

# Anger and Forgiveness with Robyn Walser

**Robyn Walser:** Noticing the physiological responses is part of helping you to, if you're suppressing, think about what you want to do to maybe voice your anger in a way that's healthy. Or if you're acting out, Thinking about, okay, what do I need to do that's values based, that maybe isn't about voicing the anger, like yelling or something.

I need to take a moment and ground, get in touch with what's happening, and then take an action. So, being aware of your physiological arousal can be very helpful in expanding the way you respond to anger.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That was Dr. Robyn Walser on psychologists off the clock.

**Yael Schonbrun:** We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in Mile high Denver, Colorado, author of ACT Daily Journal, the Act Daily Card Deck, and the upcoming book ACT for Burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from Coastal New England. I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of ACT Metaphors and the upcoming Imposter No More.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Hi everyone. I have our dear friend, Dr. Robyn Walser on the show today. Robyn is our friend and colleague and she's been on several episodes of psychologists off the call lock before. She's a frequent guest of ours, and in fact, you may recall from previous episodes if you've listened to her, that

she has a lovely French bulldog who you'll hear snoring during the episode, which is kind of a, if you know Robyn, this is a thing with Robyn, is that she always has dogs and they're always super cute and they always snore. Um, so you'll hear them and, and it's a little bit of a wild kingdom moment. 'cause you'll also hear some crows in the background. So you can just imagine that you're out in nature listening to crows. But the topic that I'm talking to Robyn about in this episode is anger and forgiveness.

Robyn co-authored the ACT workbook for anger. And we've talked about anger on the podcast before episode 216, and that ended up being a really popular episode of ours because I mean, who doesn't occasionally struggle with anger and I think there's so much you could talk about as relates to anger and how we experience anger and how we manage it. And so we wanted to have Robyn to come on and to add more to the conversation on anger and to hear her perspective on it. And I'm here today with Jill, who also knows Robyn and who has listened to the episode.

Jill, what are your thoughts?

**Jill Stoddard:** Who also has a snoring French bulldog, but this time it was not mine in the background.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You have the french bulldog, the act connection with Robyn and the french Bulldog connection.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, that's exactly right. Well, I love this episode and I think it's really timely because. You know, with our like constant barrage of news, typically bad news, you know, the exposure on social media, everything going on with politics and the divisiveness that we've seen, I think people are, Feeling angrier than ever before.

Expressing anger in, really unhelpful ways. And so, I think this is timely and I, I really appreciated the nuance of the discussion in terms of there are different ways anger can be felt, and also different reactions to anger.

It's not just the big explosive, like aggressive expressions, there are other ways that anger can come out, and so I just thought there was a lot of lovely nuance, and I think one of the parts of the conversation I appreciated most was you had a discussion around the function of needing to be right.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Hmm.

**Jill Stoddard:** And I think that that is something that underlies our conversations that get a little heated and we may not even realize that that's what's going on. And to be able to look at like what is showing up for you? Like what would it mean to be wrong and where is that need to be, right coming from, actually made me laugh because I remembered many years ago.

I think it's D B T and Marsha Linehan. There's a like what's more important? Being effective or being right. And I remember sort of teaching that to my husband many years ago, but probably in a way where I was like trying to make a point. And so now he throws it back at me all the time. But he uses it very skillfully because it's sort of this trigger for me to stop and go, oh yeah, I'm getting in that space where I recognize I feel this need to be right, and what am I trying to avoid with that?

And is this really what's called for in this context? So I just found that to be really useful.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And there's something so important about this because I think that there's something. I mean, the magical words are, oh, you're right honey. You know? It's like, it feels so good when you are right. And that there is something sort of that charges you up about that feeling of righteous anger. It really does.

And so I think, but sometimes it gets us into a whole lot of hot water. I mean, really this can cause a divorce. You know, if you're so locked into like, I'm right about this, that I'm willing to. You know, this is the hill I'm gonna die on kind of thing. And so, and there's other ways obviously in which, you know, if you think about politics and how that plays out in families, and I've certainly seen that with some of my extended family before.

And so it's, while on the one hand it feels powerful and good to be right and to be righteous, it's not always helping us to, to really latch onto that.

**Jill Stoddard:** Absolutely. Whenever I tell my husband, you know, if we're having some discussion about something and I I say, you were right. He's like, wait, I'm sorry, what? Could you say that again?

**Debbie Sorensen:** Can you

**Jill Stoddard:** You know?

**Debbie Sorensen:** writing please? Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** Like, you were right. And he's like, ah, hold on a second. Let me just, lemme just soak that in.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** But part of the reason for that is that.

It's hard for me to say that it's something that I've struggled with for a long time. Admitting I'm wrong, apologizing, you know, it's something I recognize in myself that I need to work on. And luckily, you know, he's very funny and uses humor around those kinds of, of things, and it's like helped me to actually identify these things better.

**Debbie Sorensen:** There are some phrases in the English language that I don't really like. One of them is that there's something like never say You're sorry or something like that. Like this sort of never apologize kind of vibe. I just don't like that. And another one is I.

Forgive and forget because it's not realistic. And the other piece of this conversation that we talk about is forgiveness and how sometimes anger is part of that. Sometimes, you know, forgetting isn't possible, and I think sometimes some of these sayings are based on some sort of cultural myth that we somehow come up with, but sometimes those can be very problematic.

**Jill Stoddard:** A hundred percent. I totally agree. I mean, I forget frequently why I just walked into a room, but I'm, but if, you know, if, if I feel wronged, Or, something really challenging has happened between two people, it's far less likely that you're going to forget. So, yeah, I totally agree.

