast on spiritual directors, but what I did not know was that providence had prepared a healing remedy for my anger, brokenness and woundedness in a ministry denigrated among ministries. The scholarship to study Christian spirituality at Creighton University sounded a musical note that created the “dance” for my diocesan administrator, the new seminary Rector, the *presbyterium*, and a host of family members, friends, and foes. The dancing from 2014 up to date became the discernment process that led to my discovery of my ministry within the priesthood, in the society, and in Creation. I am not unaware of the general attitude towards spiritual directors, but I still volunteered to do spiritual direction at my *alma mater* with the hope of forgetting my woundedness and vulnerability in serving others as a “wounded healer.” It seems crazy but doing crazy stuff had helped me to overcome fearful and helpless situations in the past. Throwing fear overboard and embracing the dark and the unknown had been my most potent defense mechanism in times of extreme fear and anger.

As I discern my vocation for the ministry of spiritual direction and the CSP scholarship to Creighton, several factors and obstacles interplayed like fire dancing in the wind. The dance which started as a solo (*a cappella)*, when I volunteered to help at my *alma mater* as a visiting confessor and a spiritual guide to the Seminarians, has graduated into a nation-wide dance. In the words of Thomas Merton, “God is the lead dancer and the soul is the partner completely attuned to the rhythm and patterns set by its partner.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Rome soon became part of the dance, as she appointed a new bishop for my diocese, which changed the musical tune and the dancing pattern. Since “one cannot dance well unless one is completely in time with the music, not leaning back to the last step (initial past-plans) or pressing forward to the next one (unknown future-plan) but poised directly on the present step as it comes,”[[11]](#footnote-12) all the participants had to *wait* patiently *and listen* attentively to the next beat, with unpredictable timing.

My anger in the scholarship saga stems from the seemly delays and uncertainties which triggered childhood memories of abandonment and uncertainty. I agreed with the author of the “Psychology of Anger” that anger is a “secondhand emotion” [[12]](#footnote-13) because it never occurs in isolation, but proceeded by painful feelings. The pain of delay and uncertainty were not enough to cause my anger but it occurs when pain was combined with some anger-triggering thoughts such aspersonal assessments, evaluations, assumptions and/*or* interpretations of the situations. In the scholarship saga, my anger was a social anger or emotion directed towards the authorities, institutions and persons “obstructing” my scholarship and causing me emotional and physical pains and frustrations.  Consciously or unconsciously, I reverted to my coping strategy and defense mechanism such as seeking divine interventions, wise counsel and increased determination for excellence to shame the critics. Thus the anger and **anger-triggering thoughts motivated me to pursue and complete the scholarship program in spite of all odds. My need for success, achievement and recognition was the jet-fuel propelled by anger against dysfunctional parenting, bureaucratic bottleneck or cultural violence.**[[13]](#footnote-14)

**My anger with the Nigerian sociopolitical system started before I was born. The structural violence, exploitation and alienation of the Christian-south are the triggers for a generational anger.** My parents married and conceived me in a state of heightened emotional instability due to the Nigerian civil war. They often told us stories of their constant fear and uncertainty as they ran errands for the fighting soldiers. I participated in the emotional trauma and anger of my parents, while still in the depth of the womb. Recent research in scientific embryology had discovered that, “during the third trimester of our gestation, we could suck our thumbs, hiccough, swallow, and produce purposeful movements as well as experience pressure, became agitated, (and be) startled at sudden and loud sounds.”[[14]](#footnote-15) In other words we share in the experiences: fears, pains and anger of our mothers, long before our birth.

**Do you know someone who is angry/whose day is filled with confusion?**

I grew up with that generation of angered and distressed youth who were confused and reacted either by fighting the oppressive structures or fleeing to Europe and America. The statistics of the mass exodus of promising youths (has) affected the demography of Nigeria forever.[[15]](#footnote-16) The other group of fleeing youth joined the political band-wagon based on their philosophies that, “if you cannot beat them, join them.” These confused youths (like Judas goats) are elected and appointed into bogus political positions and juicy offices at the whims and caprice of their political godfathers. Together with the cabals, they belong to the 1% of the superrich who control over 90% of the total wealth of our nation. The extreme inequality, poverty, and discrimination in Nigeria is mind boggling and annoying. According to a recent survey, the combined wealth of Nigeria’s five richest men ($29.9 million) could end extreme poverty at a national level.” Five million Nigerians are hungry, and more than 112 million people are living in poverty, yet the report says that in Nigeria “between 1960 and 2005 about $20 trillion was stolen from the treasury by public office holders.”[[16]](#footnote-17)

Although trapped and confused by our situation in Nigeria, we can still choose how to respond to the annoying situation, no matter how bad or painful. Ingrid Betancourt validated this attitude, choice, and habit in the face of hostile external aggressors when she wrote “life in captivity had not removed the necessity to act in the right way.”[[17]](#footnote-18) As free agents, (not robots) we can choose to make the Nigerian experience *transformative* through anger management and coping techniques rather than *destructive* through uncontrolled anger, hatred, or revenge. Born in Edo state, one of the oil-producing states in the south-south region of Nigeria, I grew up lamenting and watching painfully and tearfully how the hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani from the north siphoned the crude oil to develop big cities while we were left with oil spillage, air pollution, sickness, and poverty.

