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TRANSCRIPT

Anger: A vehicle for social change

In the past month, our society has been going through some intense changes and reactions following the killing of George Floyd. And as a psychologist, I'm getting to hear lots of different questions from my clients in response to racial injustice. I find that a lot of people are trying to make sense of their own inner experiences, and at the same time they're trying to make sense of what might be driving some people to respond some drastic ways during these times.

In this video, I'd like to talk about anger in the context of systemic racial injustice. On one hand, I know that I will never fully understand or lives with the experiences of the black or indigenous communities that have had to go through hundreds of years of systemic oppression in America. So I'm not speaking on behalf of the Black community, but I'm speaking more as a psychologist to share some psychological perspectives on understanding anger and also seeing if there is a way that we can use anger for social change.

So what is anger?

Anger is a pretty normal range of emotions that all of us may experience at some point in our lives. And it's too bad that it gets labeled as a bad emotion. Sometimes emotions can't really be categorized as good or bad or moral or immoral. How we respond with those emotions can perhaps be seen as helpful or harmful. But the actual experience of emotions can't be good or bad. They're in fact healthy and they communicate something. So anger, for instance, communicates that either somebody is being unfair, unjust, or that your boundaries are being crossed. So, it can be extremely helpful to listen to what anger is telling you.

The other thing about anger is that we often think of it as a primary emotion, meaning that we think that's something external happens and then we react instantly with that emotion of anger. And we might also think that it's a primary emotion because anger is a little bit more visible than some of the other emotions. You know, our gestures get bigger, our voices get higher, our faces get contorted when we're angry. And because it's more visible of an emotion, sometimes we think that it is a primary emotion. But anger actually is a secondary or second-hand emotion, meaning that it's kind of like a cover up for more painful feelings underneath. And some of these painful or vulnerable feelings might be say of sadness, of fear, embarrassment, helplessness, loss, or feeling powerless.

So, if you think about it, anger is pretty much like a defense mechanism because it's protecting us from not experiencing those really painful feelings. In fact, what's also interesting is that the same part of our brain that gets activated with pain also gets activated when we're angry. And in both cases, they're communicating something good to us, they're both telling us that, you know, something's not okay or there's some danger and some kind of action needs to be taken. Just like when you put your hand on a hot stove, the pain signals telling you that, 'hey, you need to take



your hand away to save yourself from that threat.’ Similarly, if we listen to our anger, it's usually telling us that something's not right and that's some kind of action needs to be taken.

The other thing about anger is it varies in intensity. There's a good article I read from clinical psychologist Dr. Leon Seltzer. And I love the title of the article because I think it really captures the essence of this idea that anger lies on the spectrum of intensities. And the name of the title of this article is the *Force of Anger is Tied to the Source of Anger*.

If you think about it, your anger towards your child for not putting their toys away might look and feel very different than if somebody were to accuse you of something that you didn't do. That type of anger, maybe a little bit more intense and can look different. So while the sounds like common sense, the reason I find it important to bring up is because when we see the outrage or anger being expressed by a community that's been oppressed for hundreds of years, it's probably because their source of anger is deeply rooted in intergenerational trauma. And so that might make sense why some people are responding in very drastic and intense ways right now.

Knowing these basic facts about anger, I'd like to share a few perspectives on what we might be able to do to use anger as a as a vehicle for social change.

The first thing I'd like to highlight is the importance of accepting when we may not understand or fully relate to experiences of oppression. And so right now, some expressions of anger or outrage are being labeled as overreactive or being overly dramatic to a situation. Again, if you have not experienced systemic racism or oppression, just recognize the fact that you may not be able to relate to that intensity of historical trauma and the intensity of anger that that gets triggered due to that. So, to label those as to judge others anger as being too much or unjustified, it is unfair. So, again, it's really important to accept and acknowledge that we may not understand or be able to relate to that source of trauma and anger.

The other thing I want to highlight is that a lot of the time suppression of anger gets confused with harmony. And they're not the same. You know, there are some people who are also commonly saying phrases like, you know, why can't we say all lives matter? Or Why does everything have to be about race? Or why can't we all get along? So, yes, while it would be great for all of us to get along peacefully and be at a level playing field, the reality is that we're not yet in a place of equity. And so until then, suppression of anger only creates an illusion of harmony. You know, again, kind of going back to that point of how anger is a stigmatize or a relatively more stigmatized emotion than others. We somehow get these social messages are, you know, expressing anger or talking about that is not good and maintaining peace. You know, let's just maintain the peace. And sure, in some cases, you know, showing outward expressions of anger or outrage may not be socially appropriate. But if you've been through unjust or unfair times or you've been through some trauma and you keep suppressing anger time and time again, that type of anger is bound to erupt at some point. And it's going to be more intense than, say, it would have been if we were able to address that type of anger sooner. So, this notion of, let's be neutral and lack of action or complacency only reinforces oppression from the power structures even more. In fact, you know, research also shows that collective outrage in the form of, say, protests actually does result in positive social change. And psychologically speaking, expression of anger can actually heal trauma.



The last point I want to share with you is about the importance of knowing and using one's privilege. Sometimes you might hear the most well-intentioned people say things like, "I had to struggle a lot to be successful, so I don't consider myself that privileged." So, privilege doesn't mean that you don't struggle or that you didn't work hard or that you didn't have your own traumas. Privilege essentially means that you get certain favors or you get treated differently based on things that you didn't really choose, such as the color of your skin or the socioeconomic status that you're born into or your sexuality. So, it's important to know that that's what privilege is and for us to identify that and be able to use that to be allies with communities that have been more marginalized. There's a talk by a clinical psychologist named Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis that I was watching recently, and she talked about the trauma, racism. And she said something really important that I'd like to share. She was talking about the fact that the marginalized group is already struggling with two things. The first thing they're struggling with is to not internalize all these negative beliefs that have been said about them for so many years. And the other thing that they might be struggling with is finding a safe space to raise their voice. So, it's ironic that we still expect, you know, marginalize or a community that has been oppressed for hundreds of years for them to fight their fight. We will not be able to reach equity until we fight this fight collectively. And so, it's really important for people who consider or can identify their privilege to use that to raise a voice collectively together.

While there are many layers to this topic, I hope that at least what you can take away from this is understanding what anger is and seeing if there is a way that you can use it for social change. Thank you for watching this video. I welcome any feedback, questions or comments on our web site.

References:

- Anti-Racism Resources (*Document compiled by Sarah Sophie Flicker, Alyssa Klein in May 2020*) bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES
- Video by Thema Bryant-Davis, Ph.D.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egr2279UiAI>
- Article by Leon F. Seltzer: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201807/the-force-your-anger-is-tied-the-source-your-anger>

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