And I thought that your conversation around forgiveness and what it does and doesn't mean, or what it does and doesn't entail was also really useful. It really added to the conversation you had with Carla McLaren fairly recently. You know, there were some elements added in this conversation with Robyn.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah that episode with Carla, it is interesting because that's another one. She, we talked about anger and the wisdom and anger, and we also talked about forgiveness and the intersection between anger and forgiveness. So this conversation to me feels like almost an extension of that conversation about the language of emotions.

**Jill Stoddard:** It's amazing how different the conversation was. It complimented that other episode. Which in that episode felt very thorough and

comprehensive. And so when I listen to this, I'm like, oh, see, there's like always more to learn. I just love that. That's why I love the podcast so much.

And you know, I would just add that listen to the end if you want to find out whether Robyn thinks we should set cars on fire.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Intriguing, intriguing. Well, everyone enjoy the conversation. My guest today, Dr. Robyn Walser, has appeared frequently as a guest on Psychologists Off the Clock. We're happy to have her back. She's talked to us about a variety of topics, including existentialism, acceptance and commitment therapy.

Narcissism and Empowering Women. She is the author of several books and a renowned speaker and trainer. Her consultation and training service is called Trauma and Life Consultation and Psychological Services. She has expertise on acceptance and commitment therapy, traumatic stress and moral injury.

She currently has an on demand ACT for trauma training available through Praxis. She also does research on suicide, and Robyn, as I understand it, you have a course coming up soon for clinicians on suicide. Can you tell us a little bit about that for listeners who might be interested?

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah. First, thank you so much for having me on psychologists off the clock again. It's such a pleasure. And I will. Yeah, no, it's, it's always a pleasure to sit down and chat about things that are important to psychologists and others who might listen. So we're doing a training October 6th through 27th and it's every Friday between those dates from 4 to 6 p. m. Eastern Time. And it's Act for Suicidal Behavior. I'll be joined by my colleagues, Dr. Sean Barnes and Dr. Lauren Borges. looking...

**Debbie Sorensen:** Both whom have been on the podcast, I might add. Sean came on and talked about suicide, and Lauren came in and talked to us about moral injury.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, they're both terrific folks, and I'm really glad to be doing this ACT for Suicidal Behavior training with them. I think it's going to help folks think about how to work with individuals in their practice and hospital settings and clinics who are engaging in suicidal behavior.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And that's a virtual training, is that correct?

**Robyn Walser:** so it's live training, but online.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Okay, and where people, where can people find out about that online?

**Robyn Walser:** Uh, go to Praxiset. com, that's P R A X I S C E T dot com and click on our courses and you'll find it there.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Wonderful. That'll be a great training. Thank you, Robyn. And so we're here today to have a conversation with Robyn about anger and forgiveness. One of the many books that Robyn has written, which she co authored with Manuela O'Connell is called the Act Workbook for Anger. So Robyn, thank you again for being here. I'm really excited to talk to you about anger and forgiveness.

**Robyn Walser:** I'm looking forward to talking about it too. And just a shout out to my good friend and colleague Dr. Manuela O'Connell, who wrote the book with me. She wanted to be here today, but was unable. And so I'll be speaking for the both of us, I suppose today.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yes, it's always tough when there's two authors of a book. It's nice to have both when possible, but sometimes it just is very hard to arrange schedules to make that happen. So she'll be here in spirit.

**Robyn Walser:** Yes, we'll have her here in spirit for sure.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, actually, that's a nice segue to talk about the way that you start your book. Because I think it's very powerful. Both you and Manuela share a little bit about your own histories around anger. And I think it's really important when people are looking at anger, if anger is something that you might be struggling with or grappling with, to take a look at your history.

You know, what you learned about anger, how you learned to feel anger and respond to anger sort of growing up. And I was wondering, Robyn, I'm gonna start with a little bit of a personal question, um, since you put it in the book, I hope it's fair game. But would you be willing to share a little bit about your own learning history as a child?

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, sure, of course. And I do think this is really important for people to consider as they're looking at their own struggles with anger and what they learn about anger in their youth is really important. .

So, for me, I grew up in a family where I had a relatively explosive father, so he could get pretty angry and sometimes violent. And so... Having him, like,

demonstrate anger in those ways was really impactful in terms of how I thought about anger. It was scary and big and horrible and damaging.

And he also gave us messages that he was the only one allowed to express anger in the family. So there was a rule no one can be mad, but me, I'm the only one who can get angry here. And so, you know, we're following those rules, of course, because we didn't want him to get angry at us because it was so big.

And, it was very impactful. And for me, even though I knew I was feeling anger, I would not express it or show it. I would not talk about my anger as a result of that learning history. And so, I always sort of suppressed it and held it back. Not, I mean, sometimes I can get angry or I'll suppress for a while and then suddenly my anger is there in bigger ways than I might want it to be.

I guess I should say one other thing that became very clear to me is I observed this from my father is I never wanted to be like that. And so that also sort of informed how I was dealing with my anger emotionally. And not that I ever want to be acting out in ways that are problematic, but learning how to express anger in a way that's healthy and allows you to feel that emotion can be a real challenge for folks like myself.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I share, I would say, some similar history around that. I think Manuela in her story did too, that theme around suppressing anger. I think I felt very scared in the presence of anger too because of some of my history around it. And, To the point where when I first became a therapist, as I was training to become a clinician, if my clients expressed anger as they sometimes do, I think I kind of froze up a little bit, felt a little panicky.

The same was true in my personal life as well. But I had to learn to be in the presence of anger and also to not suppress my own anger so much. And cause I think I just always felt like, well, I'm not that angry. But. There's anger in there. I think I just kind of bottled it up or just didn't even realize it was there and you know, I'm aging and I did some work around this.

