

Managing Anger and Irritability

Russell Kolts: [00:00:00] I think there's this push and pull sometimes with anger where it feels really powerful. And so you go with it. But in doing that, a lot of times we ended up doing something that's hurtful to the people we really care about.

And so if you do that, you may feel powerful while that's happening.

But very often afterwards, there's this feeling of shame. Right that I just hurt someone I really care about

Debbie Sorensen: That was Dr. Russel Kolts on psychologists off the clock.

Diana Hill: We are four 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, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal

Diana Hill: I'm Dr. Diana Hill coauthor with Debbie on ACT Daily Journal, and practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-[00:01:00] based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book of ACT Metaphors.

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

Diana Hill: Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock!

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Diana Hill: You can get a coupon code for Praxis, continuing education on our website, off the clock, [00:02:00] psych.com for some of their live offerings. And we can really attest to the quality of practice we've both participated in, in ourselves

and have seen its benefits in our clinical

Jill Stoddard: so visit our offers Page at offtheclocksite.com

Diana Hill: Hi, this is Diana here, and I'm really excited to share with you that I partnered with mindful.org to host a free online summit coming up on October 15th and 16th called from striving to thriving, but you are not going to want to miss. It has thought leaders like Dr. Jed brewer. Who's going to talk about the neuroscience of striving, Dr.

Kristin Neff. Who's going to bring all of her fierceness to talk about how to care for yourself. Dr. Rick Hanson, we'll be talking about aspiration without attachment. Dr. Monica Ramirez Bosco is going to tackle perfectionism and procrastination. And the dear Paul Gilbert will be there talking about how to shift from competitive drive towards a more compassionate mind.

Julie Bogart is going to teach us how to motivate our kids from the inside out. Rhonda Magee will be [00:03:00] sharing on the good kind of striving, how to strive for social justice. And Alison Briscoe Smith. We'll be talking about parenting with grace and gumption. I'll be sharing an act and how to use ads to transform, striving into thriving.

So check us out at, [from striving to thriving.com](http://fromstrivingtothriving.com). That's from striving to thriving.com and I can't wait to see you on October 15th and 16th.

Debbie Sorensen: Anger is a universal human emotion that we all have. And yet, sometimes it can get us into some hot water when we don't manage our anger very well or respond to it in a very helpful way.

Anger can range everywhere from just that day-to-day irritability and grumpiness. Like when you snap at your partner or your kids or coworkers, or at the more extreme end it can result in violence road, rage. Aggression yelling. There's really a big range when we're talking about anger and today we're going to be talking about all of it.

This is Debbie and today's episode is a little [00:04:00] different. So the first half of the episode will be a conversation between me and Diana, about how we approach anger in our work. Um, we're gonna be talking about a behavioral and acceptance and commitment therapy based approach to anger, and we'll give you some.

Based strategies that we find helpful. And then the second half of the episode is a segment with our friend, Dr. Russell Kolts. Who's been on the podcast before to talk about compassion focused therapy, and he's the author of *The Compassionate Mind Guide to Managing Your Anger*. And he's going to talk about the role of compassion in anger. This is a topic that's been requested by our listeners in part, because a lot of people have been feeling really angry lately with the pandemic and all the stress of the world.

People have been reporting irritability a lot in my experience. And actually I just came across an article in the news. It was a CNN poll and

I sent the article to you, Diana. Um, the poll showed that a lot of Americans from both sides [00:05:00] of the political aisle are just reporting that they feel either very angry or somewhat angry about the state of the world right now. And so it seems like a timely topic always, but maybe especially. So right now, Diana, do you want to tell us a little bit about your experience working with anger and what you found helpful in your practice?

Diana Hill: Well, I love that you brought up the anger feels like it's on the rise. And I think that many people will relate to that. I'm hearing it a lot more in my practice as well. If just people feeling irritable and frustrated and acting in ways. Sort of are not how they want to be acting, whether it's with their kids or with their family members or at work?

And some of my favorite tools around anger actually trace back to a dialectical behavioral therapy approaches. And we'll talk a bit about chain analysis today

and how that's really helpful, but also I really appreciate Buddhist practices in the approach with anger, because it really maps on to act in terms of, it's not [00:06:00] about necessarily.

Changing anger as much as it is changing our responses when anger shows up. . How about you, Deb?

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. My work in anger management started a long time ago. I think mostly when I was working with veterans with PTSD years ago, because anger is associated with. The often people have a very short fuse and get very reactive when they have a trauma history. I I'd often say to my veterans that it feels like you go from zero to 100 and 0.5 seconds.

Um, and I think that's how it feels emotionally, but right now I'm doing private practice work. And I do still see a lot of different types of anger in my practice. I think it, you know, it shows up for everyone from professionals who are stressed out at work and getting irritable and snappy or people getting angry with family members and, you know, we don't always manage it very well.

one of my favorite tools for working with anger is called an anger episode model. I got this from a book I found really useful [00:07:00] called the Practitioner's Guide to Anger Management. We can link to that in a few other books that we found useful on the show notes for today.

, but anyway, the anger episode model really breaks down what's going on with anger and. I love that because I think in my experience, anger can be such a strong emotion and so powerful that it feels overwhelming to people. It just feels like this burst of emotion. That's so big and strong that sometimes we don't even know what's going on and it can just feel overwhelming.

And so the anger episode model breaks down the chain of events, leading up to the anger episode into its components. And by doing that, by looking at it in its pieces, it helps people have a better understanding of what's happening. It helps them slow down and take a closer look and it makes it less powerful and overwhelming.

And that tool is basically kind of like a chain analysis or a functional analysis tool. That's really geared toward anger

Diana Hill: What you're describing as you have the strong [00:08:00] experience of anger, and then there's all this shame around what you've, what you sort of did with your anger.

So you don't want to look at it again, but by not looking at it, you actually don't get to learn from it. And so chain analysis is a really nonjudgmental perspective. Break down what happened and oftentimes you pick an incident. Like here's an incident for me when I got really angry. I was actually in your episode, Debbie, I think at some point you said that, uh, the Diana doesn't seem like she gets angry.

What, what was it that he said, Diana seems like she has it together.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. Russell Kolts said, I think Diana seems like she has it all together.

Diana Hill: So yeah, behind closed doors, not so much always. And actually it's helpful to think about a recent incident when maybe you've experienced anger and to use chain analysis, to break it down to, to the different components that led up to it because it helps you see more clearly. What led up to your anchor response and then also choose a different response in the future.

one thing I [00:09:00] just want to add about to, uh, research on anger is that the idea that venting and punching a pillow and hitting a wall is a way to release your anger is an old one. And they have. Definitely disproven that with lots of research studies, that date back to the eighties, that when you do those behaviors, you just tend to make things worse.

