

## **UNDERNEATH ANGER AND RESISTANT EMOTIONS**

### **THE INSTANT BEFORE ANGER**

Think about the last time you were really angry. Do you remember your feelings the instant before the aggression took over? A special slow motion camera might help, as the transition from a vulnerable feeling to anger occurs in what seems like a split second. Since such a camera does not exist, we will focus on learning how to search for and hopefully discover the feelings directly beneath our aggression in order to shorten power struggles, conflicts, and despair. When we practice containing our aggression and searching for the feelings beneath it rather than suppressing them, we will get a clearer impression of what we are defending against. Then it is more obvious that beneath our strongest human defenses, we are all the same.

Acknowledging anger in a way that neutralizes negativity will help us experience and share our most vulnerable feelings and needs. Recognizing such feelings as fear, sadness and loss, can help us to notice quickly what occurred before the flash points of aggression took hold. These feelings can be illuminated when we are courageous enough to spend time directly with our anger, without acting it out. This is no easy job. It really requires us to consider a very new way of dealing with our aggressive feelings. If we refuse to believe our anger's "story," the voices that say it's someone else's fault and justify our urge to act passively or aggressively, we will have an opportunity to know ourselves more intimately.

What do you see beneath your aggression? Do you recognize it? Many of us don't believe we even get angry at all, but a closer look will reveal that we all have some kind of strong internal reaction to being mistreated and to not getting what we want. In my experience, at the root of the major ways we separate our hearts from each other, there is a protest stemming from our self-centered sides. Whether we act it out passively or directly, it is a form of resistance.

Each of us has our unique ways of trying to take control and get what we want. Some of us do it directly while others try to manipulate people through money, withholding sex and expressions of love. Still others withdraw into work, the machinations of the mind or various addictions. These patterns of separation that we express through our energy and our actions, express the root of most of our anger, so it is essential to keep searching for what lies beneath aggression, even if we don't overtly express it.

### **PATTERNS OF SEPARATION**

Our defenses reveal themselves in how we separate from our own and each other's hearts most frequently, and therefore have a major influence on our daily lives. They will remain as defenses until we can see them clearly and guide ourselves to what is underneath. Being able to do this is, in itself, a miraculous and transformational achievement. How often in your life have you been able see your own defenses and not be held captive by them? How often have you been withdrawn, seen it clearly, and returned to being engaged? How often have you endlessly intellectualized about your feelings, seen what you were doing, and been able to feel what was actually happening? How often have you aggressively defended yourself, caught yourself in it, and been able to shift to a softer approach? Hopefully we can see that these are challenging and rare responses in our lives.

The inability to get underneath our aggression is the main cause of war, human suffering, unhealthy competition, and power struggles. Can you recognize how tragic this really is, and how important it is to learn how to transform this? The fact that we are all suffering from the same pitfalls and consequences will inspire us to break through our own ways of being aggressive, and reach for a way of finding greater peace.

When we were children, many of us learned that if we got really angry and stayed that way, we got what the things we wanted, such as candy, a special toy, or staying up late to see our favorite TV program. Anger often worked, and was such a brilliant strategy that even now, as adults; we unconsciously continue to use the same approach. We still believe unconsciously, that anger works in this magical way. It's hard to imagine that we can still buy into this, but we do, and we may even think we aren't really acting from a young place. This kind of acting out just doesn't work in our adult lives, no matter how badly we try to starve another person into submission to get what we want.

Our aggressive patterns were reinforced when we were children, but even now as adults, we frequently get what we want *temporarily* by acting out in certain ways. At the same time, we lose what we need. The following case study is a good example.

### **HOWARD & RENEE**

Howard and Renee had been in a relationship for several years, during which time Howard boasted that they had sex at least once a day, usually twice. Renee validated that it was true, they did have sex every day, but Renee was submitting rather than engaging enthusiastically because she really did not have the capacity for daily sexual activity. When she tried to explain this to Harold, he told her she was cold, rigid and untouchable. Fearing he was right, Renee began to acquiesce to her lover's demands, having sex when he wanted it and only pretending to enjoy herself, which did nothing for their intimacy.

When Renee's business sent her to Asia for three weeks to trouble shoot a failing company, Harold missed her terribly. Of course, he missed the sex but he realized that he also missed her presence, her loving and nurturing attitude and the way she encouraged him. He was thrilled to pick her up at the airport and reconnect. But he found that she had contracted a stomach ailment on her trip and she crawled into bed when she got home, in pain and quite ill.

