

Anger management in Islam

كظم الغيظ في الإسلام

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Although anger is a natural feeling it can have negative effects on those who allow it to control them, and adverse effects on those around them. Anger can destroy relationships, health, property, and livelihood. Uncontrolled anger is one of the tools of Satan and it can lead to many evils and tragedies. For this reason Islam has a great deal to say about the emotion of anger.

Because anger is often associated with ‘fight or flight responses’, it is often difficult to separate an action that is done in self-defence (or to protect properties or families) from one that is done out of uncontrolled rage. It is ok to feel anger but it is not acceptable when a person allows it to overtake him and drive him to act in an unacceptable way, sometimes even leading to murder and mayhem. The story of an event in the life of one of Prophet Muhammad’s companions, his son-in-law Ali, demonstrates the difference.

Ali ibn Abi Talib was once fighting in a war, when the leader of the non-Muslim army attacked him. During the confrontation, Ali managed to overcome him and was on the verge of killing him, when his opponent spat in Ali’s face. Ali immediately stepped

back and left the man alone. The man said, “You could have killed me, why did you stop? Ali answered, “I have no personal animosity toward you. I was fighting you because of your disbelief in and rebellion against God. If I had killed you after you spat in my face, it would have been because of my personal anger and desire for revenge, which I do not wish to take.”

The Prophet once asked his Companions, “Whom among you do you consider a strong man?” They replied, “The one who can defeat so-and-so in a wrestling contest.” He said, “That is not so; a strong man is the one who can control himself when he is angry”.

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As always if a person is unsure about how to act in any situation he need only look to Prophet Muhammad or our righteous predecessors to find the best way to act. Prophet Muhammad was known as a man who could and would even under dire circumstances control his anger. One day the Prophet was attacked by a Bedouin, who seized him roughly by the edge of his cloak, the marks left on his neck could be seen by his companions. The Bedouin demanded Prophet Muhammad give him some of the wealth. The Prophet (who had every right to be angry) turned to him and smiled, then ordered that he (the Bedouin) should be given something agreeable to him. ²

We can also follow the example of the Prophet by making our anger for the sake of God, when His rights are violated. This is the kind of controlled anger which is praiseworthy. Prophet Muhammad became angry when he was told about the *imam* who was putting people off the prayer by making it too long, when he saw a curtain with pictures of animate creatures, and when he was asked questions that he disliked. However his anger was purely for the sake of God, he did not fly off the handle, rant and rave, or make people fear to be in his presence.

1 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

2 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

When Prophet Mohammad became angry due to someone's incorrect actions or their words, he never expressed it with his hand and used only mild words. In fact those that did not know him well did not even suspect that he was angry. His companions however, knew that he was angry by just looking at him; his face would turn red and his forehead would be beaded with sweat. However rather than expressing his anger openly he would be quiet, using those first moments to control himself.

Controlling anger is a sign of righteousness. A righteous person is promised Paradise and one of the characteristics of righteousness is being able to control anger.

“And march forth in the way (which leads to) forgiveness from your Lord, and for Paradise as wide as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the pious. Those who spend (in God's Cause) in prosperity and in adversity, who repress anger, and who pardon the people; verily, God loves the good-doers.”(Quran 3:133-134)

“So whatever you have been given is but (a passing) enjoyment for this worldly life, but that which is with God (Paradise) is better and more lasting for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord. And those who avoid the greater sins, and illegal sexual intercourse, and when they are angry, they forgive.” (Quran 42:36 & 37)

Anger is a very natural human emotion; it is also very powerful and can vary in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. The latter can be destructive. It can rage through a person, creating a desire for revenge and pushing a person to strike out at the object of his anger. Because it is natural it is impossible for a person to avoid it completely. It is however possible to understand anger and thus control it.

When a person becomes angry, whether as a result of provocation or not, he has the choice to control his anger by responding to it in a way sanctioned by the Quran and the

traditions of Prophet Muhammad or he could give in to the wave of emotion and behave in a way that displeases God but delights Satan.

In the era when it appears that Islam is being denigrated all over the globe many Muslims are letting their anger get the better of them. Yes it hurts to have our religion and our beloved prophet abused and vilified, but as believers we should not let our emotions dictate our actions. Actions are to be based on divine knowledge and wisdom. We cannot completely stop those who tarnish Islam with their lies and deception but we can control ourselves, educate the masses, and take other positive steps legislated by Islam.