And as we do these 10 analysis, you can see that sometimes it's sorta like, um, it's like scratching a mosquito bite. It feels good at first, but it just inflames the problem and leads to more problems than what you started with.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, it's true. The catharsis model has been debunked, but it's a myth, right? People still sometimes bring it up with me. Like I just need to get my anger out. And it's like, to me, when I do the work, the goal isn't to vent the anger or to just make the anger go away at all.

I think that's unrealistic for most people. I think instead it's more like helping people respond. More effectively. So they're not doing those things they regret. And to do [00:10:00] that really, you have to pay more attention to anger as it's showing up, like taking a step back to really notice it, notice what you're doing and then the consequences, the short and long-term consequences.

So we're going to kind of walk through some of those components.

Diana Hill: So when you're doing a function analysis, it helps to understand the context. I mean, the anger doesn't just come out of nowhere, but there's a context to why it's why it develops and what causes it to rise and get into.

Debbie Sorensen: and I think when you really look at the context, you can go way back and think about like, why do we even have. This going on in the first place. And I think it's really important to note that anger is wired in, right. It's the fight part of our fight or flight system. It's part of our threat system that helps us defend ourselves.

And so that can help you go a little easier on yourself just to recognize that this is a very normal human emotion that we all have.

Diana Hill: One of the things that I think has been rising to the surface recently is that people are angry and they're angry for good reason. Right? So [00:11:00] things like social justice issues or oppression or people that are frustrated around COVID and different approaches to the response to COVID right.

There can be reasons why you are angry and what we're not. What we're going to talk about today is not to undermine those reasons. And in fact, when you do a chain analysis, even understanding some of those reasons can help you be more effective in your responding so that you can really tend to what's underneath the reason whether it's to defend yourself or something that we need to fix

Debbie Sorensen: yeah, that's right. I think that sometimes we can learn from anger at points towards something that matters to us. It can point toward something that we care about and which can guide our behavior. I also think it's important to look culturally. At anger expression and what we've learned through our experience about anger.

And I think one example of that is gender socialization. I think sometimes men have learned that anger is okay to express, but more vulnerable emotions aren't whereas girls are often taught the opposite, right? That [00:12:00] they shouldn't express anger. They should bottle it up or be more passive or just not feel it at all.

So I think it's always an important part of the context to look at and what we learned. And some people out there think of anger as more of a secondary emotion. If you look at anger, it's almost like layers of an onion that what you see on the surface. Sometimes it's anger, but if you look deeper into the layers underneath it, sometimes it's something more vulnerable.

Like maybe something scary just happened. Like in the case of road rage, I think sometimes people were scared and, you know, they just had a really scary situation happened and they might flip into anger really easily. So I think it's interesting to take a look at what else is going on with anger, besides just what you see on this.

Diana Hill: So when I do a chain analysis with somebody that's struggling with anger, the first place I always start with is around vulnerability. And I think it really helps also just an understanding context, right? Because if you're too tired or maybe, you know, for me an example of a time when I got really angry, it was because I had just [00:13:00] driven in the car for two hours with my kids in the back of the car.

I had dinner to make, it was a Sunday evening school the next day. Right? There's all this context that leads me. To get to a place of not being able to regulate my anger very effectively. And being able to know what your vulnerabilities are to, to feeling anger or irritability is really helpful so that you can actually sometimes tend to those or say, this is a time when I need to pause and step away.

So in the first part of a chain analysis, getting clear on what, what are your vulnerabilities? What are sort of, what's sort of the setup for.

Debbie Sorensen: Impatience is a huge one, right? I think so often people are more prone to anger when they're in a hurry or they wanted things to go a certain way and then they get thrown off from that, from their expectations. And then they feel frustrated because of their impatient. Yeah. So I have my clients also really, as part of the chain to really take a close look at the internal cues that are coming up with anger, their thoughts, [00:14:00] their emotions, their body sensations, and anger, really.

I mean, if you pay attention, you can really start to notice it building up the sensations in your body. What I'm trying to do with my clients is to get the, and myself for that matter is to get my clients to really. Tune in and notice that so that they can catch themselves earlier in the, in the chain next time.

And people can notice like feeling hot, feeling their heart pounding. I had one client once who said that she felt like the top of her head was tingling whenever she started to feel angry, which was a really, I thought that was super interesting. And I was like, oh, that's a really good thing to start to notice before you react, is that tingling sensation on the top of your head, but whatever it is for you, it's really important to be aware of.

Diana Hill: and we can do the same sort of approach with anger that we've talked about in other domains, like bringing curiosity and a stance of sort of like, huh, noticing the wave as it rises, where, where along this wave do I, that I actually lose it. And can I do something different [00:15:00] than engaging in sort of either suppressing my sensations?

You know, I've, I've had clients talk about when they get really angry, they. Clench their mouth or they clench their teeth or they hold their breath or they grip their toes. And actually in doing that, you may be increasing your anger, right? Because you're not allowing that sensation to be there rather trying to resist it can make it worse.

So being aware in that chain of the sensations, and then I think the next next part of it is also being aware of your thoughts because there are certain. Types of thoughts that not only can trigger anger, but can keep anger going. And in particular thoughts that are judgmental, our mind wants to categorize things and simplify things and make sense of the world.

But when we get into sort of these global judgments about people, it can be particularly toxics, like a whole group of people are wrong or bad, or the person you're talking to is stupid. It really blocks you from taking perspective or having compassion. And the same is true for blaming or [00:16:00] assuming intent.

So when we start to get into that cycle of blame and pointing fingers, not only can that sort of block us from taking in the big picture, we just sort of ended up defending our territory and get more and more. Um, self-righteous in our anchor. So being aware of your thoughts and how you're actually kind of.

using your thoughts to feed and fuel the anger and being a mind watcher, you know, we don't have to argue against those thoughts, but we can start to not give them so much.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And I think two week get really tunnel vision when we're angry, where those thoughts like take over just the other day I was doing about something. I was like mad at. Something going on around the house. And I, I noticed it was like, I had lost perspective on everything else because I was so zoomed in, like in my head going around and around about how I was.

Right. And everybody else was wrong in me. And I think that that's a thing to be aware of is when, because that really just gets you really stuck [00:17:00] there. You're going around and around it in your mind as if like you that's all you can see in that moment.

Diana Hill: I love the classic act chessboard metaphor where you kind of think about there's the black pieces and the white pieces that are battling each other on the board. And when we're really angry. On our side of, of the, you know, on our team sort of battling the other side, but in act, we talk about how can you be more of the board, right.

So that you're observing what's happening on the chess board, but you're not totally entangled in it. It's just sort of, can you be the board? Can you notice you're in the I'm I'm right. Or I'm defending thoughts and sometimes. I can, even when I'm in that place, I can notice that I'm in that place. Like I can even hear my own thoughts going on in my head and then act in a way that's not what my thoughts are telling me, which is pretty profound.

