

How anger became the forgotten emotion

August 25 2023, by Olivia Metcalf and David Forbes



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It has now been twenty years since anger [was first called the forgotten emotion](#), and today, little has changed.

While we know a lot about sadness and [fear](#), anger still has an uncomfortable place in society. Most of us don't know what anger is for, or the difference between healthy and problem anger.

But just like sadness and fear, anger is a normal human emotion. Normal anger is healthy and helpful. We experience it when feeling under attack, being wronged or treated unfairly, or when seeing injustice in the world.

Unfortunately, we often treat healthy anger as a problem and when we can't tolerate healthy anger, we might even punish or criticize our loved ones when they feel angry.

At the same time, just like sadness can become depression and fear can become an anxiety disorder, anger can become unhealthy.

Anger can become a problem when the person experiences it often, intensely, for long durations of time, and it interferes with their [relationships and ability to function](#). Researchers refer to this type of unhealthy anger as "problem anger," because of the problems it can create for people in their jobs and relationships.

Our research at the Anger Lab has been addressing anger's knowledge gap, focusing on problem anger in people who have experienced [trauma](#). Our work shows that problems with anger are one of, if not the most common problem that occurs after trauma.

But it can take people years, or decades to realize their anger is linked to their trauma, and that is partly due to anger still having an uncomfortable place in our society. We need to talk more about anger, alongside our increased understanding of trauma.

What is anger?

Anger can be experienced emotionally (from mild annoyance through to blind rage), cognitively (thoughts about who has wronged us), physiologically (increased cardiovascular activity and muscle tension), and behaviorally (shouting and slamming doors).

It can be unpleasant to experience, but it serves a critical function. Unlike sadness and fear, which motivate us to withdraw, shut down, or retreat, anger motivates us into action to defend ourselves, protect others and overcome obstacles.

We have all experienced our anger escalating to a boiling point and probably have feelings of shame or regret when we think back to those moments and how we behaved.

Aggression and violence can occur in a moment of heightened anger, but are never excused by anger. People who use aggression and violence against another person can never say anger "made them do it"—aggression or violence is always a choice.

There are also instances of instrumental aggression, where anger is not present, but the person is using threatened or actual aggression and violence as an instrument for control and power—this type is highly prevalent in intimate partner violence.

Anger and post-traumatic stress disorder

Our research shows that in certain trauma-affected populations, [like veterans and first responders](#), or [survivors of natural disasters](#), problem anger can affect up to 31% of people. Yet it can take years to make the connection between struggling with anger and having experienced past trauma.

We now know that [anger is often a core symptom of PTSD](#) and is also a common response to trauma in its own right, with rates of problem anger at times higher than well-known disorders like depression and PTSD.

There are many examples of men who have experienced trauma and have problems with their anger in popular culture, but they can often be

extreme examples. One example is Logan Roy, the main antagonist in the widely popular *Succession*, who experienced significant childhood trauma and has many of the symptoms of problem anger.

For Roy, his anger is triggered in instances when he feels he is being taken advantage of. His overreaction may come from his past childhood experiences of abuse and feeling vulnerable, which triggers his anger at an intensity, frequency and duration that harms himself and his interpersonal relationships.

He also has high levels of hostility, which is a predisposition to dislike or mistrust others and to interpret their behavior as selfish and hurtful. Research shows that a "hostility bias," or the tendency to interpret ambiguous information as hostile, is very common in problem anger, [particularly after trauma](#).

Examples include when someone cuts us off in traffic or bumps into us at the supermarket with their trolley—a hostility bias would be interpreting these events as intentional, rather than accidental.

It is worth noting again that Roy's displays of aggression and violence are not excused by his trauma or mental health. He also rarely, if ever, displays any distress or guilt, whereas we know that many people who have experienced trauma and have challenges with their anger find it very upsetting, and unpleasant, and desperately want to recover.

Women and anger

It is much harder to find popular culture characters that show women with trauma and problem anger. [Girls are socialized differently from boys](#) when it comes to their expressions of anger, which leads to more suppression rather than expression.

Our research shows that in some populations, including natural disaster survivors, [women have higher levels of problem anger than men](#), which may be partially explained by how disadvantaged women are after a natural disaster, being at greater risk of experiencing domestic violence and suffering more economic harm.

The recent film "[Women Talking](#)" does an excellent job of depicting a woman who channels her righteous fury to motivate action after experiencing significant trauma, providing an important reminder that not all anger in people who have experienced trauma is problematic.

Every time someone channels their anger to protest, organize, or act in a way to change things, they are harnessing the power of human anger.

It is very important that we bring the experience of anger in from the cold and allow its integration into how we understand, talk about and manage other emotions like fear, sadness, guilt and shame.

Understanding the link between trauma and anger, and learning about the differences between healthy and unhealthy [anger](#), is critical to allow trauma survivors to [better understand their experiences and emotions](#).

Provided by University of Melbourne

Citation: How anger became the forgotten emotion (2023, August 25) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-08-anger-forgotten-emotion.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--