

Ever Wonder Why You're So Judgmental?

I used to be a bully—intellectually, anyway. As a student, I often found myself sitting through classes where I suspected that the teacher didn't really know what they were talking about. So I'd pounce: arguing, cross-examining, pointing out logical flaws, and generally being an obnoxious gadfly, just like my childhood idol, Socrates.

But like all bullies, I wasn't being mean simply for the sake of being mean; I was being mean because it seemed to fill a need in me. It made me feel powerful and smart in an environment where I was frequently under-stimulated, under-challenged, and bored stiff.

Just like the playground bully who learns that picking on little kids makes him feel big and strong after a night of abuse and belittling at home, I unconsciously learned that being hypercritical and judgmental made me feel smart after hours of classroom boredom and academic disappointment.

Of course, this general attitude of judgmentalness didn't win me many friends among my professors. And rightly so...

The difference between judging and being judgmental

At the time, I rationalized my judgmentalness with an argument something like this: "The truth is what matters most, especially in school. I'm just pointing out the truth!"

I thought of myself as a dispassionate judge simply setting the record straight. But to my teachers, I was coming across as a judgmental jerk. And they were right.

Besides the fact that I didn't know nearly as much as I

thought I did, my own rationalization doesn't hold up for an important psychological reason: My motives were selfish and entirely unexamined. Like the sophists of Socrates' day, I was using argumentation and logic for something other than the pursuit of truth and knowledge—money for them, better feels for me. And so I was rightly perceived as *judgmental*, rather than simply *judging*.

But it wasn't just the alleviation of boredom and disappointment that motivated my judgmentalness. There was something even more psychologically insidious going on...

What we all get wrong about anger

So far we've established that being *judgmental* is rightly considered poor behavior because—unlike dispassionate *judging*—it's motivated by selfish reasons: In my case, I wanted to feel less bored. But that's only half the story.

I got in the habit of being judgmental because it alleviated the aversive feelings of boredom and disappointment—a process psychologists call *negative reinforcement*. It's negative not in a good/bad sense but negative in the sense that the behavior (judgmentalness) increased because of a reduction in something aversive (boredom and disappointment).

Negative reinforcement is powerful enough to sustain many habits. But the most powerful habits are both negatively and positively reinforced. Junk food and drugs, for example, are so powerful as habits because they alleviate negative feelings and add positive ones.

Similarly, my habit of judgmentalness was especially strong because it was also positively reinforced: In addition to the alleviation of boredom and disappointment, I also felt a swell of positive feeling while I was arguing and being judgmental. This was partly excitement—the thrill of the intellectual

hunt!—but by far the largest positive emotion I experienced in these situations was self-righteous anger.

But for anger to be a positive reinforcer, that would have to mean anger is... a positive thing?!

Exactly.

One of the most common misconceptions about human psychology is the idea that anger is a “negative” emotion.

We incorrectly classify anger as negative because the outcomes it leads to are often negative: That sarcastic comment we mutter to our spouse after an argument that becomes a point of resentment or the car accident we get into as a result of our road rage and poor driving. Notice that in neither of the above examples are we actually describing the emotion of anger. Instead, we’re describing the outcomes and behaviors that it preceded.

But just because an emotional experience precedes a certain outcome doesn’t mean the emotional experience corresponds to the valence of the outcome. For example, if I miss exercising for a few days in a row, I often feel a mild twinge of guilt. Consequently, I end up going to the gym. But just because the behavioral result of getting to the gym was positive, that doesn’t make the emotional precursor of guilt a positive feeling. Guilt still feels bad even if it occasionally precedes positive results.

Emotions are properly defined by what they are themselves, not what they may or may not lead to down the line. So even though anger often precedes very bad outcomes, the feeling of anger itself is actually quite positive.

But anger does feel bad. I hate being angry!

Are you sure?

As I’ll try to show in the following section, we actually feel

positive when we're angry, although a lifetime on confusing antecedent and outcome has muddled our awareness of it.

Anger is a positive emotion.

Far be it from me to tell you how you feel. Still, I'd like to suggest a little experiment the next time you feel frustrated, annoyed, irritable, enraged, or any other emotional variant of anger: Stop and ask yourself, *Is the actual feeling state I'm absorbed in pleasurable or painful?*

I think you'll find that, often enough, anger itself feels quite pleasurable when you disentangle it from its surrounding thoughts and behaviors.

Here's why: Anger is typically the result of the following assessment about the world: *Something is wrong*. Now, if that were the end of the assessment, you'd expect to feel negative. But hidden between the lines of most assessments of injustice is an implied assessment of self-righteousness: *Something is wrong... and I'm right!*

In other words, the cognitive assessment that precedes anger almost always involves an argumentation along the lines of *they're wrong and I'm right*, which is decidedly positive and leads to a proportionally pleasurable emotional experience.

When we learn to stop and observe it carefully, we often find that the real feeling of anger is a sense of power, agency, control, pride, and righteousness. All of which feel very, very good.

Okay, maybe anger is positive. But what difference does it make?

As the notorious gadfly Socrates famously proclaimed:

The unexamined life is not worth living.

And while I never managed to get on to the philosophy career track, I found my way into psychology, which values that sentiment just as highly as the philosophers.

As a practicing psychologist, I get to witness every day how unexamined bits of thinking, emotion, belief, and desire get people tangled up in painful webs of emotional suffering and distress. And an unexamined view of anger is one of the primary culprits.

Here are two examples from my own life of how a poorly understood theory of anger can be problematic:

Anger is an antidepressant (with some potentially nasty side-effects)

As an argumentative classroom bully, I was amazingly unaware of the psychological mechanics driving my behavior: Being judgmental and overly-argumentative helped me alleviate the boredom, disappointment—and in a sense, profound sadness about the state of my education—by substituting self-righteous anger as my dominant emotional experience in the classroom.

The trouble was, it got me into unnecessary conflict with teachers and professors who didn't appreciate my antics. And while I managed to make it through my academic career without any major issues, there were a couple close calls. That's a pretty risky gamble for the sake of temporarily numbing out the feeling of boredom and disappointment.

Anger is a crutch that makes us passive

In addition to the explicit side effects of unexamined anger-as-antidepressant, it also has an implicit opportunity cost.

In economics, *opportunity cost* refers to all things you can't purchase once you've committed your money to a specific purchase. If I spend \$10 on a burger and fries, I can't spend that \$10 on a car wash, movie ticket, or anything else.

But opportunity cost applies to any model of investment. When I invested my time and energy into arguing with my professors, that was time and energy I couldn't spend elsewhere.

For example, a much better, more productive use of my time and energy would have been to address my boredom and disappointment head-on: Instead of criticizing my professors or school for not doing a good enough job, I could have taken it upon myself to study and learn more on my own.

My argumentative judgmentalness and all the ego-boosting anger that resulted distracted me from a very real solution to my problem.

All You Need to Know

Most of us think of anger as a negative emotion because its consequences often are. But the experience of anger itself is actually positive, which means it can function as a powerful but subtle reinforcer of unhelpful behavior.

One of the most common "uses" of anger is that it serves to alleviate or distract from other aversive feelings like sadness or boredom. Seen in this light, unhelpful tendencies like judgmentalness and hypercriticalness begin to make more sense as drivers of a *temporarily* useful emotion.

But awareness of this pattern of *judgmentalness leading to anger which serves to alleviate a painful emotion like sadness* is only possible when we begin to take a closer more nuanced look at our emotional lives.

As Socrates might have said had he ended up on a slightly different career path:

The unexamined emotional life is not worth living.

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