Over the several weeks to follow, Renee was still in pain, she was on medications to heal her stomach and she had no interest in sex. Harold had not expected this since he had remained abstinent while she was gone. Sure, he missed her company when she was gone but now that she was back, he felt more sexually deprived than before and blamed Renee for not being there for him. He paced the bedroom several times one evening, complaining about his deprivation and how much pain he was in from not having sex. "I need to really feel you in a way I can't when we're cuddling," he told her. "How much longer are you going to be sick?"

Renee felt so pressured, she submitted and allowed him to have sex with her. He knew she was not really into it, but he didn't care. He wanted what he wanted and he wanted it now! But when the sex was over, he felt worse than before because her lack of interest and her obvious acquiescence made him feel like he was having sex with a dead person. He got what he wanted, but he lost what he needed. She left the relationship, as neither one of them were able to deal with their anger openly. This is all too frequent an occurrence.

## **SEEING OUR STRATEGIES**

Just like Howard, we can we hang onto our various strategies, intimidate the other and in the short term, satisfy our desires. But in the long run, the satisfaction is temporary at best. This tendency is transparent in our politicians, lawyers, corporations, terrorists, opposing political parties and competitors in all fields. But while their aggressive manipulations are obvious, it's hard to see the same patterns in ourselves. The sooner we get the tragic joke that we believe we can get the other to submit, the sooner we can stop shooting ourselves in the foot.

It's humbling and liberating to clearly recognize how we create distance from those around us, by being aggressive. But such recognition provides motivation to open our hearts and help us find fascination with that which lies underneath our aggression. Staying with this inspired curiosity for a long and deep enough period of time helps us to laugh at our childlike futile efforts to gain control. As one client said to me with a smile, "I'm going to get her to stop screaming, by yelling how much I hate it." With the help of some humor, we may be able to clearly see that we're in a regressed state when we believe the "other" deserves to be the brunt of our anger. We continue to be deluded in thinking that if we make a big enough stink, they will submit to our will.

This kind of thinking dominates our world today. Most of us believe that the world is "out there," and we are not, in even the tiniest way, contributing to war, terrorism, alienation and separation. But if we look closely, we see that our small aggressive actions, attitudes and demands are a microcosm of the larger world. Each time we dump anger on an innocent person, shame our lover, or yell at the tech support guy after being kept on hold for an hour, we are perpetuating aggression in the world at large. These small acts of aggression cause the innocent person to experience emotional distress, they cause a lover to contract and withdraw, and they cause the tech support guy to be in a very bad mood. Just imagine how far this chain reaction travels every time any one of us dumps anger on somebody else!

Unless we can see our aggression and its strategies more clearly, we are not going to support change around us in a significant way. Rather, hanging onto our ineffective strategies makes it next to impossible to see what is underneath our aggression, which is essential to move toward our hearts.

## **HIGHLIGHTING THE ABSURDITY**

A method of highlighting an absurdity in order to get the joke is not about blaming ourselves. Rather, it's about shocking ourselves into recognizing our staggering degrees of magical thinking and two-year-old blindness. Once we can see this clearly, we have a greater chance of finding the motivation to look beneath our illusions. We will see that none of really us want to hurt ourselves, yet this is what we are unwittingly doing. Denial of our self-destructive aspects will only keep us unconscious and in the long run, will cause us to suffer even more.

Before you blindly express your anger, try repeating out loud the inner messages that are keeping you in denial, such as, "It's really going to work this time." Or, "I'm going to make him love me and I'm going to get him to obey. I *will* get his respect." Keep convincing yourself, out loud, that your manipulations WILL work - - until you start to laugh or cry. With an awareness that self-inflicted magical thinking results in self-inflicted wounds, you may be more interested in finding the vulnerabilities that lie underneath this false sense of strength.

Once we get in touch with the absurdity of our belief that we can get what we want by expressing anger, the next step is to find the courage to give up these aggressive tendencies. Remember, when we talk about "giving them up," it's not to suggest that you deny or repress these tendencies. Quite the opposite. Once we have gotten the joke, perhaps we can find the courage to share our feelings of failure, inadequacy, competition, insecurity, anxiety and depression that lie just below the surface. A key part of our universal condition is to find a way to openly face the more challenging parts of our suffering. Do we have the faith? Can we acknowledge the anger, and penetrate these underlying depths with the people closest to us? Can we voluntarily let those we love the most how out of control we really get.