If you can get to that place of starting to notice that your thoughts aren't always true.

Debbie Sorensen: it's hard to believe that sometimes when you're really convinced. Right?

Jill Stoddard: Hey everybody. It's [00:18:00] Jill. If you are a clinician and have been wanting to learn more about act, I have an upcoming full day CE workshop through PESI called breakthrough act techniques and experiential exercises, a clinical roadmap to help clients overcome psychological distress. You can either join me live on Friday, October 8th, from eight to four.

Pacific time, or you can watch on demand any time to register, just visit my website, jillstoddard.com and click on learn from Jill conferences and workshops. I hope to see you there. So now we've gone through the chain. We've looked at the predisposing factors.

Debbie Sorensen: We've looked at the sensations, the thoughts, the emotions that are showing up. And we also want to take a look at what we're doing, right? Our behaviors, our actions in the world when we're angry and there can be a big range, right? Sometimes we might. Respond in ways we feel very proud of, and we're happy with ourselves at the end of it.

Sometimes not so much. And I think we can see also [00:19:00] people, either getting really aggressive when they're angry, you know, yelling, exploding, getting violent others though. Hold it in and get really passive and like kind of bottle it up and not say anything. And I think actually both can be equally problematic.

Sometimes. I think people who tend to like never express anger at all and just hold it all in that can also kind of like build up and really, um, not be very helpful, especially if it's a situation where saying something would be helpful

Diana Hill: there's um, one of the things. Uh, techno Han teaches in Buddhism is the five remembrances. And if you sort of practicing and Buddhism, you're supposed to repeat these every, every morning. And the fifth remembrance is my actions are my only true belongings. And I think that that is so. True. Like we, we go about our day and the way in which we actually interact with people, the actions that we take, no matter how bad it gets in terms of whatever's happening, sensation wise in our [00:20:00] body.

If we're able to pause and find that space to then choose a different action that lines up Brussels said, this abuse beautifully, that lines up with how we want. Make other people feel or how we want to be in the world. Then that really leads to the, like our true belongings. What are sort of the ground on which do you know how to say the ground on which we can stand?

So I do think that there's in functional analysis. That's really where our power lies. We can't control their people. We can't even control our emotional experiences that might show up. But if we can get enough space to pause and have awareness to then choose a different action, then we can have a different result.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And when you choose your actions, I think you want to take a look at what's working well for you and what's not working well for you. And over time to kind of move in the direction of what's working well for you. And it's important to understand that by looking at, you know, the consequences of your anger and that's part of a chain analysis or a [00:21:00] functional analysis, as well as to look at, you know, how's this working for me in the short term and in the longterm.

And I think. Sometimes we do things that actually work in the short term like avoidance, or we do things that make us feel powerful or something like that, or it might get the other person to do what we want in the short term. And that can be very reinforcing, but sometimes in the, long-term not so much, like it might have an impact on our, our lives or our relationships.

That's really not working for.

You know, if you're going around being angry and having outbursts all the time or even doing the silent treatment, like it's, it's hard for people to connect and relate to you. So it can start to feel kind of lonely and.

Diana Hill: I

Really appreciate Jen Brewer's model around habit loops and, you know, sort of this idea that there's a cue behavior and a reward. And sometimes some of the things that we do that we think aren't rewarding actually are. So things like self-righteousness is. Re it's, it's rewarding in our [00:22:00] brain to be self-righteous, it's highly reinforcing, but that's only in the short-term in the long-term being self-righteous isn't going to make you any friends.

And so when we start to focus on the longer term consequences of how we want to be in the world, that also can be rewarding, being kind and generous is rewarding. It feels better to be kind and generous actually in our bodies.

And so one of the things that we can do when we're doing a chain analysis is look at the short-term and long-term consequences. And how can we in the moment when we're doing maybe a pause with our anger. Remind ourselves the long in the longterm, how is it that I want to feel and be in this world and bring that into the present moment to help guide our behavior.

And that's really what our values are about those intrinsic intrinsically rewarding behaviors that in the long run build the life that you want.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's a big piece of the work that I do is I help my clients think through, you know, if you were to handle this the best [00:23:00] way you possibly could or a way that you felt proud of, you know, what, what would be your values underneath that? And so, In the future, they have other behaviors to choose from, right.

So that they can over time, be more values consistent. And the way I often describe it as I want them to respond with intention instead of reacting impulsively or automatically, because I think when it comes to anger, it's, it's very prone to impulsive reactive behavior. But if you can be really in tune with how you do want to respond to at your absolute best, not that you're always going to get it perfectly right, but it can be.

And so that you can continue to repeat that.

Diana Hill: So it, because it's not always easy to do that in the moment. That's where the mindful pause comes in. And I really loved the work of Rhonda Magee who wrote the inner work of social justice, because one of the things that she teaches, so she's an attorney. She teaches law to law students talk about potential force for self-righteousness and she teaches about racial [00:24:00] justice.

As she has conversations about race with a bunch of. Or a bunch of law students. And what she really teaches is the importance of being able to slow down and pause. When you notice the sensations of self-righteousness or anger or irritability or I'm rightness show up and be able to be with them and make space for your thoughts and your feelings and emotions.

And then when you can act from a place of your best self that's when you act, and I think it does line up with what Russell talked about in terms of, sometimes you do need to go into your basement of your mind and like take a little break and sometimes you do need to take a break to be able to actually remove yourself and have that pause before you can act more skillfully, but doing something like a chain analysis.

After the fact when you're not in it and to be able to look at what are your particular patterns, what are your vulnerabilities? What are the thoughts that hook you? What are the emotions that you get flooded by? How do you want to act in the long-term that.

can help You set the [00:25:00] stage for a plan for how you want to respond, respond the next.

Debbie Sorensen: And I think sometimes too people have some skills that they could work on around that I often, when I'm working with anger management, we'll bring in some, for instance, assertive communication skills, right. Helping people find the words that they want to use, because I think sometimes we might either.

Really aggressive, which is like coming in too hot, or we might get passive and shut down and just avoid and not say anything. And we really want to try to help people find the sweet spot there of, of like being direct and clear and speaking up for themselves, but not in a way that's going to make the situation much worse for everyone.

Diana Hill: I think related to that is also just recognizing that you are not alone when you're in a conversation with someone and you're feeling the heat that

often they are feeling the heat too. And to have some understanding and compassion that we'll just, you know, we're gonna make mistakes. We're going to stop on things.

We're not going to always say the [00:26:00] right thing and give some grace to the other person as well, because. When we can allow each other to make space and when we can not allow each other to make mistakes and not know exactly the right thing to say, but can actually do it from a place I'm just doing the best job I can.

