The Anger Funnel: Mastering The Destructive Emotion

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

If you enjoy Mark Twain quotes as much as I do, you appreciate their profound ability to simplify the things that are easy to overcomplicate. Twain says, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.” It’s hard to argue with the fact that anger does great damage to the “vessel” in which it’s stored, yet this knowledge isn’t enough for most people to keep their anger in check. Just because most of us aren’t running around keying cars and chucking our smart phones into the water, doesn’t mean we’re immune to the ill effects of anger. If anger is such a destructive emotion for the person in whom it burns, why do we feel it so often? The answer is the anger funnel.

Anger is experienced so frequently that it is considered to be one of the five core emotions, but emotional intelligence black belts know that 99% of the time anger is not really a unique emotional state. Unless you are experiencing anger that enables you to ward off immediate physical harm, your anger is simply a replacement for another, less palatable emotion.

Why Replace an Emotion with Anger?

We live in a society where emotional expression is generally feared and avoided. We’re taught to bottle emotions up or avoid them all together. Anger is considered to be more socially appropriate than other (presumably “weaker”) emotions like fear or shame. This makes the experience of anger far more tolerable for most people than what they are really feeling. So, they funnel their fear, shame, regret, apprehension, guilt, embarrassment, sorrow, or what have you into anger. If you think about it, it’s much easier—and far more tolerable—to get angry and point the finger at someone else than it is to sit with a powerful, negative emotion.

A beautiful illustration of the anger funnel at work comes from one of our Top 10 EQ Moments of 2010. In case you missed the piece, check out the video below of a press conference with Cardinals quarterback Derek Anderson after his team had suffered a humiliating loss to the 49ers.

Click on the image to view this clip.
Anderson’s laughter on the sideline while his team was being slaughtered would only have registered as a blip on the public’s radar had he showed composure during the post-game interview. There certainly wasn’t anything about the reporter’s questions to warrant Anderson’s response. The reporter provided Anderson ample opportunity to explain himself, asking difficult questions in a careful and respectful manner. At first, Anderson was merely defensive, trying to avoid shame by denying that he was laughing on the sideline. When the reporter revealed that the laughing had been broadcast on television, Anderson immediately funneled his profound shame and embarrassment into anger. This sequence shows how quickly and easily strong emotions can morph into anger.

It’s as if we’re all walking around with funnels around our necks, just waiting for our emotions to be poured into it. In Anderson’s case, a little self-awareness would have helped him realize he was heading down this path before he exploded, and self-management would have enabled him to tolerate the embarrassment of being caught red handed, knowing that getting angry would only serve to make things worse.

1. Why am I angry?

The answer to this question is usually going to involve some finger pointing. That’s OK, as it’s part of the process. Usually something or someone around you helped you to begin moving towards anger. In my case my answer was, “I’m angry because that jerk almost ran me off the road.”

2. How did this incident really make me feel? (aka, what was the feeling that I funneled into anger?)

As long as you’re willing to feel vulnerable, the answer to this question should come pretty easily. In my case the answer was obvious: fear. Getting cut off like that made me feel intense fear. The fear was so intense that a fuming, smoke-out-my-ears anger came out the other side of the funnel. I knew it was time to ask myself these three questions, as opposed to giving in to my burning desire to teach the guy a lesson (AKA, road rage). My anger was like a big red balloon that was going to pop, but as soon as I realized this anger was a substitute for fear it sent all of the air rushing out of the balloon. I went from shocked that I couldn’t get the car in front of me out of my mind, to shocked that anger that intense could simply evaporate.

3. Why was this feeling so intolerable?

By the time you get to question #3, your anger will have largely subsided. The whole thing felt kind of silly by this point. I felt silly for being so angry and silly for being so vulnerable to fear. So, I asked myself why? I’ve been driving for decades here in Southern California where getting cut off is a regular occurrence. So why did this one get me going? The answer is that I’m now a father. My drive to remain safe and be there for my son magnified my fear. What was really intolerable was the thought of not being there for him. Learning why the feeling is so intolerable isn’t intended to help your anger subside—at
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least not this time. This third question improves your self-awareness so that you’re less likely to use that funnel the next time someone cuts you off.  

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of Emotional Intelligence 2.0 and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world’s leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, Newsweek, BusinessWeek, Fortune, Forbes, Fast Company, Inc., USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and The Harvard Business Review.