It's like, I can feel anger more now and be more in touch with it. And I think Hopefully, usually in a healthier way. I mean, I have my irritable moments, of course, but generally speaking, to be able to contact that was actually, took me some work too..

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, no, I agree. The messages are different for different people, of course, and your learning history will dictate some of that, but there's sort of some kind of general pieces out there that you know, it's okay for men to

be more angry than women, you know, sort of some social messages that are like that women shouldn't show anger. They're, you know, crazy if they do or out of control or something like that. And we can say the same for men, especially if they're acting out. I mean, these are very general sort of thoughts that I'm putting out there and don't want to categorize too much because I really want people to get the message that we all feel anger and that it's okay for everybody to have that experience.

It's just what you do with it when you have it.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, and we'll talk more about that in a second. I think those narratives you're talking about, though, which are cultural and which sometimes there are components like gender components, those narratives do affect, they stay with us and affect how we respond to anger, how we feel it. It's interesting because, you know, I said I used to be kind of panic or freeze a little bit around it.

Now I do anger management work. That's one of the things I offer clients. So it's kind of funny to go from that to now. I love it. Because you can do so much work with anger, you can really help people. And I'm hoping to tap into that a little bit today so that people who listen might have a few you know, ideas and tips that might help them, because it is workable. I think, I've seen people make a huge shift in terms of how they're able to respond to anger. I don't know about you, Robyn, when you do this work.

**Robyn Walser:** yeah, absolutely. And I mean, well, I where it sounds like we're going to move in this direction, but I want to make sure we're capturing the social messaging that's out there. And that's a part of our learning history. So that's something to pay attention to is as well as not just, you know, what did you learn in your family of origin?

But also what were the social messages that you receive about anger and what it means about you. And probably one of the things that is going to be very important to convey is that the distinction between feeling it and, and the behavioral expression of it. Like those are two different things and most people don't make that distinction.

And so. I think the social messages don't capture that either. It's just sort of all balled into one big you can have it or you cannot have it kind of deal. And that misses the range of anger kinds of experiences that you can have that are little bits of burn versus great big burns and, you know, like Little sparks versus bonfires is another way to say it.



There's a full range of emotional response here and lots of messages about what's okay, and I think women don't really get to share that very much, and when they do, they're labeled negatively. Of course, if men are behaving violently as a result of anger, there's lots of labels that come along that as well, but there's a lot more room for loud voices of men than there is for loud voices of women.

That's sort of that social process that's out there.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Absolutely, yeah, and I do think sometimes for men in certain situations I'm sure this is not universally true, but in certain contexts that is one of the few emotions that men are allowed to express, you know some of those more vulnerable emotions are the ones that are discouraged sometimes among groups of men.

So it's sort of interesting the difference, at least that's, that's been my experience here in the U. S.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah and one thing we should say is that there are cultural sensitivities here to a different messages depending on the culture that people are from and what's okay in this area. So we can be thoughtful about that culture and context. so some of the things that we're talking about are general, but we do want to be thoughtful about those kinds of issues.

And the only way to really know is to speak to the individual in front of you and understand their learning history, their social messages, the way they understand it as a personal process, if that makes sense.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, and I think if you're working on anger in your own life, you can ask yourself, What did I learn about growing up about anger? What's my history there? What messages do I hear about anger in my situation, in my Context my cultural context in the world around me and just think about how's that playing out for you?

And is there anything unhelpful in there, you know, because that's sometimes where you come like wow I did learn this growing up and it's not helping me. So maybe I need to unlearn that I don't know if you can unlearn it but learn something

**Robyn Walser:** New, broaden, broaden what we've learned and I think, you know, to be fair as well, if I think about my mom and her modeling of anger, so she would get angry, right? But never in front of my dad. So it was context

dependent. She kept it on the down low. And , it would usually involve, as I think about it, you know, Of course, facial expressions

we can read anger and facial expressions, and some kind of fast walking, if that makes sense, like walking fast, kind of moving around the house in a way where it was clear that there was an energy behind it, and maybe, you know, a little bit of Cupboard slamming or setting things down hard. Not very often, but every now and then, so you could tell that something was going on.

But she wouldn't say much about what was happening, but you could read it in her body language. And so there again probably not the most effective way of expressing anger kind of shut down of the voice of bottled up voice, but expressed through other actions under the context of my dad being absent.

And that was from time to time.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I can picture exactly what you're saying. I feel like I've had moments like that where I'm sort of huffing around. You know, like, I'm not saying the words out loud, but you can, if you're paying attention to my body language, you know I'm

Um, yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Those non verbal cues and...

Yeah, of expressions of anger. So those are a piece of the behavioral part as well. Yeah. Well, if we talk about the emotion itself, in the book you really make the point that the feeling of anger, the emotion of anger is It's not the problem in general, right? So it's a wired in emotion we all have.

Could you talk a little bit about that? Why do we have anger? What purpose does it serve and what does it do for us? Why do we have it? Why is it the case that the emotion itself isn't necessarily the problem?

**Robyn Walser:** I think this is a great question, and if you think about needing to be mobilized in the fight flight, you know, freeze system, we sort of bring it down to some basics that if you're threatened, or feel threatened in some way, that anger is a lot of energy in it, a lot of explosiveness and power behind it.

And so anger can serve as a way to reduce threat, essentially. So it's kind of built into our system. And you can think of things that where You might see or experience anger very rapidly and it actually does serve the purpose of keeping others safe or keeping yourself safe. Like if you saw maybe a child in harm's

way and it was something that was pretty unpleasant, you might get really angry and grab the child and pull them out of harm's way.