### **LEE ANN**

Lee Ann had been married for twenty years when she and her husband, Thomas, came to me. They were both concerned about Lee Ann's relationship with her two kids. She had become distant to the people around her, including Thomas. In her words, "I feel hopeless and dead."

During the first several months, we unearthed her pattern of getting angry impulsively, as a contributor to her feelings of distance. Since Lee Ann had a great sense of humor, I knew I could be playful with her. She engaged in an angry interaction with her husband, which was quite telling, "Thomas," she said angrily, "you're completely uninterested in what I'm going through.

How many times do I have to ask you to check in with me? You're so oblivious. What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you give a shit?"

In a tone of removed sarcasm, Thomas said, "So how are you? There, I'm interested."

"Thanks a lot," Lee Ann said in a raging tone. "Whenever I ask you to pay attention to me, you get sarcastic with me. I'm really unhappy."

"How do you think your tone sounded when you first asked Thomas to pay attention to you?" I asked her.

She said, "I was straightforward and understandably frustrated."

"Can you repeat what you said in that same frustrated voice?" I asked her.

After a few tries, she spoke in exactly the same voice from earlier. "How did that sound to you?" I asked her.

"I guess I was pretty exasperated."

I chuckled. "Let me get this straight. You want to get Thomas to be more sensitive to you by insensitively demanding what you want."

She started to laugh, but stopped herself and said, "You have no idea how difficult he is."

Smiling, I told her, "Sometimes our anger is smarter than we are. Tell me what you're laughing about."

Sheepishly, she said, "It does seem kind of crazy to be insensitively telling my husband to be sensitive." I asked her if she could exaggerate it to make it more obvious to her.

Over the next few months, Lee Ann intermittently went in and out of rationalizing her behavior with Thomas and she was having similar experiences with their kids. Her oldest, Martin, took offense when she asked him in an accusatory tone if he had done his homework. "I'll do it when I feel like it," he said in a bitter voice.

"Don't you talk to me that way," she typically derided him. And they were off and running, fighting and struggling against each other.

"How do you think you sounded to Martin when you asked about his homework?" I asked Lee Ann when she explained the hostility between them.

After a few rounds of denial, she finally said, "I was impatient."

Lee Ann gradually began to notice her anger in its various forms as she rationalized and then surrendered to see the truth. One day, she said in a frustrated tone, "Thomas came home last night and he had absolutely no interest in me. I had just asked him how he was doing and he rattled off a bunch of things about his day. I went into a diatribe and said, "What in the hell is

wrong with you? How many times do I have to ask you to show some interest in me? Are you a complete Bozo? You're really hopeless."

Because Lee Ann was smiling, I saw that she had become aware of her anger without deluding herself. This was a big step for her. Not only was she noticing her anger, but she wanted me to notice it, too. I asked her lightly if she would be willing to exaggerate her feelings in an attempt to see more clearly the quality she was conveying with her husband and the effect it was having on her and those around her.

She exaggerated by saying, "Thomas, you are an insensitive idiot. I hate your oblivion and I'm going to slam you over your head until you get it."

She paused a moment and I encouraged her to keep going.

"I'm going to keep beating you up until you learn how to be sensitive," she continued. "I know this'll work. The more I shame you, the more you'll surrender to me."

She was starting to have some fun and she was laughing as she said, "I know that the harder I slam you with my rage, the more you'll give in to me."

After a great deal of practice over many months, Lee Ann finally knew that her anger was a major contributing force to her alienation. When I saw that she was able to accept her anger with humor and insight, I asked, "Can you express what you really want from Thomas in a more sensitive way?"

This request was not a new one. I'd asked her the question many times in the past, with minimal success. Now, she stopped to think and she said, "I'm really sorry I've been hitting you over the head with my anger. I want you to know I'm embarrassed by it. I'm working on changing it. I want to be able to ask for things in a kinder way. She said tenderly, "Are you open to asking me how I am? Are you open to listening to me? You're so important in my life."

She looked at me and said, "When I speak this way, I feel peaceful, and also a little horrified. I've been lonely my whole life and I feel ashamed that I couldn't deal with it more directly."

I could really sense Lee Ann's core feelings underneath her anger, as she was so clear about what she needed. It was obvious she was having a breakthrough when she said, "The sad part is that I chose a good man. I already know he'll respond if I can speak more from my heart. I bet if I talk to my kids from a more neutral place, I'll get some different responses."

I felt reassured that Lee Ann was clear about her anger when she said, “I’m hopeful since I have found a softer place inside me. I know I’ll still lose it at times, but I found a new way of being that has always been missing.”

