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Got Anger? Try Naming It To Tame It

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Ariel Davis for NPR

Over the past three years, I've had one major goal in my personal life: To stop being so angry.

Anger has been my emotional currency. I grew up in an angry home. Door slamming and phone throwing were basic means of communication.

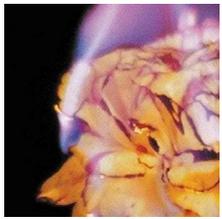
I brought these skills to my 20-year marriage. "Why are you yelling?" my husband

would say.

"I'm not," I'd retort. Oh wait. On second thought: "You're right. I am yelling."

Then three years ago, an earthquake hit our home: We had a baby girl. And all I wanted was the opposite. I wanted her to grow up in a peaceful environment — to learn other ways of handling uncomfortable situations.

So I went to therapy. I kept cognitive behavioral therapy worksheets. I took deep breaths, counted to 10 and walked out of rooms. And I even meditated at night.



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These strategies helped me manage the anger, but they never really decreased it. It was like keeping a feral horse in a barn. I was contained, but not really domesticated.

Then, six months ago, I was talking with Lisa Feldman Barrett, a psychologist at Northeastern University. Right at the end of the hour-long interview, she tossed out this suggestion: "You could increase your emotional granularity."

My *emotional* what?

"Go learn more emotion words and emotion concepts from your culture and other cultures," she added.

Over the past 30 years, Feldman Barrett has found evidence that anger isn't one emotion but rather a whole family of emotions. And learning to identify different members of the family is a powerful tool for regulating your anger, studies have shown.

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Or better yet, as I found, go and make up your own anger categories and start using them.

What is anger?

There's a common theory about anger. You'll find it in text books, scientific papers, news reports — even here at NPR. And some scientists support the theory, says Feldman Barrett.

The idea is that anger is one of several "basic emotions" that are universal, Feldman Barrett says. It's almost like a reflex — hard-wired in the brain. When something unjust or unfair happens to you, "your blood pressure often goes up. Your heart rate will go up. Maybe you'll breathe heavily or you'll have a reddening of your skin," she says. "Then you'll have an urge ... to punch or yell at someone. That's the stereotype of what anger is," Feldman Barrett says.

But it's not the full story.

Anger around the world

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What you feel when you're angry depends on the situation, what your past experiences are and how your culture has taught you to respond, she says.

As a result, there is actually enormous variation in the types of anger in the U.S., like exuberant anger when you're getting pumped up to compete in sports, or sad anger when your spouse or boss doesn't appreciate you.

When you look at other cultures, the variation explodes.

Germans have a word that roughly means "a face in need of a slap," or *backpfeifengesicht*. "It's like you're so furious with someone that you look at their face, and it's as if their face is urging you to punch them," Feldman Barrett says. "It's a great emotion."

Ancient Greeks differentiated between a short-term anger that doesn't stick around (*ὀργή* or *orge*) with a long-lasting anger that's permanent (*μῆνις* or *menin*).

Mandarin Chinese has a specific word for anger directed toward yourself, 悔恨 or *huǐhèn*. It's literally a combination of regret and hate, says linguist Yao Yao at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. "You regret something you did so much, that you're angry at yourself," she says.

Thais have, at least, seven degrees of anger, says linguist Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong at the University of Hawaii. "We don't walk around saying 'I'm angry.' That's too broad," she says. "We may start with 'I'm displeased' and 'I'm dissatisfied' and then increase the intensity," she says.

And India is a treasure trove of angers.

"There's a common form of anger which means like 'when eggplant hits the hot oil,'" says Abhijeet Paul, who teaches South Asian literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

"You suddenly become, like, really angry at hearing something shocking or learning

something that you really, really dislike," Paul says.

Indians also differentiate between political anger, which you have for the ruling class or "boss man," and personal angers, which you have for a friend, family or neighbor. You would never mix the two and express political anger in a personal relationship, Paul says.

"There's also a very interesting anger that is a loving anger," Paul says. You express this emotion toward a spouse when your spouse has angered you but you can't help them, only love them, he says. "It's a mixed bag of love, grief, sorrow and anger."

Personalize anger to help regulate it

So in many ways, anger is like wine. There are these major varieties — such as chardonnay and pinot noir — but each vintage has its own unique combination of aromas, flavors and potency. The more practice you have at detecting — and naming — these nuances, the better you understand wine.

And if you learn to detect all the various flavors and nuances of anger and label them, you can start to handle your anger better, says psychologist Maria Gendron at Yale University.

"There's definitely emerging evidence that just the act of putting a label on your feelings is a really powerful tool for regulation," Gendron says. It can keep the anger from overwhelming you. It can offer clues about what to do in response to the anger. And sometimes, it can make the anger go away.

The idea is to take a statement that's broad and general, such as, "I'm so angry," and make it more precise. Take the Thai: "I'm displeased," or the German "Backpfeifengesicht!"

Psychologists call this strategy emotional granularity. Studies show that the more emotional granularity a person has, the less likely they are to shout or hit someone who has hurt them. They are also less likely to binge drink when stressed. On the other

hand, people diagnosed with major depressive disorder are more likely to have low emotional granularity compared to healthy adults.

"There's a whole arm of research showing how functional it is to have finely tuned categories for our experiences," Gendron says.

Emotional granularity is like watching HDTV versus regular TV. It lets you see your anger with higher resolution, Gendron says. "It gives you more information about what that anger means, whether you value that experience and choices about what to do next," she says.

This last part is key: Being granular with your anger helps you figure out what's the best way to handle the situation — or whether you should do anything at all.

For instance, if you are feeling a quick burst of anger, which you know will fade rapidly, then maybe doing nothing is the best strategy.

And you don't have to limit yourself to the labels that already exist, Gendron says. Be creative. Analyze what's causing your various angers, give them specific names and start using the terms with family and coworkers.



THE SALT

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"If you're making a practice in your family of coming up with words and then using them together, that actually can regulate physiology," she says. "That can resolve the kind of ambiguity about the situation."

Personally, I found this strategy the most helpful. I started paying attention to what typically triggers my anger at work and at home. And I found three major types, which I named.

Illogical anger: This emotions happens when somebody at work makes a decision

that seems completely illogical. Once I labeled this anger and started tracking what happens afterwards, I quickly realized that trying to convince an illogical person of logic is often futile – and a waste of time.

Hurry-up anger: This is the anger I feel when someone else is not doing something fast enough — yes, I'm talking about the driver of the gray Prius at the stoplight this morning or the 3-year-old who will not put her shoes on fast enough. Once I labeled it, I realized that cars, people and toddlers eventually move. Huffing and puffing doesn't make it faster.

Disonophous anger: This is my favorite anger. And has the biggest impact on my life.

I wanted to figure out how to decrease yelling at our house. So I started paying attention to what often occurred right before the screaming began. It was super obvious: The dog was barking and the toddler was screaming. Basically two loud sounds simultaneously.

So my husband and I made up *disonophous* anger from the Latin for "two sounds."

Now when my husband says, "I have disonophous anger, Michaelleen ..." we know exactly what to do: Put the dog on the porch and pick up the baby.

And I know he's not angry at me. He just wants some peace and quiet.

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