You know, like there's a safety quality in it that really gets us mobilized, but, you know, shows up a lot under threat. I think that with our system of language and relating to it also can show up when we feel out of control, but that's probably also threat related too like, I'm not in charge and I'm not going to get what I want.

And what does that mean about me? I'm more vulnerable in some way. So it has a quality of like pushing against vulnerability. Because when we're vulnerable, we don't feel as safe. And so anger can serve a kind of protective function if that makes sense. But it's a natural experience, right? Like, we all experience anger.

Even those of us who've done lots of mindfulness and compassion and in fact, sometimes I would even argue that having some compassion might involve some anger. For instance, if you're feeling angry and stirred up about people being harmed and you want to take action on it.

So having compassion for those folks who are being harmed might actually involve the experience, an emotional experience of anger.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I think that's a really important point. Sometimes it's helpful in that sense that there's a problem, we need to do something about it whether it's an injustice or yeah, a threat we're trying to keep ourselves or someone else safe. I'm just thinking about that piece you said about it feels sometimes out of control. Because I think that's really important. I think that's where sometimes people get into problems. Sometimes it's... We need to act fast when that fight or flight system gets going, but sometimes that doesn't really serve us very well in today's modern world.

You know what I

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah. You know of course we have folks who are feeling threatened in some way, and it's about status, or being in control, or some sort of way of wanting to exert force in their social situations. And then, that's not the same as like pulling somebody out of danger, or reducing an actual threat to somebody.

It's more about protecting an ego, protecting themselves from having some kind of vulnerability.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I have an example of that from the gas station near my house. Actually, I wasn't there when this happened. My husband told me about it. My husband was waiting in line with a group of other people all waiting to pay for things and the guy working behind the counter had kind of fumbled with something and My husband said he thinks he was embarrassed because he was fumbling around there and had dropped something and there were all these people standing there watching him.

And this guy working at the gas station lashed out at this woman that was just there trying to buy something in this kind of surprising way. I think my husband told me about it because he found it a little shocking. And to me, that seems like an example of what you're talking about. Maybe he was in a social situation, he felt flustered, embarrassed, I'm not sure what he felt, but I'm guessing.

And his response was to yell at this woman for no reason, and it was kind of striking. Is that an example of what you're talking about?

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, like he felt a little vulnerable. He didn't want to feel that vulnerability. And so anger is an avoidance or can be an avoidance of vulnerability. So it can be you feel some kind of hurt and to avoid that experience you move to anger. You feel out of control in some way.

**Debbie Sorensen:** and I think that's really, you know, your book is an acceptance and commitment therapy Approach to looking at anger and that piece related to avoidance and control I think that's exactly where it often ends up being Problematic for people, so I was wondering if you could maybe just say a little bit more about that from that perspective of, the, the emotion itself isn't a problem, but maybe the, the control piece of it.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, so, when you think about the two ways that we can avoid emotional expression, there's the one that you and I started with in our personal stories where we're suppressing it, hiding it, cutting ourselves off from it, trying not to show it, and sometimes even wondering if we feel it, like, am I mad about this or not?

That is sort of one way to step away from your emotional experience. So you hide it. And then the other is, you're having another kind of emotional experience. Vulnerability. And you don't want to be vulnerable. You want to remain in control. And you act on it. You act out on it. As an example where you avoid the vulnerability by getting very big and loud and angry. And people respond to those situations pretty rapidly, like anger can get reinforced really quickly, like if you want somebody to stop doing something because it's maybe

hurting you in some way or making you feel vulnerable in some way, anger is a really quick way to do that.

You know, like if, if you say something to me, like you're evaluating me and, I hear it as a rejection, and then I get loud and big and forcefully confront you about it, you're more likely to like back off and get quiet. And so then my angry behavior has just been reinforced. And I get to avoid that vulnerability or that rejection that I felt around your evaluation.

Does that make sense?

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. There's that social reinforcement of it. A group of people that I'm surprised have come to me where anger is part of the clinical issue are parents, often mothers of young children because they're irritable or frustrated or angry and kind of acting in ways they don't want to be acting as a parent.

That's not consistent with their values. And I think that there's a good example of that in here that they'll say. Honey, go put on your pajamas, or, you know, get your shoes on we need to leave like 50 times and then nobody It's almost like nobody's even hearing it. This is my life, too, by the way.

I'm

**Robyn Walser:** for moms, and moms and dads, right?

**Debbie Sorensen:** I've done this so many times but then you snap Brush your teeth right now! You know, you like, lose your mind, and then all of a sudden everyone like, jumps up and does the thing. And then you're like, wow, okay you don't think this consciously, but hey, guess what just worked?

It got everyone's attention. But then of course, you don't feel good about that because you're like, I don't want to be the mom who's yelling about this.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, no, but that's a really good example of everybody snaps to it, right? And then it like reinforces that and happens again and again and again. And I have a lot of sympathy for parents around this place, right? Because we want our kids to behave right. We want them to engage in good health habits, brush your teeth, go to sleep, like all of these things that are important and helping kids learn and stay healthy.

And it's a struggle like, how do we do this in ways where we are behaving as the parent we want to behave as and not getting like over the top angry or yelling all the time or something like that. It takes a dedication and consistency and I think parents these days have a hard time with that because of time itself, right?

Like parents are for time. I mean, usually people are working and there's a thousand and one things to do. And so you want control because it makes your life easier. And it just is one more tick mark on the things that you have to do and there's also sort of a sense of future construction here if you think about it in languaging terms that we do in the act world is once they're in bed, I'll be able to relax.

Right? I'm going to be able to calm down and I'm going to get a little break. So there's a lot of motivating factors in there. You want healthy children. You want a little break for yourself. You want to be able to get things done. And so, anger is... It's a quick way to make that happen. And so I think it's hard these days for parents to sort of come into this place of patience and thinking about consequences and how to consistently behave with your child so that they are doing what you'd hope they do.

