

Natural Mental Health... Rage

By Carla Wills-Brandon

It was July, and the heat was stifling. After turning up the air-conditioning, I looked at the middle-aged man sitting on my peach-colored couch. He appeared to be very uncomfortable. "Is this the first time you've ever visited a therapist?" I asked.

"No," George replied. "When I was married to my ex-wife, Margie, she took me to some quack. You aren't going to tell me I need drugs, are you?"

Surprised, I replied, "Why would you think that?"

Shaking his head in dismay, he said, "The last shrink referred me to another doctor for Prozac, and the stuff made me feel numb... numb as a rock." For a moment, George appeared to be reflecting on his past. "Yep, the therapist thought I was the Beast and that my ex was a poor victim."

Running his fingers through his sandy blond hair, George hesitated and then added, "I have a problem with anger. I just can't seem to control it. This is partially why Margie and I broke up. Now, I have this delightful new woman in my life . . . and last week my anger popped up again. I know I scared her and I don't want to blow this relationship."

"George, what happens when you get angry?" I asked. Looking a bit ashamed, George replied, "Sometimes I get so mad I punch holes in the wall." Glancing up at me, I could tell he was waiting for a reaction. But he wasn't going to get one from me. "So, you punch holes in the wall. What else happens?" I questioned.

Casting his eyes downward, he continued, "I just lose it. Totally lose it. I've even screamed at my kids. I know they're frightened of me and I hate that. Now you know why I'm here."

"George," I asked, "are you prepared to do a lot of work?" He appeared confused until I added, "You have a serious rage problem, and, no, drugs will not fix it. Sadly, you've crossed the line from anger to rage, and I bet you've been in this place for some time."

Almost relieved, George replied, "Yes. What can I do about it?" Is George unusual? Absolutely not. In our feeling-denying society, George's plight is very common. Many men and women periodically erupt into a rage. After exploding at spouses, children, lovers, employees, friends, and others, such individuals are then racked with shame about their conduct. Let's begin by examining the psychology behind raging behavior.

Psychology of Anger

"All I feel is anger." This is a common quote I hear from clients who have difficulty with rage. Rage attacks appear to come in cycles. A good analogy to a rage attack would be a full tea kettle placed on the stove, the water inside of it slowly churning to a boil. After a while, the expanding steam in the kettle must escape. Eventually the steam violently shoots through the nozzle of the kettle, causing it to whistle. If one is not careful, the steam can create a nasty burn.



Rage attacks work just like a steaming tea kettle. Over a period of time, little frustrations, irritations, and anger naturally build. For most of us, anger is a normal consequence of living. Sadly, in our society, we're constantly rewarded for not expressing this emotion. Religious institutions, mental health-care providers, physicians, and contemporary spiritual teachers are quick to tell us that anger is 'unhealthy' or 'sinful.' Anger is only unhealthy if we don't process it appropriately. Not understanding this, many of us don't express our irritations, frustrations, and anger as these emotions occur. Instead, we stuff our feelings. Eventually all of this stuffed anger comes to a violent boil.

If we continue to repress our anger, we eventually find ourselves on anger overload. When we reach this point, anything can, and will, set us off. Explosive rage is a direct consequence of overloaded anger. In order to begin healing from rage attacks, it's extremely important to identify everyday moments of anger.

Identifying Anger

For a month, document your daily mood changes. "Impossible!" you say? It may feel that way, but here are a few guidelines to follow. When you feel resentment, frustration, irritation, annoyance, agitation, disgust, or exasperation, guess what? You're angry. For a month, record your daily reactions to stress and upset in an "anger journal." List what brought on these feelings. Who placed added stress on you at home or on the job? Did someone cut in front of you while you were driving to work, or did a family member do something that hurt you? Was a store clerk rude to you? Were your opinions ignored or discounted? Be totally honest.

Look At Your Body

Many ragers have difficulty identifying the above emotions. If this is true for you, begin documenting changes in your body. One man I worked with had to get up and urinate every time we talked about his sexual abuse. He was raging but didn't know how to express it. Another raging client broke out in boils when he was mad. One woman had attacks of diarrhea whenever we talked about her ex-husband. My husband also had difficulty with this emotion. When he couldn't express anger, his body would react with an outbreak of acne. Acne breakouts became his "red flag" alert for the anger emotion. Other physical responses to anger include migraine headaches, hemorrhoids, a sudden increase in blood pressure, a rupture of rashes, or Herpes simplex, nail biting, scab picking, hair pulling, or breaking out in a sweat.

For a month, document bodily changes daily. Also, write about upsets or disappointments you experienced that day. After a month, go through your calendar to see how your body expresses the emotion of anger. Alcoholism, drug dependence, compulsive eating, anorexia, bulimia, or other addictive behaviors have some of their roots in the emotion of anger. Be sure to list any substances you use in excess; note when your use increases.

