



Own Anger to Manage It

Mitchell Milch, LCSW

Though no one category fits all, in my psychotherapy practice I notice a strong correlation between folks with chronic anger management problems and those who exhibit self-defeating personality traits. Many of these clients seem to organize identities around a core belief that they are victims. We believe this to be true because we continue to suffer from parental improprieties long after growing up and leaving home. As much as clients express sincere wishes to move forward with their lives, making these wishes a reality are easier said than done. Each and every time they are angry, the experiences feel as if salt is being poured on their incompletely healed emotional scars. They are especially resistant to the notion that their parents and themselves for that matter, did and still do the best they can given their limitations and the limits of the support they receive from loved ones. They prefer to collect grievances and hold grudges even though such dispositions hold themselves back from breaking with their dissatisfying pasts so they might create more satisfying lives.

With the fervor of evangelists many of us will settle for no less than one of the following: 1) An end to our pain and suffering, 2) Escapes at will from our pain and suffering, 3) Revenge or 4) Special entitlements to compensate us for our misfortunes. It doesn't matter whether we recall our parents as being miscreants of the most premeditated variety, or just very limited and clueless about what motivated apparently automatic and mindless methods of parenting. On an emotional level we hold tenaciously to demands that the justice be served.

Many of us present as unlucky and unfortunate souls who have not separated who we are from how we were treated as children. We tell our stories of woe certain there are signs pasted on our backs that read: "Go ahead and kick me everyone else does!" In truth, the sad ironies are that we are not by any stretch of the imagination victims any longer. We are in actuality unwitting architects who preserve and perpetuate our pain and suffering. We are victims of our own self-defeating patterns of behavior that we deny and/or minimize responsibility for.

As implied in the preceding paragraph buried and forgotten and primed to be relived in the present is our investment in being victims in search of ideals of fairness and justice that cannot and will not be served. How these rigid and unrelenting patterns shape our chronic anger management problems is the subject of this article.

My introductory remarks beg the question: How could it be that at 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 or even 80 we still experience ourselves as not responsible for our own destinies? Well, intellectually we know we are however, the logic of our emotions operate according to a different set of rules. We believe that managing these problems should not be our jobs because we didn't bargain with our parents to be saddled with such problems. Thus, we link "not deserving" such a fate with not needing to own and manage these problems. We're scared to death that we might not be able to do anything about these problems and/or find having them so abhorrent as to ensure a future of suffering of our own making. Now that's quite a parental legacy to have to shoulder! So we resist committing ourselves to fixing our problems because we find the unfairness and injustice of it too intolerable to come to terms with. We may keep banging our heads against the walls in broad daylight hoping that others believed to have been treated to more privileged childhoods will do something to help us. The implicit entreaty is: "Will you stop standing there and please do something to end my suffering!" Unfortunately, only we can solve our own problems if we can accept responsibility and discard our propensities for self blame. This state of affairs never did and will never have anything to do with deserving such mistreatment.

We may presently be victims but, it's not of our childhoods. We may indeed be victims of our own guilt perpetuating machines that run 24 hours a day. We may be blind to it in ourselves and eagle eyed when expressed by others however, we are in truth as capable of cruelty, sadism, anger, rage, envy as anyone else walking the planet. The crux of our problems are that we do not see ourselves as un-saintly like the rest of the human race unless we are provoked. We have not learned to own and contain such feelings, wishes and impulses without feeling horrible about ourselves. Consequently, absent an external provocation we are at the mercy of internal mechanisms that demand punishment and self sacrifice for what are universal aspects of human experience we equate with being bad, evil and destructive people. Thus we try unsuccessfully and ineffectively to defend against what is "evil" and "destructive" leaving these feelings out of our control to wreak havoc with us. Our guilt demands self sacrifice. Oh, how envious we may be of those who live lives of pleasure and plenty.

What is human for others and does not interfere with their pursuit of happiness oppresses us folks, burdens us and limits our capacities to be happy. We may be inescapable victims of the

need to suffer because we learned growing up that we suffered as a precondition of being cared for. "Being" did not make us eligible for much at all. We had to earn whatever we got and usually did so with a pound of flesh or guilt. "What do you mean you're not hungry? There are kids dying of starvation every day in Africa." Do you get the point? In addition the rules of engagement inside these homes were such that no one owned up to being responsible for what exacted so much self sacrifice. In fact, if anyone felt anything regarded as evil and destructive the accepted myth was that someone else must have "made them feel this way." So, these so called assaults on each others' self esteem led to sanctioned acts of retaliation. As was to be expected in such environments the children being weak, small and relatively defenseless took the brunt of the attacks.

