Anger – A Disabling Emotion

by Michael Edelstein
from his book *Three Minute Therapy, Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life*

Anger is not an involuntary emotional response to a specific situation. Anger arises from a philosophy-a way of viewing the world. At its core, anger represents an outlook of grandiosity, self-righteousness, commanding, and condemning. Many mental health professionals disagree with this view, that all kinds of anger are generally bad for you. Most therapists classify anger as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" according to context, and they usually argue that, when appropriate, it is healthy to express anger ("let it out") and unhealthy to suppress anger ("bottle it up").

Recent research, however, contradicts this popular view, and suggests that all anger, expressed or suppressed, is harmful to your health and damaging to your relationships with other people. Among the many difficulties associated with anger are:

- **Increased likelihood of heart attack, stroke, and hypertension**
- **Greater difficulty in solving problems constructively**
- **A tendency for the anger, which may start in one area of your life, to overlap and extend into other areas**
- **Preoccupation with thoughts of revenge**
- **Adopting an antagonistic attitude, which needlessly alienates other people with whom it's advantageous to have cordial dealings**
- **A predisposition to violence, especially child abuse**

Doesn't expressing anger help release pent-up frustration?

It's true that an outburst of anger may sometimes momentarily provide relief. But psychological distress often takes its toll on the body, and some preliminary evidence suggests that expressed anger causes more physical damage than suppressed anger. There is, however, a third

alternative to suppressing or expressing your anger: Don't make yourself angry in the first place!

The "expressive" approach implies that anger is something inside you, like a gallbladder. If your gallbladder bothers you, you could have it removed, and then it won't bother you anymore. Similarly, if you can get your anger out, it won't be inside you any more, causing distress.

This view is hopelessly mistaken. Anger is not a physical entity. It's a feeling generated by an attitude or belief. You don't free yourself of feelings by expressing the attitudes and beliefs that create them. That usually reaffirms and strengthens those attitudes and thus makes the feeling more likely to return.

Consider an opposite sort of feeling, like love – a feeling that we often want to continue. It's clear that the more you express feelings of love, tenderness, and caring, the more loving, tender, and caring you are likely to become. No one would suppose that by expressing such feelings you were "letting them out" and thus losing them.

It's exactly the same with the self-destructive feeling of anger. If you express your anger, you reaffirm and solidify your angry attitude, and make it more difficult to dispel. If you refrain from expressing your anger, this may be the first step towards avoiding anger entirely.