Look At Your Past

My mother was incapable of expressing anger in a healthy manner. Interestingly, family friends and relatives continue to wonder why she died of cancer at the age of 38. My mother was, essentially, eaten up with stuffed rage.

My father came from a family where there was a lot of unexpressed anger. Silent raging is built-up anger that is never expressed. My grandfather was a very rageful man who would repress his rage. Because he never dealt with this anger, my father acted it out Ñ rather loudly, I might add. As you can imagine, I didn't have a clue about venting anger in a healthy fashion. I either stuffed it like my mother and suffered bouts of colitis, or exploded like dear old Dad, breaking dishes.

Children learn about expressing the emotion of anger by watching their parents and caregivers. On a sheet of paper, describe how your mother handled her anger. Next, look at how your father processed his fury. Finally, describe what your anger

looks like. Then, compare your expression of this emotion with that of your parents or other childhood caregivers and relatives. Who are you most like when expressing anger?

Old Baggage

Rage attacks can be the result of "over-feelings." George raged at his girlfriend. I wonder how much of his raging had to do with his unfinished business about his ex-wife's history of extramarital affairs. If we haven't totally resolved childhood losses, disappointments, divorces, old job conflicts, deaths, or feelings of past victimization, we are at risk for displacing these emotions on current-day loved ones.

Feelings in the here-and-now can trigger unresolved emotions from the past. Get a sheet of paper and list the rage attacks you've experienced over the last two years. List the people, situations, and places you were raging at. Once you've done so, ask yourself:

Did this particular situation or person deserve all of your rage?

1. Does this situation or person remind you of an event from your past?
2. Was your expression of rage more than was necessary for the situation you initially felt anger about?

Really looking at our behavior begins to provide us with clues as to why we react in the extreme with anger.

Get Extra Help If You Need To

If you find that you're having difficulty exploring your rage by yourself, seek out the assistance of a therapist who isn't afraid of anger. Be sure to shop around. Too many therapists, counselors, psychologists, spiritual counselors, and psychiatrists shame their clients into believing that anger is an unacceptable emotion. Not understanding rage is a result of long-standing repressed anger, these helping professionals often compound the situation by referring raging individuals for medication.

Support groups such as Co-dependency Anonymous (CODAD) or Emotions Anonymous can also provide you with guidance and they're free of charge. In learning how to process rage attacks in a nondestructive, growth-producing manner, lifestyle changes can greatly help. Here are some tips for managing rageful outbursts.

Lifestyle Remedies for Anger: A plan for identifying budding rage

Having a written plan of action that addresses rage can prevent destructive behavior from occurring. When rage begins, the rapid physical rise in the chemical adrenaline often escalates this emotion. Eventually, a raging person is powerless to turn off the destructive outburst. A rage plan assists you in nipping this behavior in the bud before it intensifies. Begin your plan by identifying what your rage looks like as it builds. Do you get headaches, clench your teeth, slam doors, or start to curse? Does your heart pound, or do you begin making a fist? Can you feel adrenaline rushing through your veins, or does your foot become lead on the gas pedal while driving your car? List all the emotional and physical changes that occur for you just before you explode into a rage. These characteristics will serve as your warning, or "red flag" system, when you're on the verge of a rage attack.

Create a plan of action for handling rage. This plan should include:

- taking a timeout and leaving the house or the office to walk around the block.
- going to a safe place and beating on, or screaming into, pillows; or

- doing something physical such as hitting a punching bag, pounding nails into a board, stomping on soda cans, tearing up phone books, throwing clay balls at the refrigerator, or writing angry letters to those you're upset with.

Give loved ones permission to take a timeout

Share your rage plan with your loved ones or those who live with you. Tell them to leave the scene if they feel you're about to erupt into a rage. If they're in your space while you're raging, they'll be victimized by your outburst. Even if you're angry with them, no one should have to endure the terror of a rage. When raging occurs, spouses need to be instructed to take any children out of the house. Growing up with a raging parent produces children who rage, self-destruct, suffer from hyperactivity, or are depressed. Let your family know that once your raging reaches a certain point, you're powerless to stop it and that it's in their best interest to leave you alone.

Take care of your basic needs

People who rage are more at risk for doing so if they're not taking care of their basic needs. There's a saying that goes something like this: "Never get too hungry, angry, lonely, or tired." As we've discussed, letting life's frustrations build is a setup for a rage attack. When we don't take time to relax; don't take care of ourselves emotionally, physically or spiritually; don't get enough sleep; or neglect developing our creative side, we will feel tired and frustrated with life. Life stops feeling joyful; it becomes taxing on our being. This constant sense of frustration eventually leads us to the door of rage.

Nutrition definitely contributes to raging behavior. If we're hungry and our blood sugar has dropped, we will be more irritable. Next month we'll look at nutritional factors that can contribute to a raging state of mind.

The above is taken from Carla's book *Natural Mental Health: How to Take Control of Your Own Emotional Well-Being*. For more information of this nature pick up a copy of *Natural Mental Health or Learning to Say No*.