The rich owners of oil wells were people of other tribes and religions while my Niger-Deltas kept asking the why, why, and why questions: what sin are we being punished for, or where is God in all this? Where is the God of justice, love, and mercy? Whom did we offend? Where and how did we get it wrong? Because of these social injustices perpetuated against my people many youths adopted the coping technique of civil-disobedience, revolting and fighting the oppressive systems, the malign society, and the government that caused, encouraged or allowed the cultural violence to exist. Armed militancy, oil pipeline vandalism, cultism, *419*-fraudulent dealings, ritualized money-making, robbery, kidnapping, prostitution, drug dealing, illegal migration, and political thuggery are some of the ways my peers are coping with their anger and responding to the unjust structural violence in our society. Their anger could be justified but their responses and reactions are questionable, hence many of them had been killed, incarcerated or banished abroad.

I agree with Howard Zinn, that:

"Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of leaders … and millions have been killed because of this obedience… Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves… the grand thieves are running the country. That’s our problem."[[18]](#footnote-19)

Some of my contemporaries have become confused and frustrated due to the structural violence denying us of the basic human needs such as survival needs, freedom, identity and ecological wellbeing. The common task before us is how to change this mindset and restructure our emotions constructively?

**How do you change this mindset and restructure your emotions?**

Experts in anger management had submitted that the first step towards coping with anger is awareness of the triggers and feelings. According to Mark Twain, “anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything (anybody) on which it is poured.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Anger is a deadly emotion that can destroy both the originator and the target. In the three instances sited above, the negative effects of anger were felt by all parties (me, my peers, the institutions, government and society at large). It goes to show that anger is universal but the responses and reactions are particular and peculiar to individuals and circumstances. The important thing is to acknowledge the anger, recognize its source, reflect on it and redirect its destination purposefully. The great philosopher, Aristotle puts it beautifully well “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.”[[20]](#footnote-21) The task of managing and coping with anger is a lifelong duty. My coping techniques are constantly been reviewed and modified with time and in different situations. Dr. Christian Conte’s five keys to controlling anger summarize my coping techniques.[[21]](#footnote-22) They include:

* Detachment
* Not taking things personally
* Letting go
* Being mindful
* Appropriate emotional expressions.

My first coping skill is learning how to detach myself from my ideas, values and beliefs which are the sources of anger when threatened. The ability to separate my ideals form my essence can prevent the ego-defense system from fighting to protect the values and the self. The ego which is the collection of opinions that I have about myself, my values and worldviews can be disassociated from my identity and *persona* if I learn not to take things too personal. Somebody can disagree with my ideas, beliefs and values without necessarily harming or threatening my person. Thus detachment and letting go of dogmatic positions can avert anger outburst and rage. The use of absolutes (never, ever, always, forever) can trigger anger when disputed.

Being mindful or mindfulness is necessary for anger management and for choosing the appropriate responses and expressions. When I am mindful of my anger, its triggers and bodily sensations, I can choose from a number of options how to respond to it. The Buddhist writer and mindfulness teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn in his book *Peace Is Every Step* (1992),outlined a five-step process for changing mindset and transforming negative emotions (e.g. Anger). Firstly, “greet the negative emotions of fear, anger, depression, sadness, or anxiety, rather than suppress the emotions, repress underground or deny/wish them away. Secondly, “shake hands with the emotions and engage in a process of calming down” the negative emotions, like a mother holding her crying baby, and thirdly “comforting and soothing the negative emotions.” The fourth and fifth steps involve “releasing, letting go of the emotions” with the smile of emotional equilibrium and inner balance necessary to “identify and change the conditioned,” distorted perception that created the negative emotions in the first place.[[22]](#footnote-23) Thus I am able to change the mindset that interpreted the “situations” as threatening and annoying as well as restructure my emotion of anger through the process of cognitive defusion.

Cognitive defusion, also known as *deliteralization*,[[23]](#footnote-24) is a technique used to help people cope with uncomfortable, unhelpful thoughts and feelings (e.g. anger). It involves creating space between ourselves and our thoughts and feelings so that they have less of a hold over us. Cognitive defusion is the opposite of cognitive fusion which is buying into or accepting every thought that passes through our minds as if they are 100% factual truths. Cognitive defusion is “noticing self; noticing thought,”[[24]](#footnote-25) and choosing what to believe/accept and what not to. Through the process of cognitive defusion I have started to notice my thoughts, identify the negative ones that trigger anger, how they are affecting my feeling as well as how to reframe them in a positive way. Rephrasing my thoughts has help me identify that I have a choice and options in what I think, how I interpreted situations and the feelings of anger associated with each thought pattern and the judgment value I placed on them. In this way I have benefited from coping with anger and other related emotions.

**Conclusion**

My understanding of the psychology of anger together with the physiology and spirituality add up to my emotional liberation. This course had helped me in appreciating the positive and negative impacts of anger to me and to the society. It has helped me to understand that anger as a secondary emotion can be substituted for pains and frustration. *“*Part of the transmutation of pain into anger involves an attention shift - from self-focus to other-focus, as well as creating a feeling of righteousness*,*powerandmoral superiority”[[25]](#footnote-26)which is not present when I am merely in pain, self pity, feeling helpless and vulnerable.

The exploration of my past experiences of anger was consoling and liberating. It was beneficial that I engaged with my past anger and its triggering factors with the tools and skills of this course. This interior excursion had liberated me from of victimhood to the position of hero and survival. My unhealthy and healthy coping techniques were educative and instrumental to my general wellbeing. The technique of cognitive defusion gave me back my power of observation, evaluations and decision-making in choosing how to respond to anger and annoying situations.

Mindfulness and awareness is fundamental towards identifying master triggers and in changing the mindset that produces the negative appraisal in the first place. The ability to separate myself from my ideas, opinions, feelings and thoughts is the hallmark of emotional restructuring. This course is like home-coming for me.

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