And trying to come from a place of kindness and caring, then it's going to turn out better in the long run for both for everyone.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Well, and I also like to just help encourage people to. To operate from a place of compassion and also sometimes forgiveness. I think sometimes it can be really hard, but we might need to forgive ourselves for things that we've done, especially if we're having anger turned inward, you know, and we also may need to forgive others sometimes.

And to me, that doesn't mean that we won't feel angry or that we forget about what happened, but it just means that we're kind of willing to let go of it and move forward.

Diana Hill: and I think one of the most vulnerable and powerful things that we can also do is ask for. [00:27:00] When we've made a mistake, whether that's asking for forgiveness from a loved one, or asking for forgiveness from a, you know, an acquaintance that that's actually kind of puts you in a place of vulnerability to say, Hey, I messed up and I'm sorry, and we need to do, I think all of us could do a little bit more of that.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, I find that actually, anytime you can be more vulnerable in your response, it's helpful. I just recently with my husband went from stewing about something and kind of, you know, Being pretty angry toward him to actually telling him what was going on inside and what I was upset about in a more vulnerable way.

And it completely shifted the conversation. I think that's often the case when people, you know, can be more open and express how they're really feeling. So I talked to Dr. Russell Kolts about his stance on anger. Let's take a listen to Russell.

Russell Kolts has written several terrific books on compassion, focused therapy, including CFT made simple and experiencing [00:28:00] CFT from the inside out. He's a friend of mine and a friend of the show. He was on the podcast before episode 50, about compassion focused therapy.

So definitely check that out, Russell, welcome back. And thank you so much for being here.

Russell Kolts: Oh, thanks for that.

Debbie Sorensen: Um, we wanted to invite you back to share your ideas about anger and compassion as part of this anger, anger management episode, and you presented a very personal and powerful TEDx talk specifically about anger and it's called anger compassion and what it means to be strong, highly recommend watching it to our, our listeners who haven't checked it out yet.

Um, Yeah. So you were just telling me that quite a few people have, you've had quite a good response to that. Ted talk.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I, I've gotten quite a few emails from people all over the world. Actually, that'll reach out and just say, Hey, you know, I, I saw your talk and it really spoke to me and I've decided to go get some help. I've called the therapist. I'm going to [00:29:00] do something about my anger. I'm sort of tired of it.

You know, doing things I don't like to my life. And it's really touching to get those messages.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, absolutely. And the fact that they're from all over the world, it just really speaks to how. How universal right. Anger is

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Yeah, no, I think so. I think so. It's, it's pretty basic to us and it also, I think, speaks to how, you know, all over the world. We don't necessarily handle it as well as we could. Right. It's not just people in the west, for example, who struggle with it.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's so true. So true. Well, so one of the pieces of your Ted talk is so it's called what it means that the subtitle is what it means to be strong. And I think that anger can be a really powerful, strong emotion in a lot of ways, which kind of makes it a little bit hard. I think sometimes too. To approach it and to work on it because there is a surge of power.

Sometimes it can come [00:30:00] with anger, but you have a different twist on that. What are your thoughts about power and anger?

Russell Kolts: Well, I think, you know, people, people ask me these questions all the time. Uh, they say, but isn't anger, good. Isn't anger. You know, it gets you go. And it's like, well, I don't see anger as was any emotions as being good or bad. It's about understanding how it functions. And I think particularly in the context of current life, anger is a wonderful sign and a terrible strategy.

Most of the time in terms of how it organizes us, uh, around facing life problems. So anger is really good at getting us off the couch. It's really good at helping us identify. I need to do something about this, right? This is something in my life. That is not okay. Or at least as registering that way for me.

Um, the tricky bit about anger is that really is, I mean, in, in compassion focused therapy, we really look at the function of our emotions from an evolutionary standpoint. And when people talk about, you know, fight flight freeze or fawn, anger is [00:31:00] really about that fight response. So it, it organizes us, but it organizes our energy in an aggressively oriented.

And I find that most of the times in my life, the sort of threats I face are very different from what our ancestors faced. You know, hundreds of thousands of years ago, where maybe fighting was, was an adaptive response. You know, when I'm having a conversation with my wife or I'm in the faculty meeting or whatever situation that might trigger my irritability, anger, um, uh, aggressiveness usually is not a very helpful response.

And yet that is what anger is preparing us to do. So it can be tricky. It can also feel tricky because as you were saying, it feels powerful. It feels really powerful in our bodies and it feels it can, we can feel strong when we're angry. Um, and again, that, that fits. If you see angers and evolve, fight response, right.

If that's what we're going to do, we need to feel strong. We need to have conviction around, around being able to move forward. [00:32:00] Um, and I think that quality of anger can be seductive, particularly if you know, I'm someone who doesn't feel powerful in lots of other areas of mine. Right. So it's hard to give up.

It's hard to say, well, I need to work on this because sometimes I kinda like it. I kinda like feeling strong like that because I, you know, I don't feel very strong or very powerful at my job. I don't feel very powerful in my relationship. So if anger is the only way I have to be strong, it's hard to let go.

So I think if we're going to expect people to be able to realistically work with their problematic. Right. Anger. That's getting in the way for them. We have to give them new ways to be powerful. We have to give them new ways, uh, to be powerful in their lives. We can't just wait, just say, well, you know, let's, let's get rid of this bit.

You know, it violates, uh, the dead person rule, which has never asked a client to do something that a dead person can do. Right. Which is not to ask them to [00:33:00] not do something. You.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's right. Well, and you know that just trying to focus on avoiding feeling that way is probably, probably not going to do much good.

Russell Kolts: No, no, no. And that's actually, I think why I think compassion plays can play potentially a really important role in helping people with problematic anger, because

and shame in this context. I think in a lot of contexts, it can happen really the effects of it can happen really quickly. It's really painful to make that realization. And so I think very quickly, almost like dominoes falling over the person can shift from this awareness that I just heard someone I love.

To avoidance to try to alleviate the pain of that awareness and with anger, I think that often takes the form of things like blaming, but I only said that to you because you did that at the da or, or rationalizing well, you know, it makes sense that I would act like that because they did. Right. So, so it doesn't look like avoidance necessarily, but the function of it [00:34:00] is to, I think, to avoid kind of the shame and the, the responsibility taking for it.

Behaved horribly someone I really care about.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, you're making me think of the term righteous anger. I think there can be so much righteousness to it, like, well, I'm right. and people can really dig in on that.

Russell Kolts: Yeah, and people love it. And you know,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Russell Kolts: I get asked about this stuff all the time. What about righteous? Anger? What about this is it's very popular, fierce compassion. And I think that

sometimes those things get confounded. You know that righteous, anger and fierce compassion, you know, the, the tricky thing about the idea of righteous anger for me is that if we look at the research on hangout, anger, organized our mind, anger always feels righteous.

