

Article: From Mad to M.A.D.L.E.S.S. by Gil Fronsdal

Anger is one of the most common human emotions and perhaps the most dangerous. Regardless of whether the anger is directed toward ourselves or others, it can be painful and cause a great deal of suffering. While the danger of mild anger may only be discomfort for the person who is angry, rage and simmering hostility can lead to significant pain and distress for ourselves and others. The danger of anger increases dramatically when it's acted out: relationships can be ruined, enemies made, and people's lives shattered with angry words or actions. It's painful to be angry, and acting with anger easily produces more pain.

It seems that whenever I teach about overcoming anger, someone inevitably insists, "But isn't anger sometimes appropriate?" The answer depends on the nature of the anger. If the anger involves hostility, then I hope it is never necessary. I hope we can always find a better way to accomplish what is needed than through aggression. If hostility is absent and the anger is a compelling frustration or the disapproval of an injustice or harmful behavior, then perhaps anger can be appropriate—provided it is acted on with wisdom and care. Yet even if anger is appropriate, it can all too easily be expressed in harmful ways. When anger is justified, it may not be necessary to become angry. We find our freedom by seeing we have a choice.

When we're motivated to avoid the dangers of anger, it's important to understand the anger and to learn how to work with it so it doesn't drive our behavior. Because taming the flames of anger can be difficult, I offer seven approaches that can help. For the sake of remembering them, I refer to them by the acronym M.A.D.L.E.S.S.—Motivation, Attention, Dissipation, Learning, Empathy, Story, and Speaking/Sharing.

M stands for **Motivation** and involves understanding what lies beneath our anger. Motivation can be explored with the following questions: What purpose is the anger serving? What is the anger trying to accomplish? Is the anger an attempt to release pent-up frustration or to push away something uncomfortable? Does being angry involve wanting to change, reject, or rectify something? Does the anger have a wise goal or purpose? Might there be wiser motivations or wiser actions?

Taking the time to ask these questions begins an important process of stepping back from the anger and considering it objectively. Having distanced ourselves in this way, we can then examine our relationship to the anger. We can ask ourselves: Do I want to be angry? Do I want to allow the anger to provoke and motivate me? If what we want is freedom, then our motivation for freedom has to be greater than our desire to remain angry.

This brings us to the **A** in the acronym: **Attention**. This involves being mindful of our anger by clearly seeing what is happening emotionally, physically, and mentally. What thoughts and beliefs come with the anger? What is the subjective experience of being angry? How does it feel in the body? What is happening right now in the present? How much does past and future thinking affect the anger?

One of the important functions of mindfulness of anger is to learn how to allow the anger to exist without being caught up in it. This involves cultivating an awareness that provides either mental distance from the anger or a sense of spaciousness around it. It can help to learn how to feel the anger in the body while imagining the body as an open container in which our energies flow freely. We can feel the impulses to move or to speak without acting on them. Mindfully breathing while being aware of the anger in the

body can be useful for giving “breathing room” to the anger. It can help us find a way to be aware of anger while being neither for it nor against it.

D stands for **Dissipation**. This is useful when we are so mad that we have trouble paying wise attention to our anger. Dissipation involves discharging the energy of anger so it doesn’t continue to harm us or cause us to act in ways we later regret. We can do this by going for a walk, exercising, taking a shower or a nap, or finding someone to talk to about the anger in a manner that calms us down. I have known people who’ve gone into the woods to be alone and then found a tree toward which they could safely express the anger.

Dissipation is not meant to be a way to forget the issue that caused the anger. Rather, it’s a way to diminish the intensity of the anger so we are not being pushed around by it. It’s also a way to become calm enough that we can **Learn** about the anger—which brings us to the **L** in M.A.D.L.E.S.S.

Anger presents us with an opportunity to learn something about ourselves. The presence of anger is a symptom of a disharmony or conflict that would be helpful to understand well. This can be done by reflecting carefully on what happened, including an honest consideration of our own contribution to getting worked up. For example, we can explore our own reactivity so that in the future we aren’t as easily triggered. Hopefully pride, embarrassment, resentment, or blame won’t interfere with the willingness to do this important investigation.