But for the parent, it's like control and you control here.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Control.

**Robyn Walser:** some degree of that is true. You need to, you know, teach your children things. But acting in ways that are consistent with your values in that territory when you're feeling angry is hard and it takes work and awareness.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, so one piece of working with anger is to be really aware of anger, to just really understand it, and I think that's something that in your workbook, you have a number of things that people can look at to just be aware of their own emotions, but you really break it down into four main components, feelings, physiological sensations, thoughts, and actions.

We've talked a little bit about Actions already. I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about some of the other components. So starting with physical physiological sensations. I actually think, and I imagine knowing you, Robyn, and I imagine you'll agree with me on that, that sometimes just being aware of the physical sensations of anger can be really helpful.

So could you walk through. What are some of the common physical sensations of anger people might notice and how might it be helpful

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, so, you know, some of the common things that folks might notice are. Feelings of heat. Like you can feel yourself turning red or heat. Heart rate, breathing increases. You might also experience tension in your muscles, you might, for instance, if you made an angry face, you could feel the experience of that like the tension maybe in between your eyebrows.

People, when they're angry, their mouths tend to turn downward and so you can feel the sensation of the muscles pulling on your face. And so some people experience these differently, but those are some kind of typical physiological responses. Some other folks report, and they describe this as a physiological experience, a kind of narrowing of their vision.

They lose their peripheral vision. They might find their fists clenching. Or they might find themselves like like my mom, walking quickly and moving in a fast fashion. So it could involve the whole body in terms of thinking about the way our body is responding physiologically. To this emotional experience and being aware of those can be really super helpful for people Sometimes folks are not paying attention to what's going on with their body at all They're not looking at the signals that show this kind of arousal They're kind of caught in their minds and, you know, thinking about this shouldn't be happening or, you know, what's going on here.

I need to fix this or whatever it is that they're running through their mind in that moment. And if we can get people to just slow down a little bit, it doesn't take much just a little bit. A second or two and connect with their physiological experience. It's a place where maybe they could choose to do something different.

Noticing the physiological responses is part of helping you to, if you're suppressing, think about what you want to do to maybe voice your anger in a way that's healthy. Or if you're acting out, Thinking about, okay, what do I need to do that's values based, that maybe isn't about voicing the anger, like yelling or something.

I need to take a moment and ground, get in touch with what's happening, and then take an action. So, being aware of your physiological arousal can be very helpful in expanding the way you respond to anger.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, it helps with that out of control feeling you were talking about earlier, to notice it in your body. Then you can say, I'm angry, and then you can pause, like you said, and choose a response that's less automatic, that might be more values consistent. And so if you tune into your body, it builds that in, which I think is really helpful.

You know, it feels, Like, somehow it's not as powerful. If you're like, oh, you know, I'm feeling hot, intense, I'm angry, , then, if you're like, raaah, just, you know, explode.

**Robyn Walser:** Well, and I think one other thing to pay attention to here, too, is that if you're working with people who are really struggling with acting out on their anger, like, you know, I work with a fair number of veterans, and they'll describe their anger as going from 0 to 100 in, like, a split second, right? So it's one of those very intense and quick experiences.

And they say, there's no way I can, I can intervene on that. Like it's from zero to a hundred and it's done. It's over with, I've exploded. And so you kind of feel as a clinician, like, well, how do I even start them? If they're going from zero to a hundred, how do I help them get in control of this behavior?

And often folks who have this kind of experience really do think there's no way. But if you ask them to like do a very slowed down and look at the seconds before the zero, right, when they say zero to a hundred and you actually back up time just slowly before the zero, you'll start discovering that there are things that are indicating and telling you that you're about to hit that space.

And some of that is physiological stuff.

**Debbie Sorensen:** hmm.

**Robyn Walser:** so people are not attending to the, the pre zero space. And if you start looking at that pre zero space, you might find that what if you said something there and did something there, or even sooner than that, like you back it up even further. And so sometimes when I'm working with clients, I'll say, let's look at the, seconds, the minutes, the hour.

The day even and what's kind of leading up to this place where you go from zero to a hundred and probably what you'll discover is a Number of places along the way where you could take a different action That stops that zero to 100 place that feels so out of control



**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. That's a really good way to think of it. This is giving me a thought about... road rage and how sometimes it just feels like this instant rage situation and it happens fast, you know, you're barreling down the highway. But if you back up, usually there's something, like maybe you're afraid because you're driving fast and someone cut you off or something, you know what I mean?

There's something in there. It feels so fast, but if you really break it down, what happened right before that? Can you tune into that? And that's where I think it goes back to what you're saying. Sometimes there's other emotions also happening, but... Rage is so strong that you don't notice those other feelings, you know?

Oh yeah, it was pretty scary when I was driving down the highway and someone swerved. Um, does that mean I need to go chase them down on the highway? And get into a violent altercation? No.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, well road rage can be a terrible problem. My brother just shared with me that two vehicles were in a road rage altercation on the road and they hit a third vehicle and all three people in that third vehicle died. And so you really have to think about what's happening here and it can be multiply determined, but I think part of it is.

That there's rules about how you behave on the road, and you don't ride on somebody's bumper is a rule. You're supposed to, you know, when you take your driving courses, you learn the rule that you stay so many feet back from the bumper. So when somebody's up on our bumper, we get frustrated because they're not following the rules and that can set off an instance of road rage and we do something like slam on the brake and, you know, wave our fists and those kinds of things.

