

What Lies Beneath

By Dr. Monica Vermani, C. Psych, Clinical Psychologist

Ever wonder what underlies negative emotions, like anger? Learning to look beneath 'blanket' emotions, like anger, can lead to a deeper, more compassionate, and more authentic understanding of ourselves and others.

The Oxford English dictionary defines anger as a 'strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility.' We've all been there, feeling disappointed, hurt, bitter, or let down. It never feels good, and it sometimes leads to unpleasant interactions with others, with damaging negative consequences.

Anger is a negative emotion, like jealousy, hate, and sometimes sadness. Anger can be a dangerous emotion, explosive, violent, and destructive. Most of us want to know how to handle ourselves better when we angry, but most of us have virtually no understanding of it.

Anger is what's known as a 'blanket' or 'secondary' emotion . Blanket emotions are not primary emotions, but emotions that stem from more deep-seated and core emotions, like fear, grief, and sadness. By examining our anger, and looking beyond and beneath situations that make us angry, we can better understand ourselves and relate to others in a more positive, authentic, and effective way.

Looking under the blanket

Here's an example. Martin is a member of a team of colleagues tasked with delivering potential solutions to correct communication problems across various segments of his company. During team meetings, Martin contributes the lion's share of ideas and solutions. These ideas are passed along to senior management via his team leader, and eventually are implemented with great success. As a result, Martin's team leader is acknowledged for his brilliant problem-solving abilities and rewarded with a job promotion, while Martin is left unacknowledged and unrewarded.

When Martin hears of his team leader's promotion, he is filled with anger. He is beside himself and doesn't know what to do, other than throwing an electronic device across the room, confronting his former team leader, or quitting his job, in a self-defeating act of defiance, as he has done before.

Go deeper

Let's look at what lies beneath Martin's anger in this situation. He feels used by someone he worked alongside and trusted. He feels sad at having been overlooked for a well-deserved promotion, unappreciated and unacknowledged for his contributions, and let down by a colleague who took credit for his ideas. He is afraid that he will never get ahead in his career, and that his talents and hard work will never be acknowledged. He might feel defeated, and in low self-esteem and courage, as a result of deep-seated feelings stemming from a childhood of never receiving his parents' praise.

When Martin looks beneath the blanket of his anger, he can begin to have compassion for himself and his situation. He may decide to schedule a conversation with his former team leader and ask that his contributions be formally acknowledged. In conversation with his former team leader, he may learn that he is well regarded and will soon be promoted. Or, he may decide to draw a line under what has happened and seek guidance from a career coach to ensure that this does not happen again. He may also find team members to be supportive of his contributions and together they might come up with a strategy as a team to fairly and formally acknowledge individual contributions in the future.

In this situation, acting in anger will not achieve a desirable result for Martin, and will more than likely keep him stuck in repeating and self-defeating patterns of behavior. Looking deeper into his true feelings and seeking a meaningful resolution could lead to a more transparent and equitable workplace, one that will eventually result in improved career prospects for Martin's valuable skills and abilities.

The anger problem

In many situations and relationships, there are times we can become angry. We can be let down and made to feel *less than* through the actions of a family member, friend, colleague, and even a stranger. When our feelings are ignored or trivialized, when we are unappreciated, left out, disrespected, or ignored we are hurt, and saddened, and become angry.

The most pressing problem with anger is that neither acting out in anger or holding it in delivers a desirable result. Anger demands our attention, as it buries our more authentic and true emotions, and prevents us from seeing ourselves and our situation clearly, and truly understanding what is happening within ourselves.

The upside of anger

Anger is a fight or flight emotion that shows up when we feel the need to defend ourselves. It's a sign that something is wrong and needs our attention and consideration. It is an indicator that we need to find a new way forward.

Learning to lift the blanket emotion of anger and explore our true feelings beneath leads us to a better understanding of and greater compassion for ourselves. When we explore what lies beneath our anger, we are improving our communication with ourselves. In turn, this leads to better and more authentic interactions with others and can open the door to positive changes in our lives.

When anger shows up

Step back from rather than act out in anger

Take time away from others to allow feelings of anger to decrease

Explore the underlying sadness, disappointment, or fear that triggered your anger

Acknowledge these true feelings beneath the anger

Commit to positive changes that tackle problematic situations in your life



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About the author

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