Anger, Covid-Style

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Whether you’re quarantined alone or with others, it’s likely that you may be experiencing anger during these unprecedented times. Anger at what you’ve lost, whether loved ones, a cancelled wedding or graduation, physical contact with friends and family, a normal routine or simply the ability to go where you want, when you want.

Anger is a normal part of grief, and in these times of physical distancing, everyone is grieving something.

For most of us, at no point in our development do we learn how to process negative emotions such as anger, irritability, annoyance and many others. These emotions are uncomfortable, and we simply don’t want to feel uncomfortable, which is a sign that our human brain is doing its job of keeping us safe.

When we do experience difficult emotions, we often quickly reach for the escape button, whether that is unhealthy food, yelling at others, or suppressing the anger for now, only to blow up later. No matter where the “escape button” takes you, it is not a true escape when the results are less than ideal.

Then we feel angry at ourselves for being angry. Yet that state of self-judgement has no upside and is never a part of the solution.

Rather than reaching for the escape button when we feel angry, what if instead we are willing to simply feel angry? To experience anger fully and completely. To invite it in and stare it in the face. To say to ourselves, “I’m feeling angry right now, and that’s okay.”

What if we are courageous enough to fully experience any uncomfortable emotion until it passes?

One way to do this is to describe what exactly you are experiencing in your body: are you clenching your jaw, making a fist, or tensing your shoulder muscles? Where exactly in your body do you experience anger? Imagine having to describe anger to someone who has never experienced it before – what would you say?

As you sit with your anger, notice how long it stays with you, along with the intensity. It’s likely you’ll find it short-lived and diminishing in intensity over time. Anger can pass with no negative consequence if we’re willing to face it.

Now notice what set your anger in motion. What thoughts were you thinking that caused anger? Write them down and ask yourself if they are true and helpful. If they’re not both true and helpful, ask yourself what else might be true. Given that thoughts are 100% optional, ask yourself what other thoughts would serve you better.

It may help to create a new version of an escape button such as a walk, a moment outside or sitting down with a journal – whatever gives you space to feel the feeling and identify the cause. An escape button that has no negative consequence will always serve you.

As challenging as it is to be in quarantine, we can also view it as an opportunity to learn more about ourselves, how we process emotions and how we interact with others. The lessons can be of benefit in all areas of our lives, and for our entire lives.