We're teaching that person a lesson, right? It's and there it's about control. It's about, and it's that space of I'm, I feel vulnerable here. You're not following the rules. I'm going to teach you a lesson when actually probably the more reasonable thing and safe thing to do is just to pull over in another lane and let that person pass because the person behind you is, you know, doing whatever they're going to do.

And so there's, that's part of it, right? It's like, we want people to be socially responsible and when they aren't doing that, it's hard for us or we're caught up in our own rush where I've got to get there. We don't leave enough time to do it.

And we're burning the gas to to get where we're going. We want people to get out of the way.

So that's another way that that can happen. We get mad when they're just driving, right, or we accidentally do things like maybe we accidentally cut someone off or maybe somebody's in a hurry and they cut us off and we attribute negative reasons to them, right? Like we call them names and they're not paying attention and they're bad drivers and we

**Debbie Sorensen:** an and

**Robyn Walser:** idiots, right?

It makes me think of, I think this was George Carlin who said that everybody driving faster than me is a maniac and everyone driving slower than me is an idiot.

**Debbie Sorensen:** That's so good! That's perfect. I love that.

**Robyn Walser:** Right. And so you were you're on the road, look at that maniac go and then Oh, look at that idiot. So there's a very funny experience in there and we feel isolated. So there's a, like, power thing inside of our vehicles, too, where we kind of assume that other people won't do things, but that's not always the case.

So we act out on our anger, and then many of us will instantly regret it. And why did I do that? Like, why was I acting that way? That's not how I want to be. And I was just recently in Thailand. I was thinking about this and there's a lot of vehicles on the road. And those, the little small vehicles, I can't think of the name of them right now, but they're just these little tiny vehicles and they're just coming from everywhere and cutting in but you know what, no, no honking.

No shaking of fists. People were just letting the traffic flow as it flowed, and making way, and allowing, and I was just like, Oh, we, we need, um, the tie way of driving in many of these situations, but there's of course ways to work on road rage as well that involve awareness. And do I want to be when I'm driving?

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and I think you gave a few examples of this, but I wanted to talk about the role of thoughts here a little bit more. I think you gave some examples in this road rage examples, you know, that's one of the aspects of anger to be aware of when we get very anxious or cranky. Stuck in certain

thinking patterns that may contribute or that could result from that immediate threat response.

So I don't know if you have anything else you want to add about that, about I guess basically the types of thoughts and beliefs that might show up related anger that people can be on the lookout for.

**Robyn Walser:** Well, so, it does depend, again, on whether you're suppressing or whether you're acting out on it. And so like, when you think about suppressing, there's sort of this, do I have the right to be angry, or I shouldn't behave this way, or you have self doubt about your emotional experience. Or you might sort of run thoughts around in your mind quietly, where you can hear the complaints in your head, but you're not acting on it in any way, and you just sort of, um, shut down.

But it doesn't mean you aren't still having thoughts, but they may be more self directed, or more, like, self doubtish, or they might have qualities of If I get angry, it's going to be terrible, and nothing's going to happen anyway. I'm ineffective, inefficient, like some of those kinds of thoughts might be happening.

And by the way, I want to say that there's crossover and not clear distinctions about these kinds of things, but for folks who are acting out, the thoughts might be about how unfair things are in some way, shape, or form. People have broken rules that I have and that I don't want them to break.

And I'm right about this. I'm right about the way things should be. And they're wrong, and I'm going to show them that I'm right. And so, thoughts that are kind of in those territories. Not very much, a lot of rigidity around right wrong, good bad, fair unfair, that they can get caught up in as a way to try to, again, try to control.

**Debbie Sorensen:** So maybe we can use righteous thinking, you know, that I'm right or things shouldn't be this way type thinking as an example for how you might address that. Let's, let's say you were working with a client on anger and there were themes of, well, I'm right about this. And. The world is wrong, or this other particular person is wrong because I think that idea, I mean, that underlies anger so often, right, that, well, my way is correct, and the world is not behaving accordingly.

So how might you work with that, with, with someone who wanted to do some anger work?

**Robyn Walser:** Well, I do think that one of the first things I want to do, as you might in any act work, is understand their values. And first, like, get those clarified and defined. And then ask questions about what happens for you. What do you get or receive from being right? Like, If you get to be right, or if there's a fairness in this, like what happens for you?

And, usually it's involves things like people can see and understand me. Things will go more smoothly, things will go my way. Relationships will be easier because people will get where I'm coming from and I won't get in these places. Right, so there's sort of this. Kind of sense of ease and peace and acceptability in some way.

And if you kind of pursue, like, what will you get if you're right? Because largely, and then you can compare and contrast, so, in being right, is that what you get? Let's look at the two places sort of doing a little bit of a discrimination task, like coordinating these two events and looking at how they're actually playing out.

And I might do some creative hopelessness work then here around, is this actually getting you where you want to go? Is it getting you this value and acceptance? And if people are acting out, it's often they're not getting those things and people are rejecting them more and pulling away from them more and then they get into it's not fair and they don't understand me and The world doesn't get it and so you can either go further down that path or look at how you might change your behavior and broaden your understanding of things and invite other ways of seeing the world.

And so you could do a fair bit of perspective taking and, you know, your shoes, their shoes, the person's shoes that they're angry with. In just different ways of kind of understanding and interacting with the thing that they actually want that's values based and meaning driven versus that sense of I need to be in control.

For suppression of anger, I also want to know, like, what are your values here, but in relation to you, how do you want to treat you? In this process, what do you want your voice to be about and stand for in the world? And what are the fears that are there if you let your voice be heard? And again, it's things like, I'll be rejected.

I won't be accepted. I won't fit. I'll be ostracized. I'll be labeled crazy or whatever. And so you have to start looking at what would a voice that's not

suppressed look like? And how might you express your experience of anger in ways that are appropriate to the context and honor your values of yourself?