It always does. One of the things that we see with anger that just goes along with the emotion is a sense of a conviction, right? You're a certain. [00:35:00] And at that you could actually do research on this. You can spit split group people up into two groups and you can have one group think about something completely neutral.

Like if you're going to get a new toothbrush, what color would you want it to be? And you can have another group think about something you're really angry about. And then after this group is good and angry, you can have them make a prediction about something completely unrelated. So who's going to win the world cup next.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Russell Kolts: Right. And they make a prediction. And if you then afterwards ask them, how certain are you a predict of your prediction? How sure are you that your prediction is correct? The angry group certainty scores will be significantly higher than the controls that just goes with anger. And if you think about it again, if anger is the evolved fight response, Right.

If you've got a real physical threat that you've got to respond to right now, you want conviction, you want to be able to act immediately. You don't want to be waffling. You think, well, gosh, I don't know. Is this the right thing to do? I don't know. So [00:36:00] anger always feels righteous. So our ability to gauge whether or not our anger is righteous is almost certainly compromised while we're angry, because it always feels righteous.

It always feels like I'm right. I know.

Debbie Sorensen: That's such a good point. That's so interesting. Cause I, and I think that it's that pausing to ask ourselves almost like, does this matter or.

Russell Kolts: Yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: Who cares or am I really right, because I do think you're right. That it's one thing to have a conviction about something that's very values-based and to kind of go toward that thing that, you know, when anger is

indicating an injustice, for instance, but it's another thing to just be so convinced that I'm right.

And to have it just be this reflexive automatic kind of thing. That's where we get into hot water. I

Russell Kolts: Yeah, well, and the other tricky part of that is even as our certainty goes up, when we're angry, our focus narrows and our thinking becomes much more rigid and we're much more [00:37:00] likely to rely on stereotypes and things like that. And there's research that reflects all of this. So the whole idea is when we're really angry, we're more sure that we're right.

And we're much more likely to be right. And, and so I think having some awareness of that, just to sort of know that, yeah, I know it's going to feel like this when I'm angry, but this is not the time to be making major life decisions about I'm going to interact with people around me that I care about because you know, it's, it's, it's an easy time to do things that I'll regret later.

Debbie Sorensen: absolutely. And the cost can be high. So one of the things that you say in your Ted doc, just going back to this point, you made a minute ago, you say, if we want happy lives and good relationships, we've got to take responsibility for working what we've got with what we've got.

So it is in fact, something that's, you know, wired in. It's a universal human emotion, and sometimes it's not really easy to. Acknowledge it, you had mentioned shame earlier. And I think that sometimes [00:38:00] taking an honest look at, you know, at our anger can be, can be really tough.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Yeah. Well, because if we're someone who struggles with expressing anger and problematic ways, when we, when we really pause and look closely at it, the version of ourselves that we see is often not a very flattering one. It's not a very likely. Of ourselves, you know? Um, and, and, you know, I think for a lot of us, I know for me before I sort of said, I have this sort of irritable tendency that I, I need to work with.

There was an underlying feeling of maybe I'm just a jerk. I'd see myself responding in these ways. Maybe there's maybe I'm just a jerk. Maybe there's something wrong with me. And that shame. I think that feeling, I, that thought that there's something wrong with me is one of the most painful human experiences there is.

And I think it just provokes avoidance so easily. And I think that for a lot of people, that's why they don't engage with their [00:39:00] anger. It's this kind of one, two of, well, it kind of feels good sometimes kind of feels powerful. Yeah. Really taking responsibility for, it means being honest with myself about some stuff that doesn't feel very good, you know, in terms of looking in the mirror and seeing how I'm behaving.

And as I said, how I'm behaving often toward the people I care most.

Debbie Sorensen: So would that be, would you describe that as an uncompassionate way of responding to anger? What would an uncompassionate way of responding to, or look like?

Russell Kolts: Well, I think, I think, you know, the, the most characteristically uncompassionate way of doing that would be self criticism or self attacking. When you say the fact that I do this makes me a bad person. Um, and I think that that captures the, kind of the tricky bit about shame, um, shame on an, on a societal level.

I think shame sure serves some, some useful function, [00:40:00] right. It serves to, to kind of tamp down behavior that that's unhelpful in a cultural sense. Right. And so we see that when certain problematic behaviors that have been shamed are not shamed anymore. Right or are held up, then you see problematic, which is why we've seen up surges.

And I think various problems the last few years. And I won't, I don't want to politicize things. I won't go further into that, but at an individual level, I think shame, it does shut us down, but in shutting us down, it keeps us from being able to engage with whatever the suffering or the challenge. If I see that I've, I've acted out in an angry way.

And then I think, oh, I'm a bad person. I did that. I'm a bad father, or I'm a bad husband. Um, you, you can even see me as I say, I'm a bad, I mean, like I'm a shrinking.

Debbie Sorensen: he did on the video kinda. Yeah. Hunched in a little, yeah.

Russell Kolts: Yeah, it doesn't really motivate us to change anything because the, the, the badness isn't about to [00:41:00] act with shame, the badness is about it's.

The inference is about the person, the actor, because I did that. That makes me bad. And if I start with that as a premise, that I'm bad, then I can't get any better. Right. If I'm bad, if that, that defines me, if I'm an angry person, you know, on the other hand, uh, in CFT where we're quite okay with. Right.

Guilt is I did something that was hurtful. That was unhelpful, and I want to do better. I regret the harm I did and I wanted to better. Um, but even with that, and here again, I think is why compassion and self-compassion is really core to this. That's really painful. It means coming into contact with the fact that I've said or done things that have caused problems or have caused pain and people I care about.

And that's not okay. And that doesn't mean I'm a horrible person. That doesn't mean I can't do better, but it means that that's not the version of me. I want to be. That's not consistent [00:42:00] with what I care about. It's not consistent with my values. It's not who I want to be. And so I've got to do better. I've got to figure out how to do that.

And, and I think if we, if we can approach that with compassion to say, so the, so the motive is how do I help myself be a better version of me versus how do I beat myself up? For the things I do that don't fit with the person I want to be. I think that opens up a lot of possibilities.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah,

you can hear, even in the language you're using theirs. Freedom or, or hope or flexibility in that response versus when you're, you know, when you're talking about just being so self-critical and I'm a bad person, it just feels like there's no way out

Russell Kolts: yeah.

Debbie Sorensen: to keep you stuck. Yeah.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. And that's really, for me, that's why I decided to kind of put my toe in that the anger arena, because quite frankly, I mean, there's, there's lots of good anger management tools, [00:43:00] techniques out there that we've had them for decades. The problem is that a lot of people who struggle with anger don't use that stuff because the shame stops them in their tracks.

