

Angry Thoughts

Anger is linked to a perception of threat, damage, or hurt, and to a belief that important rules have been violated. We also can become angry if we think we have been treated unfairly or prevented from obtaining something we expected to achieve. In the fight over the damaged shirt, Rick was angry because he expected that John would clean his shirt without any damage. John was angry because Rick's personal attack ("You are so careless and thoughtless!") seemed very unfair. It discounted his love and caring for Rick and his good intentions in laundering the shirt. Notice the emphasis on fairness, reasonableness, and expectation. It is not simply the hurt or damage that makes us angry, but the violation of our rules and expectations.

Imagine a man who loses his job. Does he feel angry? It depends. If the man loses his job and considers this a fair decision (perhaps because the company went bankrupt and all of its employees lost their jobs), he is unlikely to feel angry. However, if he thinks his job loss was unfair (perhaps others were not fired, or only men of a certain race or age lost their jobs), then he may feel very angry.

Similarly, if a child steps on your foot while you are riding on a bus, you feel pain. Whether or not you feel angry depends on your interpretation of the intent and reasonableness of the child's behaviour. Your anger is likely to be quick if you think the injury was intentional. But if you think that the child stepped on your foot by accident when a swerve of the bus made the child lose balance, you may wince in pain, but you probably do not feel anger. The probability of anger in response to an injury is related to your judgments of reasonableness or intention. For example, on an overcrowded bus, you may overlook someone's stepping on your foot more easily than you do on a nearly empty bus.

These rules of anger may seem quite straightforward until you consider that people vary greatly in what they consider fair and reasonable. Rick expected John to be attentive and supportive to him, even when Rick was behaving in ways John considered hurtful. John expected Rick to speak calmly to him, even when Rick was feeling enraged. Both Rick and John believed that their own expectations were reasonable and the other's expectations were unrealistic.

As Rick and John discovered, anger is most likely to emerge in close relationships. Anger is rarely so intense as when it is experienced with someone with whom we are in close contact, whether this person is a love partner or a work colleague. The link between anger and intimacy can be best understood by recognizing that each of us has multiple expectations for our friendships, love relationships, work partnerships, and so forth. We are less likely to have specific personal expectations for people we meet casually. We rarely feel intense anger toward a store clerk, because our expectations for this type of relationship are quite low. The closer our relationship with someone, the more likely it is that we have high expectations of this person. To complicate the picture, we may not tell people about our expectations, or even become aware of them ourselves, until they have been broken. Then we feel hurt, disappointed, and often angry.