When learning about our reactivity in relation to anger, it’s helpful to consider that there are chain reactions within us. The anger may be the last link in a series of reactions, many of which have gone unrecognized. Three of the most common and under appreciated causes of anger are hurt, sadness, and fear. Taking the time to discover if and how these underlying emotions are present can change not only our relationship to the anger but also our relationship to the person or situation with whom we’re angry. Seeing how anger is a symptom of the underlying feelings can help us to address those root feelings without perpetuating a conflict or antagonism toward others.

When anger involves hostility, there are even deeper layers to uncover and explore. Perhaps the most important is selfishness. There is no hostility without some degree of self-absorption and ideas of “me, myself, and mine.” Listening to how often our speech and thoughts are self-referential can provide a useful way to understand the degree of our self-centeredness. Sometimes we may learn that anger arises when our self-identity is hurt or threatened. Hopefully becoming aware of our selfishness doesn’t become an additional reason to be angry. Such self-understanding is meant to be a step toward freedom and greater self-compassion.

The **E** in the acronym stands for **Empathy**—a quality that, while often absent when anger is present, can be evoked by searching for a fuller understanding of the people or situation we’re angry with. People seldom cause harm unless they are suffering themselves. Their meanness or negligence may have more to do with stresses they are living under than with the person they are hurting. Those who are ill, for instance, may anger easily because they have little tolerance for frustration. A bully may be smarting from an earlier humiliation. A boss may speak sharply because of the strain of being unable to care adequately for a dying parent. Or someone may exhibit anger as a way to compensate for insecurity.

Of course, understanding people’s inappropriate behavior is not the same as excusing it. Empathy might, however, allow us to soften our hard position toward them, perhaps

even to let go of our anger. Realizing the other person has difficulties just as we do may help us to take their behavior less personally. And most important, this empathy may actually lead to a feeling of compassion: rather than lingering in our anger, we feel concern for the person's well being. Working through conflict and disagreement becomes easier when there is empathy for the other party.

Related to empathy is **Story**, the first **S** in M.A.D.L.E.S.S. Anger often arises from an inaccurate story we tell ourselves. For instance, we might make up a story about another person's intention. Or we imagine our anger will teach the other person a lesson, or that anger is necessary to prevent others from taking advantage of us. Investigating the story we have around the anger is a way to question what we may be holding on to and begin to consider if there are other ways of understanding.

One useful story to consider is that being angry may be causing us pain while having minimal or no effect on the other person. I have known people who did the cost/benefit analysis of anger and concluded that being mad was not in their best interest. They found that holding on to resentment was not worth the pain it caused them. Another useful story is to imagine that the circumstance that elicited the anger was designed as the perfect training opportunity for one's path to freedom. The task then is to discover appropriate ways to take advantage of the opportunity.

If we find ourselves seeing conflict through the filter of a hard "me versus you" view, it might be interesting to find a realistic story that sees everyone as "us" or "we." Is there an approach that considers what is best for everyone involved, not just "me"?

The last **S** in M.A.D.L.E.S.S. is **Speak and Share**. Overcoming anger is not a substitute for dealing with the conflicts we have. Rather, it opens the door to finding productive ways of discussing the conflicts with others, especially with those involved. Even if we have not overcome the anger, we can learn wise ways of speaking that don't offend or threaten those we're speaking to. Telling someone we are angry with them probably won't create the best conditions for a fruitful conversation because the other person may feel criticized. If instead we explain how much we feel hurt by their behavior, the person may be given a chance to feel empathy for us and then be willing to have a constructive conversation.

And one of the most powerful ways of dealing with anger, especially when all else fails, is to share something with the person with whom you are angry—to give a gift. Gift giving can shift moods and relationships in many beneficial ways, some unexpected.

Learning to use the seven M.A.D.L.E.S.S. strategies helps us approach our anger with respect, as something that warrants our careful attention. These steps can become a path through anger to freedom. Not only does this path reduce the dangers we face; it also makes us safer to those around us.

—Gil Fronsdal