It's not uncommon for victims to beget victims. We are condemned to remain victims until we develop the mindset that we can change ourselves. Short of this we walk around wearing our unhappiness on our sleeves as our currency for paying for what we feel entitled to. We are notorious for apologizing for anything and everything. We apologize for taking up space, breathing too much air, and we may even ask permission to go to the bathroom. The message is that we do not feel entitled to much and we assiduously ask for little to avoid frustrations and disappointments because if we do not get what we feel entitled to for all our suffering we are likely to feel that we are being attacked as completely worthless when in fact we have devalued ourselves to the point that we may become desperate for appreciation and recognition for our dutiful service. Absent this, we are likely to blame others for what bubbles to the surface. I'm referring to all that we regard to be evil and destructive which we will need to blame someone for.

As I indicated, we have anger management problems that stem from the fact that we remain victims of those who raised us. As long as we feel helpless and hopeless to change we regard being held accountable for our anger as adding insult to injury. The unfairness and injustice of being stuck with an impoverished sense of entitlement is compounded by the fact that to own our hostilities toward our parental figures is to render us entitled to nothing. They might as well be dead. At least if they surrender to demands that they work, sweat, suffer without complaints when they are treated unfairly they are then, entitled to ask for something. The sense of injustice eats away at these folks and they cannot forgive their parental figures who they continue to avenge in part through their self defeating acts.

Many of us fit the profiles of battered spouses; men and women. We may feel so guilty over our hostile wishes, feelings etc., that we are at the mercy of efforts on the part of the batterers to justify what is unjustifiable. If the attacks continue a point is reached where the battered party will feel so bad about himself and so resentful of the aggression that he will flee what has become a re-living of his role as child and identify with the aggressor; the aggressive parent from the family of origin. It's not uncommon for us to wind up in court arrested for a domestic violence incident when in fact, the police reports read largely like muggings and we may have started out as the victim of aggression who then, retaliated. Once again two wrongs don't make a right but, the mentality of an angry victim is not unlike the mentality of a child who identifies with what he has learned.

When my clients come into my office not only do they bring their chronic tales of woe, they also bring with them the guarantee that I will be asked to enact with them scenarios similar to the ones they describe to me. We call such enactments, compulsions to repeat history. If we are victims of history then, we have to find ways to control its impact on us. We will try and shape that which we know how to deal with: To control its influence, destroy its influence or change its influence. The compulsion is indisputable evidence that we still resist mourning our losses so we can't move on and liberate these energies for more creative and satisfying pursuits.

For example, my clients will come in, regale me with stories of how they are being taken advantage of, reject my efforts to explore what it all means in terms of their motives for such self defeating actions and then, forget to pay me for weeks on end. Misery loves company and passing the role of victim on to others is a way to stave off envy, and affirms a sense of entitlement to be compensated for all our pain and self sacrifice. Our actions express a logic that can only be understood by blurring the boundaries between the past and present: "What right do I (their psychotherapist) have to get consideration for my time and trouble when y clients do not consider themselves and do not ask for their due from others?"

In my psychotherapy practice I help many in a variety of ways. 1) I model healthy self interest, and help clients resolve their conflicts over identifying with myself. I respect y clients as capable of growing, changing and coping with unfairness and injustice in life that we all must learn to accept, in order to lead reasonably happy lives. 2) I normalize the feelings my clients believe are evil and destructive, establish ground rules for acceptable ways of expressing them, mirror expressions of these feelings with acceptance and understanding, and reassure my clients that

they will not destroy me with their anger. I also reassure them that I will not retaliate should they express anger and disappointment towards myself. 3) I encourage, and acknowledge their expressions of healthy self interest and resist rewarding self defeating actions. Conversely, I model healthy self interest. 4) In addition, I also model healthy assertions of authority to empower my clients to challenge their guilt, challenge time honored notions that glorify self sacrifice, and neutralize their attacks on themselves that for so long left their self esteem and mood in ruins. 5) We reframe their anger as an emotion that is a starting point to assess what they are getting too little of or too much of that they would like to change, and then how to use their anger to assert their rights to be treated with more respect and consideration and 6) I provide these clients the corrective experiences of being re-parented so that they can mourn their childhood losses and shed their identifications as victims.

I have attempted with this brief article to describe for you the origins of anger management problems experienced by any of us who exhibit self defeating personality traits; our characteristics and how they can be addressed through psychotherapy. One can teach someone everything they need to know about assertive communications, fighting fairly, de-escalating conflicts, mindfulness, etc. However, if we are still at war with images of abusive and neglectful parental figures, then until we are ready to wave the white flag all the anger management classes in the world won't empower us to change until we are ready to own the consequences of what growing up has left us with as our problems to solve.