So if you can get someone to the point where they're saying, I'm going to take responsibility for my anger. I want to help myself be a better version of me at

that point. Things really do open up. Cause we've actually got a lot of tools that, that work pretty well. Right. It's getting over their point where they're able and willing to use those tools.

Debbie Sorensen: So give us a little more, this is great. Give us a little bit more, I have an idea of what that more compassionate view, you know, kind of let's build on what you've already said about it and, and talk a bit about how people could maybe foster a little bit more self compassion. If they're struggling with anger.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Well, if I was sitting and talking with a person who struggled with anger right now, I'd probably start by just, um, just asking them some questions about their experience of it. I think that the secret. In so many things [00:44:00] and, and self self-compassion quite frankly, is kind curiosity. I think it's that willingness, of course, the mindfulness people have sort of been talking about this for years instead of kind of rushing in when we, when we see something, we may make an observation about ourselves or the world or whatever, instead of rushing in and judging and saying right wrong, bad, good, dah, dah, dah, dah.

If we just sort of go, huh? I wonder what's this. What kind of, I look really closely at this thing. What does it tell me? And is there anything I can learn from that about how to work with it? So if I was talking to someone who struggle with anger right now, I'd say things like, well, you know, I want you to bring to mind, you know, some times you've had problems with anger, you know,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Russell Kolts: when that stuff was happening, were you choosing to get angry?

Right. Did you think I'm, you know, or, or the angry behavior, did you pause for a second and say, I'm going to say something really hurtful to my partner. You know, I'm going to say something to my kid. That's going to haunt [00:45:00] them for years. Did you decide to do that? Uh, did you say I'm going to get really, really angry?

I'm just going to lose it did that just kind of arise in you. Right. Did it just show up and, uh, you know, I'm, I'm leaving open the possibility that at some point people will say, no, I woke up and I said, I'm going to do this, but I've yet to hear that almost, you know, the, the, the, uh, regularity with which people will say it just showed up.

It just, it just took me. Yeah. Right. It's just like, I opened my eyes and I found myself on a train and it had already left the station and Rua there, it went. And I think just little observations like that, like, okay. I didn't, I didn't choose that reaction. That doesn't mean I'm not responsible for it, but I, you know, particularly the, the harm that was done, I didn't choose.

I'm going to, I'm going to do that most often. It's this experience of being caught up in emotion that they don't know how to manage. And then that plays out on a lot of sort of ways. [00:46:00] And then I might ask other questions. This is one of my favorite ones, you know, and this doesn't just apply to anger. It applies to everything.

Um, know, given what you know about you, right? I'll ask people, you know, bring to mind a situation, your struggle with problem that you've had around anger really around anything, you know, given what you know about you. The situation in which you grew up, um, things that were modeled for you, the things you learned or things you were taught, the things you didn't learn, and you weren't taught the things that happened to you, the normal things, the traumatic things, all of it, right?

When you look at all of that and you consider this struggle or this bit of suffering, this problem you had, does it make sense that you would struggle with. Does it make sense that you would struggle with exactly that [00:47:00] now, although people don't always realize it at first, the answer to that question is always yes.

And the reason it's always yes, is that by definition, our struggles occur within contexts in which they make sense, which is why I struggle with some things that you don't struggle with. And I suspect you may struggle with things that Diana doesn't struggle. And maybe Diana doesn't struggle or struggles with things that I don't struggle with.

She seems like she's got it together. So I have a hard time picturing Diana struck, but who knows?

Debbie Sorensen: She does trust me.

Russell Kolts: So, so, so, and I think once people can begin and end. Those little Socratic questions, they kind of get at some of the, not your fault realizations that underlies CFT. And, and by, by not your fault realizations, I don't mean that we're, we're letting ourselves off the hook for responsibility for our anger or anything else in our lives.

But it's about just sort of honestly, taking a reckoning of your experience. And, and noticing what are the parts that I [00:48:00] chose and design and, and, and you know, which of the parts that just sort of played out in my life in a way I didn't choose, but which create lots of challenges for me. And if people can kind of recognize, okay, I didn't choose to lose it on my kids.

In fact, I regret it. Uh, and I know how I learned that. I remember when that happened to me. I remember seeing that model. You know, it's no surprise that I struggle with that. That's the beginning of self-compassion because instead of blaming and attacking, you're bringing understanding. And, and for me, when people ask, how can you have compassion for this?

How can you have compassion for that? How can you have compassion for these people that do these horrible things and this, that, and the other, if I start with the act, right? If I start with the crime, if I start with whatever the thing is, um, it's, it's hard to connect with compassion. [00:49:00] If that's, you know, the representation of this being in my mind is the person who did that thing.

If that's the only thing I know about them, then Compassion's hard to contact, but we know that's never the case. Right. We know that people are not the worst thing they've ever done. Right. We know that people are not their worst tendency. We know that behind that is this whole constellation of causes and conditions in which those acts make absolute sense.

And if we can bring understanding to that, I find that compassion and empathy and all that can begin to arise because it's like, it doesn't just make sense to them that they struggle in this way. It makes sense to me, it's like, wow, now I can see, you know,

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. that's so beautiful. I mean, I think that's such a beautiful question for people to answer, to ask themselves and also toward others, you know, to kind of understand we're all doing the best we can here. We all have complex, you know, biology and history and contexts in which we're living. And I think that really opens [00:50:00] up to that common humanity.

So yeah.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. What, what if we did that? What if we took that as sort of a guiding principle that before we let somebody have it, because they said something that we just really don't like or where they don't disagree with, or we really disagree with. But if we assume that in their lives, in a area of their lives,

that we probably don't have access to, there's a context in which their behavior makes absolute sense.

Right. Because that's actually the way. Right. Um, and that doesn't mean people don't make decisions that we don't disagree with. Of course they do. Right. But, but again, if we can help, if we can begin with trying to understand, rather than judging or dismissing or labeling, I think it leaves a lot more possibilities.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. absolutely. Absolutely.

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Now that's trickier said than done because we have our own threat stuff too. So when their behavior triggers us right then [00:51:00] our anger or whatever kicks up, and then we go into certainty and we get rigid. And so that's why I think compassion. When NCFC we talk about three flows of compassion, right.

Self to others. Uh, our ability to relate compassionately to others self-compassion or related ability to bring compassion to ourselves. And then other to self our ability to receive compassion, to, to reach out, into, to, to allow others, to, to be there for us when we need them. And what most people find is that there are some of those flows that feel pretty natural.

And then there are others that are, that are very tricky. You know, you've kind of find where your growth edge is. Um,

Debbie Sorensen: Which is the hardest for people. Do you think?

Russell Kolts: I, you know, I think it depends on the

Debbie Sorensen: Depends on the person

Russell Kolts: Yeah. Yeah. I'm, I'm very resistant around putting rules around that kind of stuff. Sometimes, you know, we have, we have a lot of like nice sounding cliché is that people say in our culture, that sound really good until you sort of put them under the microscope.

