

Common Inaccurate Beliefs About Anger

Michael E. Metz, Ph.D.

There are several common beliefs about Anger and its function in one's life and interactions with others. These are inaccurate beliefs which are unhealthy, even harmful, to one's self.

- **Lack of Emotional Responsibility and Blame of Other(s):**

It is common for angry persons to report, "He (She, It) made me angry." In this view, another person's **behavior causes** the anger. As long as the person believes the cause of their anger lies outside of themselves, they are unlikely to act to change their anger. Because someone else is responsible by behaving badly, that other person is viewed as needing to change. The angry person does not clearly recognize that one's own interpretations (perceptions and attributions of meaning) precipitate one's own feelings (that is, one's cognition cause one's own anger!), not the other's behaviors. This is why many people feel powerless when angry; they attribute causality to others, not to their own thoughts.

- **Condemnation of Others:**

Anger usually occurs with the idea that the target of one's anger is a totally worthless human being. The worthless individual is perceived as **deserving** one's angry outbursts or at least contempt.

- **Self-Righteousness:**

Some angry persons report believing that they have been **treated unfairly**. The transgressor is portrayed as morally wrong, while the angry person sees him- or her-self as the aggrieved party. Justice or God are viewed as then being on the side of the angry/aggrieved person. Self-righteousness involves the belief that the transgressor violated an absolute moral or ethical principle.

- **Cathartic Expression:**

"Hydraulic" metaphors of anger are common. Many angry persons believe that one must **express** their anger, the anger must be dissipated, or it will build up and either explode or cause personal harm (e.g., ulcers). Holding in anger is thought to be unhealthy; expressing it is thought to be necessary.

- **Anger Expression is an Effective Way to Control Others:**

Many angry persons appear to make the error of "selective abstraction" by believing that their anger achieves positive, short-term compliance. Their temper tantrums are "rewarded" and they are unaware of the resentful, bitter, distance that may be present. This results in the belief that the anger expression is an effective means to control others. This preference for short-term reinforcement and the ignorance of long-term consequences of the same behavior is a common human foible.