



# ANGER SAYS NO



by Carolyn Spring

For a very long time, I didn't 'do' anger.

In the family I grew up in, the adults were allowed to be angry, and even my sister was allowed to be angry, but for some reason I was not. The adults were allowed to be angry with me, but as a child I wasn't allowed to be angry with them. Nothing much changed when I myself became an adult, and mostly I just accepted it as the way it was. Many of us grow up with the mandate of 'Don't upset your mother'.

There's a lot of people who are uncomfortable with anger, and I seemed to run into an awful lot of them in my early adulthood. So by the time I arrived in therapy, I was armed with my version of what it takes to be 'mature': 'I don't do anger,' I said, and not only did I sincerely mean it, but I actually thought it was the

end goal of adulthood. I didn't understand the puzzled look that came back towards me. I certainly didn't understand when my therapist seemed to indicate that my 'not doing anger' might be something we'd want to work on.

I equated anger with vehement, violent rage. It was destructive. It was demeaning. It was ugly and putrid and rotten and foul. Surely everyone in their right mind should be aiming to 'not do anger'?

'Aah, but there's anger and there's anger,' my therapist said, unhelpfully. By this point I was beginning to feel a bit unsettled. Even talking about anger was making me squirm. I was convinced it was some sort of a trap, but I couldn't quite figure out what for.



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'Part of your problem is that you're not angry enough.'

You can go right off therapists, you know. This one was really getting under my skin.

And then there I was this weekend, talking to a survivor, and encouraging her to find her anger and use it to keep herself safe. 'Part of our problem is that we're not angry enough,' I said, unoriginally.

It was an arduous journey from anger-teetotalism to where I'm at today. I had to unpick a lot of cognitive distortions, beliefs implanted covertly by abusers to cover their tracks. Because it was convenient that in my family I wasn't allowed to be angry: convenient for the people who wanted to keep me quiet and didn't want to be confronted by the reality of their own wrongdoing.

But I hadn't seen it like that. So many of the beliefs we grow up with, we end up clinging to because we uncritically believe them to be true. Yorkshire is better than Lancashire; the milk goes in before the teabag; Christmas lunch can't be eaten before 3pm. And children aren't allowed to be angry with their parents. Obvious, huh?

But if you want to hurt a child, you need maintain a secret. What better way than to create a family culture where the children

are never allowed to object to anything that is done to them? Where anger is forbidden? Where the child is always in the wrong?

There are lots of reasons why I didn't 'do' anger, but it took me a long time before I realised that this was one of them. I had been set up never to be angry, because if I were angry, if I found my voice, if I learned to say, 'No!', then where would that leave my abusers?

Once I realised it was a set-up, it made me doubly angry: angry for the abuse, and angry for being tricked into never being angry.

So now out it all came - anger unleashed. Angry that I wasn't allowed to be angry. Angry at what they did to me. Angry at the way they covered their tracks. Angry at their blaming of me, how I was the one nobody could trust, the one nobody should ever believe. And angry too because it was a set-up, to maintain their secret.

Anger is a protective force and a creative force. Anger doesn't have to explode all over another person, to destroy them, to eviscerate them. Anger at its simplest is the boundary that says, 'No!'

I had to get angry with them, in order to protect myself from them. They kept on expecting me to take the blame and be



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silent. They got angry with me when I dared to say that I'd been abused, even though I never said by whom. But this time I got angry back. I refused to take the blame. And I put up a boundary for the first time in my life.

That was ten years ago, and it was the best thing I ever did. And now I'm standing talking to this dear survivor, and she wants to know how she can keep herself safe from her abusers.

My heart explodes on the inside of me. I seethe with the wrongness of it all. Why should she be hurt? Why should she be so fearful? Why should they get away with this?

My mind spins through the obvious options, of grounding and breathing, of journaling and 'phone a friend'. All the usual stuff – good stuff, wise stuff. But something more is needed. Something fundamental in all of this. How do we keep ourselves safe from people who would abuse us, when we don't even know what we're doing, when we're programmed to obey them, when we switch automatically into submission mode? It surges up within me, and I know what the answer is. We need to get angry.

We find the explosive energy of decades of unexpressed rage, and we tap into it to set a boundary. All the pain, all the hurt, all the injustice – instead of using it against

ourselves, we lay a hold of it to plant a wall around ourselves. We say, 'No!'

No, we're not going to do what they say. No, we're not going to let ourselves be hurt. No we're not going to take the blame again. No, they can't have access to us. No, we won't do what they want.

*No, no, no, no, no.*

Want to stay safe? Get angry.

Want to change your life? Get angry.

Want to heal? Want to find help? Want to succeed? Then get angry.

Because the anger is in there. Anger is the natural response when our boundaries are transgressed. It's the natural response when we're invalidated and abused, when we're maltreated and betrayed. Anger is the normal response to having been abused.

But we often fear anger, as if by acknowledging it, it will erupt all over us and we will set fire to the world around us. But I think we should fear our anger-less-ness more, because it's that which fails to set a boundary, and keep us safe.

Anger is a protective force, a creative force. We mustn't use it to hurt anyone. But we must use it to stay safe. ●