There's sort of an in and out that I'm doing here. Suppression that's about the inner, the way you treat yourself, and then for acting out the way others are being treated that turns out to be problematic. Although, both of them are problematic, both in and out as well, but just a little distinction in where the focus might be.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I love that you address both of those, because I think when people hear, oh, you have an anger book out there, or terms like anger management, they assume it's the acting out kind. But, you know, if you're really, this workbook for anger, it's, you're really processing different types of anger in different ways it might be showing up.

So I think that's important, that's an important distinction, but also important to take a look at both sides of that.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, and you know, when you think about right and wrong, like righteousness, like there's, I kind of want to make a little bit of distinction here is that there may be times where there's a righteous anger that does call for a little bit of righteousness acting out, but not harmful acting out, like you want to about what that means like social movements sometimes contain these qualities when there's a lot of injustice and it can serve a function.

It raises awareness to some of the struggles that people have. And we just have to think about how we want to be in that space. You know, if you look at the Women's March on Washington, D. C. in 2017, um, There's a lot of anger, but also a very peaceful demonstration. But I got, like, just my own experience of, you know, what was happening at that time, and which, by the way, that turned out to be a worldwide march, which was really cool, of women marching.

Like, this is my expression of anger, uh, regarding oppression and suppression of women. And... I'm going to make my voice heard by showing up here and I'm going to carry the signs and say this isn't okay. And so again, this is context dependent and you have to think about how do I want to be in the context and what kind of actions do I want to take?

I never support violence. But sometimes I can sort of connect with why people might set a car on fire. It's not good. I'm not saying to do that, but just like you get your kid's attention when you yell, you get people's attention when you set a

car on fire. And so there's lots of nuances and subtleties and important things to keep in mind.

And typically this becomes a problem for people. Not in a single social injustice kind of space, but when they're suppressing and acting out in places that are like family members and relationships, friendships, their social arena in ways that are preventing authenticity or damaging the relationships through violent actions

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. I'm glad you made that point. I wanted to ask you about that because you do mention in your book if you think about values, sometimes anger can be helpful in the sense that it fuels pro social behavior. It helps people be aware of something that they care deeply about. And so that values based distinction around, okay, why am I feeling this and what do I do with it, and that, that can be a helpful use of anger in terms of the behavioral

**Robyn Walser:** be quite motivating anger.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Yeah. lights a fire sometimes, it?

**Robyn Walser:** It it lights some fires sometimes and can actually produce a social change. So again, you always want to look at the function and whether it's workable so if you're throwing things at your house or hitting people or yelling and screaming, it's probably getting you the opposite of what it is that you want. it's not functioning the way you want. So what are we going to do? To help it take on a different function and that probably going to mean a behavior change for both suppressors and those who act out, right? Like, you're going to have to consider, how do I want to raise my voice if I can use that as a metaphor?

And how do I want to lower my voice if I can use that as a metaphor? So that I become more effective socially and more effective in the relationships that I really care about.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I want to turn the conversation a little bit now toward forgiveness. And I'll point to our listeners toward a recent episode with Carla McLaren, who wrote the book *The Language of Emotions*, because we talked about, a little bit about forgiveness in that conversation, and she had an interesting take on it.

And it reminded me of Robyn, of your work on *Forgiveness*, which has been really influential on me back when, you know, you did a lot of training with me back when I was at the VA and, you know, we were working together on the Act

for Depression trainings that we were doing. Um, you shared a lot about forgiveness that I have carried with me and used with my clients, used in my own life.

Specifically, a lot of it was related to your work on trauma and moral injury. So, I would love to share a little bit with our listeners about that, if that's okay with you, Robyn.

**Robyn Walser:** Sure, I'm happy to talk about

**Debbie Sorensen:** starting with what do you mean by forgiveness? I think there's a lot of misconceptions about it, even the way that people talk casually about forgiveness.

So in your mind, what, what do you mean when you're talking about forgiveness?

**Robyn Walser:** Well, so let me start by saying that I think forgiveness can be quite healing, so if you have somebody who has suppressed for a long time, you may need to Forgive yourself. And if you're someone who's acted out, you may need to forgive yourself and forgive others. And so it can have a healing quality to it.

But I do approach it from a pretty different angle in terms of looking at the word itself. Forgive And breaking apart. And actually, I got to give credit to Steve Hayes because he's one of the first persons who talked to me about this many years ago, probably back in 1992 or something like that.

But, you know, to give what came before the harm back, to give back. And so if you look at to forgive and giving is an action, right, it's a It's an activity, giving isn't a feeling, do you see what I'm saying? And typically what people do is they think about forgiving as a felt experience after you've said something like, I forgive you.

And you've let somebody off the hook for... Some harm that they've done to you. I forgive you for that. And those words are great can actually Help to heal the relationship and the emotional experience that comes inside of that can feel like a sense of lightness or That burden has been lifted in some way, but if people check their experience and maybe you have felt this too, Deb, where you do the forgiveness and then you think about the harm or the thing that happened and you're mad again.

Have you ever had that happen?

**Debbie Sorensen:** yes. Have I ever? Yeah. okay, I'm gonna forgive now, and then Five minutes later, you're back to mad.

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah, it's like it, the emotional experience that comes along with this is fluid and changing. Like I think about my relationship with my father, for instance, and there's a lot that I've forgiven him for. But it doesn't mean that I still don't get angry about some of the things that I saw him do and some of the things he did.

like I can go call to memory some of the events and get upset about it again and feel angry about it. And so we can't rely on the emotional experience of forgiveness as a signal of forgiveness. I don't think, because then you're forgiving, not forgiving, forgiving, not forgiving, if it's about being angry, the, the emotion of anger, or the thoughts that you have about it.