So for example, you [00:52:00] may have heard people say you can't love anybody else unless you love yourself. Right. And it sounds really good to hear. And I've even heard people say that about compassion. You can't have compassion for anyone else unless you have compassion for yourself. Then I think that's a load of hokey because I know literally hundreds of therapists who

have shown me that they genuinely have almost boundless compassion for others.

And they really struggled with having it for themselves.

Debbie Sorensen: I agree. I mean, I think you're right. There's not a one size fits all model here, but I do. Can think of a lot of people that have no problem having compassion for others, for animals, for kids, for people in their lives. But when it comes to themselves.

it's much harder.

Russell Kolts: Yeah, that internal and, and, you know, because maybe they had somebody in their life that, yeah. You know, kind of gave them a gift of a really critical, harsh, inner voice.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Russell Kolts: Right? So when they, when they hear themselves, see themselves struggling and then they start beating themselves up, you know, um, and the, [00:53:00] these processes, at least the research seems to indicate they're related, but they're not the same right.

Kind of different things are happening when we were light compassionate to ourselves than if we were like compassionately to others, or if we can receive it. You know, and particularly receiving, then that gets at attachment dynamics. That again, you know, most of which, you know, have their origins in the very first years of life, but can make it very tricky, right.

For people to, to receive help or to rely on it and trust it, feel comfortable allowing themselves to be helped. It's tricky.

Debbie Sorensen: Well, I really appreciate this point of view about anger and I, I thank you for talking to us about it. Um, I think it's a really wonderful starting place to even just shift the whole conversation with yourself about your anger and that, like you said, that really opens you up to get into these more to delve into some strategies and resources that might help you in those moments when things [00:54:00] get hard.

Russell Kolts: Yeah, that's actually, that's actually a wonderful segue into a second question. Sometimes one of the things, whenever I do talks like this these days, I always, if I, if I leave people with anything, I don't want to leave

them with two questions. I call this self-compassion in two cases. So the first question is the one I already asked you, you know, pick us up, right.

Pick a thing you're suffering or struggling with thing. You're having a hard time with an ask, given what all this stuff I know about me, does it make sense that I would struggle with this? The answer to which is yes. Once you've sort of asked yourself that question and sort of acknowledged, oh yeah. I can see, you know, this is, this is why I struggle with this.

The second question is given that, given that I am struggling with this thing, and it makes sense that I would. What would be helpful now? I think that's one of the most powerful questions we can ask ourselves. What would be helpful? Sometimes people misinterpret the question as what would be helpful to solve the problem.

And a lot of times, uh, those [00:55:00] of us who pay attention know that most of the big problems that we struggle with in our lives don't have a quick, easy fix. Right. So if we think what's going to solve this problem, like right now, oftentimes the answer is, well, I can't do anything. Let me go give up often when we observed that we're really struggling with this problem that maybe we can't change.

If we ask ourselves, given this, what would be helpful? The answer is really about what would help me like be the best version of myself while I struggle with this inherently difficult situation. What would help me be as comfortable as possible while I go through this really difficult. Experience. But I think that when we ask ourselves that question one, you know, maybe we'll come up with some, some things that actually will be helpful, but even more powerful, I think is the shift, uh, in, in, in compassion focused therapy, we're all about trying to get people to connect with this basic [00:56:00] caregiving motive that we all have.

That goes back to the very Dawn of mammalian life. Mammals had to learn how to care, how to take care of their Young's or we wouldn't survive because our young are just completely helpless. if you know, if, if, if caregivers don't take care of babies or baby cats, maybe dogs, maybe monkeys, all the mammals have the same birds.

Interestingly, develop this in parallel to us because they're younger help helpless too. If we don't care for those needy others, they don't live. Right for not cared for in infancy, we die. So we've got that all within us, but it gets covered up with all this threat stuff. So often. So every time we ask that question, you

know, given whatever the problem, we see the suffering, the problem, the struggle, whatever it is, and go given that, what would be helpful?

Just that question, what would be helpful, grounds us back in that caregiving motive. And so our focus isn't on avoiding the pain. It isn't on attack. [00:57:00] What we might perceive as the source. It's about looking at this situation and honestly, trying to figure out what. Be helpful here. Is there an action I could take, maybe it'd be helpful to just pause and try and figure out what's going on, you know, but at that point, lots of possibilities show up.

So I find myself increasingly as I get older being kind of less, less caught up in what are the specific techniques about doing this and that and having Trek? Well, we can figure those out, but if I can get person, a person grounded in that question to look at their struggle and go, wow, that's really hard.

What would be helpful. And I think a world of possibilities opens up.

Debbie Sorensen: I love that let me ask you a slightly personal question. Cause you, you talk about in your Ted, talk about your own, some of your own history and struggles with anger. So could you give an example of something that you have found useful?

Like if you were in a moment when you're getting riled up and you ask yourself that question, what do I need right now? [00:58:00] What what's one thing you might

Russell Kolts: So it depends on the level of anger, right? So I think that if it's, if it's I'm getting irritable or I'm getting snappish or those sorts of things, uh, one thing that is really helpful to me, and I try to ask myself this fairly frequently is. How do I want other people to feel when my presence, when I'm around my family, my colleagues, my students, what impact do I want my presence or my absence to have on them?

Do I want them to feel threatened? Do I want them to feel safe? Right? Do I want them to feel insecure? Do I want them to feel validated and valued? Right. And I find that actually, when I reflect on what I really want for other people, Not just even people are close to me, but everybody, I find that, you know, if I connect with my values around that, uh, [00:59:00] I want people to feel safe.

I want people to feel okay with themselves. I want them to feel heard. And valued. That's how I want the people around me to feel. And that's the experiences that I want my presence to trigger in them. That that's what I care

about. And so if I can ask myself a question like that, you know, like how do I want them to.

What impact do I want them to have that grounds me? I think that that shifts me pretty powerfully back to, to where I want that that works well. I've got a little bit of irritation or I'm a little snappy and I'll sell that. I'll go. And I'll say, I'm going to go again. I'll get a cup of tea or whatever, and try to try to reconnect with the version of me.

I want to be, um, people frequently ask. If I'm in full rage, if I'm, you know, that something's triggered me and I'm going, what do I do? Right. They want some technique or some practice or some little bit of [01:00:00] advice that, boom, they'll be chill. They'll be cool. And maybe that's out there. I don't know, but I haven't found that yet.

I don't know. I don't think there's anything like that. So for me, and it doesn't happen very often, but you know, once every two or three years, these days something will trigger me and I'll, I'll be really mad. And when that happens, I've got to create distance between me and other things. That's when I say I can't, I'm gonna, I'm gonna go for a walk or I'm gonna go, and I'm going to go down.