In part 2 we will look at examples of how to behave when angry, taken from the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad.



Anger is able to destroy lives and relationships and Prophet Muhammad called it a hot coal on the heart of a descendant of Adam.³ There is no fool proof way to completely eliminate anger because it is a natural human emotion. Islam however gives us many examples of how to control anger and how to channel it into acceptable actions. There are also distinct advantages to following the guidelines set out in Islam. It pleases God, and the person controlling their anger is rewarded. The Prophet said, **“If anyone suppresses anger when he is in a position to give vent to it, God, the exalted, will call him on the Day of Resurrection and ask him to choose from the rewards offered.”**⁴ He also said, **“No one has swallowed back anything more excellent in the sight of God, who is Great and Glorious, than anger, seeking to please God.”**⁵

3 At Tirmidhi

4 Abu Dawood

5 At Tirmidhi

Once a man came to Prophet Mohammad and said, **“Messenger of God, teach me some words which I can live by. Do not make them too much for me, in case I forget.”** He said, **“Do not be angry.”**⁶ Further to that in the traditions of the Prophet we are able to find many instances of how to behave when anger threatens to engulf us or burst out. He said, **“If one of you becomes angry while standing he should sit down. If the anger leaves him, well and good; otherwise he should lie down”.**⁷ The Prophet also advised us that performing ablution was an acceptable method of anger management. He said, **“Anger comes from Satan, Satan was created from fire, and fire is extinguished only with water; so when any of you is angry, he should perform ablution”.**⁸

In addition the Prophet Muhammad suggested that when angry a believer could try other methods to rid himself from the influence of Satan. He once advised a man who was angry and fighting, to seek refuge in God from the influence of Satan. Prophet Muhammad said to his companions, **“I know words that if he were to say them his anger would go away, if he said, “I seek refuge with Allah from Satan,” what he feels would go away.”**⁹

Imam Ahmad recorded that Prophet Muhammad also advised that **“If any of you becomes angry, let him keep silent.”** If a person is trying to be silent, it will obviously restrict his ability to fight or utter obscenities and harsh words. In another tradition Prophet Muhammad offered a sequence of actions to defuse anger. **“If any of you becomes angry and he is standing, let him sit down, so his anger will go away; if it does not go away, let him lie down.”**¹⁰

6 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

7 At Tirmidhi

8 Abu Dawood

9 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

10 Imam Ahmad

Thus we find that Islam offers a person several ways to control the very natural emotion of anger. To begin with a person should change his position. For example, if one is standing he should sit down; if he is already sitting he should lie down. An angry person could make ablution and offer two or more extra units of prayer; or he could seek refuge in God from the angry effects Satan has over him and finally he could try to focus on the rewards God offers those who are patient, merciful and inclined to forgive rather than hold a grudge.

The Quran defines righteous people as,

“Those who spend (in God’s Cause) in prosperity and in adversity, who repress anger, and who pardon the people; verily, God loves the good-doers.” (Quran 3:134).

Prophet Muhammad himself demonstrated enormous restraint and patience when he was insulted, belittled and beaten. As his beloved wife Aisha said, ‘*His character was just (a reflection of) the Quran*’.¹¹

At a very difficult time in his life Prophet Muhammad went to the city of Taif hoping to find people who would listen to, and support, his message to humanity. Instead of support he found men women and children who insulted and chased him out of town. With his sandals covered in blood and his heart full of sadness, he prayed to God for help. In response, the Angel of the Mountains was sent down and he asked for the Prophet’s permission to cause the mountains surrounding Taif to crumble, killing all of the city’s inhabitants. Despite his pain and suffering something he had every right to be angry about, the Prophet’s reply was, **“No, for I hope that Allah will bring forth from their progeny people who will worship God Alone, and none besides Him.”**¹²

11 Saheeh Muslim

12 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

Anger management in Islam can be summed up as follows.

- Seek refuge in God, from the ploys of Satan.
- Make ablution, because water extinguishes fire.
- Change positions, if you are standing, sit, if you are sitting, lie down. A person lying down cannot engage in fistfights or destroy property.
- Remove yourself from the situation. This could be likened to our modern equivalent, time out.
- Be silent, words spoken in anger cannot be taken back.