But rather, as a values based act, action or activity, if I'm going to forgive, I'm going to offer the interpersonal relationship the process that was in place before the harm. So, for instance if, um, let's say you and I were gonna go out and get a glass of wine, right? And then I showed up and you didn't I might feel dismissed, upset and maybe it was an important thing for me. And I'm mad about it. And then I forgive you. Then the thing that I'm going to do as an activity is treat you the same way I treated you before that happened.

That my friendship is back in its place, does that make sense? So I'm not carrying chips on my shoulder. I'm not reminding you of it. I'm not like giving you the cold shoulder or distancing myself from you. I am taking actions, values based actions that are about our relationship again. That are actions, not feelings.

Maybe I'm thinking about it and I get upset again, but it's not going to determine the quality of our relationship. Does that make sense?

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, so you're moving forward in your relationship with

**Robyn Walser:** Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** You might still have moments when you remember, right? I mean that, that forgive and forget saying drives me a little bonkers because it's like you want to forget, you would remember and you might feel You miffed at me for doing that.



You waited there and I never showed up. And you can still stay friends with me and make another

**Robyn Walser:** Yes.

**Debbie Sorensen:** with me and call me or something like

**Robyn Walser:** Precisely. Precisely.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Does it always involve continuing the relationship with the person in every circumstance, do you think?

**Robyn Walser:** No, it can involve other kinds of actions and activities. So, for instance let's say that you've been in a harmful relationship with someone where maybe they have physically harmed you. And... You decide that you're going to forgive them. It doesn't mean you have to go back to the relationship with that person.

But instead, what does it mean for you in terms of your actions and moving forward that would be symbolic inaction of that forgiveness. And it might be things That involve a kind of letting go where I'm no longer gonna, like, spend time disparaging that person, or, I'm no longer gonna.

Get wrapped up with my own time in thinking about how things should have been different in the past, but be more present and forward looking in it. Some people might do other things like my act of forgiveness in this is to contribute to domestic violence shelter, like there's other ways that you can sort of take actions around that or I'm going to, um, help other women.

I mean, the things you can do are without numbers, just using your own creativity and deciding how you want to give in ways that represent that forgiveness that don't involve reconnecting with the individual who harmed you. Because I wouldn't recommend, right, that, yeah, people forgive and then get back in

dangerous, painful, traumatic, harmful relationships, right? Like that's, that's absolutely not what this is about. And so I want to be very clear about that.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. So it could be more moving forward in your own life in a particular way that you choose. And then finally, what about self forgiveness? So if the person that you're not forgiving is yourself for something

that you did, you know, moral injury we've talked about on the podcast. I know that you have done work in that area.

You've done something. I can think of things I've done that I still, when I think about it, I'm like, Struggle to forgive myself, you know, what does self forgiveness look like for people?

**Robyn Walser:** Well, so I would define it in the same way. Give back to yourself a healthy, values based relationship that was there before the harm. And then notice that when you remember those things, that that's going to show up from time to time. I mean, I've clearly done things that I've regretted. And, is it okay to forgive myself for some of those things?

And, I'm ashamed or embarrassed about them in some fashion. And when I recall them to mind right now, like little tendrils of shame can show up. And so the deal is though, is that then I go hide and... Pull away and run and do things that are not compassionate, or can I be compassionate towards myself and continue to act in ways towards myself as if I had not done that thing?

And I know sometimes that's hard but if you think about values and meaning, if I'm like continuing to punish myself in some way, it's not only impacting me, it's probably impacting people around me. If every time I come in front of you, I'm ashamed and punishing and self punishing, it has a different quality to our relationship.

than if I am compassionate towards myself in those spaces where I need to self forgive. So, it's the same idea, it's just that you turn it towards yourself, and I'm going to treat myself as if, and how would I behave in relationships as if. I think when you think about it with moral injury, right, some of what happens for folks who've had a moral injury is that they have violated their own values, and then they can either forgive themselves, and move back into relationships in values based, meaningful ways.

That's often not what happens. They start punishing themselves and say, they deserve to suffer and that they're evil or, you know, somehow there's something really wrong with them. And they have partners and children and families and friendships. And if you're coming from the place of I'm evil, and if I touch you, you will get it, or, you know, uh, it really changes what meaning you're creating.

And so, moving back to that values based space towards self and other can really be if not healing, a different way of creating the life that you wanna live.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I would love to talk to you about this more, but I know that we have gotten to the end of our time here. I'll let our listeners know. I just find this to be such a helpful way to think about it, and I have used this framework with a number of clients over the years because I have seen that self punishing or just being held at that place for so long.

So thank you for sharing your thoughts on that and if you want to learn more you have a whole chapter on forgiveness in the Act for Anger workbook because clearly that is one path toward healing if you're finding yourself in this place of anger. So really appreciate your thoughts on that Robyn.

**Robyn Walser:** Well, thank you so much for inviting me again, and really had fun talking about, anger and forgiveness and the ways that we can experience it and still have our values in place, behaviorally

**Debbie Sorensen:** well, thank you. I feel like there's so many helpful parts of this conversation. I appreciate it. And I'll just quickly remind the listeners to check out the show notes for today's episode. We'll link, of course, to the book and to Robyn and all of her resources, as well as to some of those trainings that Robyn mentioned earlier. Act for Suicidal Behaviors training and her trauma trainings that are available on demand. So many wonderful resources. If you are interested in this, you don't want to miss it. Training with Robyn, she's the best. And, so, it's really nice to see you, Robyn. Thanks again for coming

**Robyn Walser:** So good to see you too, Debbie. I look forward to seeing you in the future.

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