I've got a room in my basement. That's basically the dream bedroom of my 16 year old self. So it's got guitars on the walls and the albums, hundreds of albums and stuff like that. And I'll go in there and put in music. And there's a story I've told several times because it really captures this for me.

Pretty nicely. Um, there was one day, it was probably three or four years ago now. And my wife and I had kinda gotten into it. I don't know what had happened, but you know, it wasn't, I don't even remember it, it obviously it wasn't that big of a deal, but for whatever reason, it triggered, [01:01:00] I was really angry.

And so I caught it, I observed it and I said, yeah, We will talk about this later. And I went downstairs, one of my music room put on our record and uh, close the door and I'm just sitting there and I'm a gradually, you know, kind of trying to work my way back to the version of me that, that I want to be when I'm around my family.

And after about 15, 20 minutes, uh, my wife Lisa came and knocked on the door and. the door and poked her head in and, and, and very kindly said, are you, are you ready to talk now? You know, kind of put a bid out to reconnect. And I, I

wasn't. And I looked up at her and I said, now, um, I'm not, I'm not ready to talk yet.

You know, cause I was still, I was still right up in it and, and her face kind of dropped a little bit and I said, I want you to know that. That when I closed that door, I'm not shutting you out. I'm shutting me in. [01:02:00]

Debbie Sorensen: Okay.

Russell Kolts: Cause right now

there's nothing that's going to come out of me. It's going to be helpful. And I need to find my way back to that before, before we move forward and talk about this and. She heard that and understood it and, and, you know, close the door back. And then I flip the record over, listen to the rest of it. And after about another 20 minutes, I was, I was ready, you know, I could reconnect.

And so I think in those situations, you know, I think sometimes the best thing we can do is just to sort of recognize, I, I just need to create some distance. Right. I need to not I'm on fire and I need, I'm not set anything around me on fire. So

Debbie Sorensen: Yes. Yes.

Russell Kolts: how do I, how do I, do that? And then I think when we do that, all we need is that a bit of recognition and then it creates some distance.

And then I think that gives us the [01:03:00] space to kind of find our way back and the way we use that space is really important too. If we use that space to ruminate. And go back over and fantasize and imagine, and play the situation again. And again, we can just, we can fuel the anger indefinitely, right? Cause the emotional center of our brain, your amygdala, the amygdala doesn't really, it's not very clever.

It doesn't know the difference between stuff that's going on out here and the images I'm creating my mind. So that's the other thing when we create that space and we notice ourselves ruminating thinking about the situation again and again, or playing it over or fantasizing aggression, we need to go, whoa, whoa, whoa.

That's keeping me here. And then in that moment for me, I think distraction is really useful putting on a record, playing guitar or going for a walk or

something like that. I think sometimes in the behavioral sciences distraction gets a bad rap. People say isn't that bad? Isn't that avoidance? And the answer is, well, it can be it's about the difference between form and function of a bank.[01:04:00]

Right. The, the form is what the behavior is. The function is what effect does it have? And distraction is avoidance. If we never come back to the situation, right. If we've got a problem and we say, oh, I don't want to deal with that. And we go over here and do something else. And then we kind of forget about it and keep moving with our lives.

That's avoidance and in the long-term that's going to create a problem, right? Because when we avoid our problems, they don't go away. They go to the gym and work out.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

Russell Kolts: On the other hand distraction as a coping mechanism to give ourselves time for the arousal to come down, to, to get back to a, kind of a better version of ourselves with the full intention that when we do that, we're going to come back and work with whatever the challenge is.

The function of that is about soothing. It's about kinda, kinda grounding ourselves. So we actually can do a good job of working with the channel. So in that case, I think, you know, it can be helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah.

I appreciate that [01:05:00] example. Um, a lot. Cause I think we, sometimes it is so tempting to just do something really impulsively. That's going to make the situations. So, you know, that's it, I'm out of here. I hate you. And whatever the case may be, punch someone road rage, you know, the whole. There's so many things we could do.

And instead to kind of shake things up, to get some perspective, to allow ourselves some flexibility in those moments to have a space. And if it's a, like you said, if it's a day-to-day thing just up, pause might be helpful. But if it's a big thing, you know, we might really, they need to shake things up. And I think, you know, just that tendency to stew on it, to circle around and around with it, it just doesn't get us anywhere.

And so whatever it takes to break that up is helpful.

Russell Kolts: Absolutely. One thing that can be helpful with that too, is getting to know how anger works really well, so we can understand our own experience. And the reason is anger. In addition to the certainty, we talked about it earlier, carries with it a felt sense. Urgency. [01:06:00] It's just a part of the emotion. So when we're angry, there's a feeling that I have to do something about this right now, now, and, and this is why it's so hard to resist sending that email or saying that thing because we're feeling it.

And again, if it's the evolve fight response, right, you want, you know, if you're being attacked, you gotta fight. Now you can't, you can't. Well, I'm going to hold up and think about this. So, so we feel like we have to respond. And I think that if we, we learn a little bit about how anger works in us, when we feel that we can ask questions, like, okay, is it actually true that I have to respond to this right now?

Or something bad will happen? Or is that urgency just a part of the. And what I find is it's usually the second bit, it's usually like, oh, of course I'm feeling that like, I have to respond right now, but that's not about the situation I don't, I can send, I can respond to this email in a, in a week if I need to.

Um, the feeling is coming from the anger. So maybe give myself some space. What would be

Debbie Sorensen: Oh,

Russell Kolts: Because I think that, I think that reflecting on what's important to [01:07:00] me, what, how do I want to be for the people around me?

I mean, that's all values stuff. And if we can connect with that, you know, that can be the motivator that helps us say, I, I, you know, I'm going to go take a walk

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah,

Russell Kolts: or I'm going to go, whatever.

Debbie Sorensen: The values can really, um, guide our, be our guide in those moments when we're not sure what to do, and we might get ourselves into trouble.

Russell Kolts: And I can actually, of course, Matt and Jen Villatte can tell you about this, you know, uh, extensively it can also, you know, working with anger

is tough. If you're someone who really struggles with anger, it re it's it's, it's an ongoing sort of thing.

And for many of us, it's a lifelong kind of thing. And you know what the, the RFT people will tell you is that if we want to motivate ourselves around doing difficult behavior, connecting with a higher order value can keep us. Right. If we're we're, we understand that I want to be like that. That can keep us working, even when it gets hard.

And when you're working with anger, it will get hard and it'll stay hard.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah, that's so true. So true. Well, [01:08:00] thank you Russell so much for joining us again, and I love hearing your thoughts about this. I think this is going to be really helpful for people. Thank you.

Russell Kolts: Oh, great. Well, thanks for having me. It's just great fun.

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