Let's talk about Anger

Why anger?

Everybody feels anger at times, to varying degrees. It's simply part of being human. Feelings of anger can arise in many different situations such as; feeling you have been treated unjustly, being criticized or not getting your way. The experience of anger can range from mild irritation, to frustration, to blind rage.

Anger can be useful sometimes. Without feelings of anger, we wouldn't take a stand against unfairness or injustice. Anger is our internal alarm that tells us something is not quite right.

Anger and Depression

Anger is also a common symptom of depression. If you are feeling depressed you might be overwhelmed with intense feelings of sadness and hopelessness. This can make even the simplest of tasks unbearable. When you feel overwhelmed, you might feel irritable, and this can progress into anger. Depression can also lead to negative thoughts and behaviors, all of which create a negative attitude. A negative outlook on life can lead to acting out in anger that you might not be aware of at the time.

Anger is a secondary emotion

Many people don't realize is that anger is a secondary emotion. What does this mean? Look at the example of the iceberg on the right. Anger is what people may see but there are other emotions under the water that we cant see.

Feeling fear or sadness for example can make us feel vulnerable and oftentimes not in control. Because of this, people tend to avoid these feelings in any way they can. One way to do this is to subconsciously shift into anger mode.
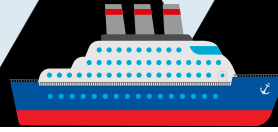
In contrast to fear and sadness, anger can provide a surge of energy and make you feel more in charge, rather than feeling vulnerable or helpless. Essentially, anger can be a means of creating a sense of control and power in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty.

ANGER

FRUSTRATED, INSECURE, JEALOUS, TIRED, HUNGRY, OVERWHELMED, EMBARRASSED, PAIN, SADNESS, GRIEF, ANXIETY, STRESS, THREATENED, CONTEMPT, HURT, SCARED, SHAME, GUILT, LONELY, DISAPPOINTED, HELPLESS.

The Anger Iceberg, first coined by the Gottman Institute

What Can You Do?

The next time you're feeling angry– whether mild or strong – pause for a moment to check in with yourself and see if you can identify the primary emotion driving the anger. If it's hard to notice anything but the anger, start by exploring your thoughts, as those are what fuel all emotions. Keep in mind that the shift from a primary emotion like fear or sadness into anger mode is typically quite fast and unconscious. Feeling anger may be an ingrained habit for you, which means that it can take more time to identify the deeper thoughts and feelings that lie underneath.

By working with the fear, sadness, or both, you will develop more skillful ways of relating to your anger. For example, you may find that you have some unresolved grief. Or, you may notice that you feel scared about a certain outcome. That's good data for you to work with, as it involves addressing a deeper need than the anger. By identifying the primary emotion, you can more easily determine the best course of action to resolve your problem. For example, you can figure out whether another's actions are truly unjust or simply a blow to your ego. Standing up for injustice, like protecting yourself or another from being taken advantage of or harmed, is rational. But, choosing to argue with somebody over something trivial is more about ego. Putting attention on the latter is a waste of energy that could be spent more wisely.

In summary, working with the underlying primary emotions is a way of decreasing habitual anger, cultivating more inner peace, and facilitating thoughtful action.