

# Anger: taming the beast

# THE AGE OF RAGE

by Richard Fowler

**I never thought I would see something like this...**

As I stood there, two police officers were restraining him, and another one was on hand just in case. I remembered, only the day before, teaching this student about main and subordinate clauses. But, in this classroom, he was about to learn a very different lesson.

And then it happened...

His anger took control and he kicked-off, again.

The officers had warned him. And so down he went, hard. Head on the floor. Third officer holding him, too. And the handcuffs came out. And the boy whom I taught literacy was learning the consequences of his uncontrolled anger.

As I tried to reassure him, I realised that this was the inevitable result of his frequent, unconstrained outbursts of anger exhibited when he did not want to do something (that day it was enough to have the police called in). But what had just played out in front of me echoed of emotional reactions beyond the four walls of that room.

Anger is a modern-day pandemic. Let's face it, *Angry Bird* is not just a counter-intuitively cute cartoon bird (recently made into an animated film); he is fast becoming a cultural symbol that tells us something about the direction of our emotional trends. From increasing numbers of school students having anger problems (some of whom I work with) to the national increase in domestic violence, it seems that we are becoming an angrier nation. An article in the *NZ Herald*

in September last year explained that not only had domestic violence increased in 2020, but the brutality of attacks and severity of injuries was significantly worse, according to victim advocates. "A huge and continuing rise in calls for help and reports of strangulation becoming 'commonplace' are causing huge concern as support service staff scramble to make sure each victim gets the help they need."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe most of us will not end up in handcuffs, but our expression of this emotion is something that we can't ignore, even if "keep calm and carry on" is our mantra. Anger affects all of us, and we need to know how to tame this beast.

Perhaps you have problems controlling your anger or are one of the approximately 30% of people who know a close friend or family member who does. Then, for you, I would like to unpack this thing called anger and suggest some possible ways forward.

Anger, of course, is not necessarily a bad emotion. We have it for a reason: it informs, it motivates, it shows that we care. But the problem is in how we react when we feel this emotion, and the length of time we stay angry. These are the areas we need to change.

But why do we need to change if anger is a natural emotional response to situations and stimuli? Well, let's take our red-feathered friend, *Angry Bird*, for a moment. With over 33 million views of the trailer, we have had the opportunity to see how his uninhibited and



Our national fuse is becoming shorter, as increasing incidents of "road rage" show.

imbalanced expressions of anger leads to others getting hurt and to their avoiding him. Uncontrolled anger means that, at the end of the day, relationships suffer.

Unchecked, anger leads us to exactly where the wise, two-foot high, green sage of *Star Wars*, Yoda, said it would: "...anger leads to hate...hate leads to suffering", and then you are well and truly on the "dark side"! In changing, we protect our relationships and ourselves.

Here's an example of what happens when it goes unchecked. Ironically, this incident happened whilst sitting in the cinema after watching the new *Star Wars* film, *Rogue One*. My friend and I were about to see the dark side of someone's anger!

During the film, my friend had asked me a few questions about the plot. Talking is never a good idea in the cinema, but I responded as if I were some font of knowledge on *Star Wars*. Unbeknown to us, this was noticed by a man sitting in the row in front. After the film had finished, I saw him approach us. I knew what was coming. As the word "sorry" came out of my mouth, a torrent of rude words came out of his. I guess he had been bubbling away for most of the film and now had a chance to vent...and vent he did.

Our national fuse is becoming shorter. So, how can we lengthen our fuse and develop a greater control over our anger. Here are five principles in the acronym, A.N.G.E.R.

#### **A = ACCEPT**

How many times have you heard yourself say: "I can't believe he or she..." in some outburst of indignation because of someone else's action? Well, why don't you start believing because, apparently, they did. Oh, and get this, maybe we do those things, too! Do we always need to be in a state of shock when those annoying things happen? We all make mistakes and do things without considering other people's

feelings. Yes, people's actions can be, okay, selfish at times, but at the end of the day, pretty human after all! It's called being human and we need to accept the imperfections of our humanity. Be more accepting of people's mistakes and you will find yourself getting less angry.

#### **N = NO TO STORY**

Say no to your narrative. We are brilliant at writing our own version of events when something goes wrong: we always cast ourselves as the victim, not the perpetrator. Try saying no to your automatic victim response. Why? Because reinforcing your own narrative that writes you as the victim, creates a downward spiral leading to feelings of injustice as you play the mental court scene over and over in your head. This only gives fuel to your anger and frustration. You may be the victim, but recasting yourself as the victim only creates room for bitterness, and when bitterness has taken control, you will find yourself in prison instead of the other person.

#### **G = GIVE IT AWAY**

If playing the judge ourselves is emotionally unhealthy, who can be the judge? The simple answer is God. But before you dismiss this as a bunch of theoretical, religious mumbo jumbo, I want to share why giving your anger to God is incredibly helpful. In a long-term sense God is the only one who can bring true justice to a situation, and all will be judged by God. But, I know, that doesn't solve the here and now. So, what about the short-term benefit? When you give anger to God by telling him about it, or knowing that your situation is thought about by God, then it means the anger can go somewhere. No longer does it have to be locked up inside, swirling around in your head, but rather, it has a way out.

#### **E = EDIT YOUR EXPECTATIONS**

We live in a world of instant gratification: faster broadband, self-service check-outs, priority boarding



*Wait. If it is possible, don't make a decision in anger.*

at the airport. This has conditioned our expectations. And our expectations become our perceived reality of how things should be. If you expect something to be a certain way or people to act in a certain way then, sure enough, that will be the reality you will see or experience. The only thing is, life is not predictable; people and situations don't play by our expectations. Sometimes your internet drops, people turn up late, an elderly person takes more time at the check-out. That's life! So, what can we do? Whatever situation you go into, at work or at home, prepare yourself for the things that may not work out, consider what might go wrong. Think of what you could do, have solutions ready.

#### **R = RESPONSE**

Delay your response when angry. Your response will determine your relationships, period! Don't destroy them. If you have to take action or make a decision, buy yourself time: wait. If it is possible, don't make a decision in anger. We all make better decisions when anger is not trying to hijack our choice.

The biblical admonition of James, written 2000 years ago, is still very relevant for us today: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry".<sup>2</sup>

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/domestic-violence-increases-rapidly-in-new-zealand-strangulation-beatings-commonplace-in-2020/TKNYCLLUVQMBANS4QNXFXORLLM/>.

<sup>2</sup> James 1:19.