



Anger in America

Myths and Truths About the Emotion We Love to Hate

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America loves anger. The message is everywhere in our movies, politics and music. Why? Perhaps because it gives us feelings of certainty and power. Studies show that fear and anxiety are bad for our health, but getting moderately angry relieves some of our stress.

There are plenty of very angry people around, and plenty of myths about anger. Venting your anger is healthy. Is that a myth? Men are angrier than women. It sometimes seems that way, but is it true? And we've seen the stereotype in movies like "Grumpy Old Men." The older you get, the angrier you get. Myth or truth? John Stossel, who's reported on anger issues on "20/20" for years, sorts it all out.

We'll also examine anger in families and how to deal with it. The Weinstein family had four out-of-control kids and a dad who frequently blew his top, until "Supernanny" Jo Frost came to help them. Frost shares practical advice on how families can resolve anger issues.

Plus, it's a rare person who can hit it really big in the movies, in sports or even in business without becoming a narcissist, with the rage that so often comes with it, according to Robert Millman, a professor at Cornell's Weill Medical College. Millman treats some of America's superstars and has become so familiar with what he describes as their narcissistic tendencies and insecurities that he has coined a syndrome unique to the celebrities: acquired situational narcissism.

"You can be a Saudi prince, for example, or you can be a baseball player or you can be a random billionaire and you can develop malignant narcissism by virtue of the situation," Millman said, adding that narcissism often leads to anger.

"It's this huge rage that you're not as great as you could be, or you're not being perceived as great as you could be," he said.

Does that explain some of the destructive and outrageous behavior we've come to accept in celebrities? Perhaps, but it's not just the stars. University of Michigan professor Brad Bushman says that narcissism is on the rise in America, and that the phenomenon is particularly striking in young people. "There's something in American culture that seems to feed these narcissistic tendencies," he said

Bushman says he has tested thousands of students and consistently found that the most narcissistic ones are the most vindictive if they don't get the praise and admiration they feel they deserve.

Robert Thurman, the first American to be ordained a Buddhist monk, might make you think twice about anger as a solution. His life is a lesson in how destructive anger can be. As a young Harvard student, Thurman had a fit of rage while fixing a flat tire and lost his eye. The trauma led him to drop out of school and travel to Tibet in a quest for answers about anger. He got some, and he thinks Americans should develop a more cautious approach to this toxic emotion.

"People will even kill themselves, you know," he said. "They'll like drive their car into something, they'll just get so flipped out. In other words, they won't even be careful with themselves, much less others, who they might love when they're normal and cool you know."

What he learned in his journey, above all, he says, is that we can change who we are in relation to anger. What Thurman says is supported by brain science, according to Dr. Richard Davidson at the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin.

"We can change our wiring," said Thurman. "That's the key thing."

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