Over the next several months, Lee Ann progressed deeper into her intimacy. She is a great example of the fact that when we find the softer feelings beneath our aggression and express them tenderly, the quality of our lives will change for the better.

### **FINDING INTIMACY UNDERNEATH AGGRESSION**

There are many of us who never reach a serious depth of honesty and integrity in our relationships. This makes profound intimacy impossible because there is nothing as transforming as voluntarily giving up our private resistant attitudes to seek a heartfelt contact. The more we can acknowledge with an element of neutrality that our hearts aren’t open, the closer we come to our own hearts, and those around us. This is hard and rare, but it changes our lives.

During a recent session, I noticed that a client of mine looked agitated with her husband. I asked her, “How are you doing?”

She took a deep breath and paused. “I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” she said, laughing. After gathering herself for several seconds, she said to her husband, “I’m so sorry I screamed at you last night. You didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t you. I was frightened and I was afraid to admit how jealous and insecure I felt. I was hypersensitive and I had some old rejection feelings when we were with your ex-girlfriend. Now I feel embarrassed I got so tight and rejected you last night. I lost it inappropriately when I expressed myself in such a defensive and angry way.”

Her husband was so moved by her openness, he easily understood and he reached out and embraced her. In my practice, I consistently find that when someone expresses this depth of honesty by voluntarily giving up their aggressiveness, the results are almost always positive.

### **SEVEN KEYS: BENEATH THE RESISTANT EMOTIONS**

These keys are perhaps the most important tools of all when you are stuck in your aggression. Rather than staying stuck, they will give you a number of options to open your heart as you lessen and loosen the grip of resistant emotions. I would encourage you to return to them whenever you are struggling with this issue. The sequence may vary.

KEY ONE: Acknowledge that you're in a resistant emotion. Shift your focus. If you are accustomed to justifying aggression by making it someone else's fault, take a moment to be interested in feelings underneath.

KEY TWO: Spend some time sincerely looking for these feelings with no judgments or criticism. The sincerity alone will start the shift.

KEY THREE: Sense the vulnerable feelings just beneath the anger. Even if you can't do this, continue to return to this step.

KEY FOUR: When you are objectively looking at your aggression, notice how you feel in the present time, seeing what you feel, such as shame, embarrassment, sadness or sorrow. These present feelings will change your experience, especially when you let them be more central.

KEY FIVE: Ask yourself how you would like to feel or what you need. Notice if you prefer feelings such as sorrow, empathy or forgiveness.

KEY SIX: Ask yourself to focus on the specific heartfelt quality that you need. (tenderness, tolerance, patience)

KEY SEVEN: Enjoy feeling whatever part of the essential quality that you have access to.

See how the following case study utilizes each of the keys.

### **ADAM**

Adam, a married father of three children, was extremely agitated when he arrived for our weekly session. When I asked him what the problem was, he said he wasn't sure.

I suggested he try to recall when he first started to feel contracted.

He thought quietly for a moment, his face upset and clenched, until I saw a light go on in his eyes. Adam said, "I got frustrated last night when my oldest son, Jason, started whining about his bed time. My wife was away for the weekend, and Jason asked me if he could stay up later to watch a TV show that he liked. When I said no, he spiraled into a really bad mood and he stayed there. I can't believe how short-tempered I got, because I've been angry ever since he got angry."

"How did you feel inside right before this happened?" I asked.

“I was already anxious. I get that way a lot when I have to take care of the kids by myself. I get scared that I’ll end up exhausted or agitated and last night I was unusually tired to start with, because I’d had a hard day at work.”

“What happened to you when Jason started complaining?” I asked.

Adam’s voice took on a sheepishness when he said; “I got uptight after I made a few attempts to quiet him down.”

“What is your attitude about your up-tightness?” I asked.

“I feel embarrassed and ashamed,” he said. I could tell he knew that I was caring for him, and as he acknowledged his embarrassment, he started to cry. “I want to be there for my kids more than anything in the whole world,” he said as his feeling state shifted from anger and self-punishment into sorrow and a deep longing to care.

“What are you experiencing now?” I asked him.

“I feel relief,” he said, his eyes still teary, “because I can feel my heart again.”

I knew from our previous work together, that Adam had a well-developed prayer practice that involved asking inside that he be able to feel certain parts of his heart. “The next time this kind of thing happens,” I said, “what will you wish or pray for?”

He didn’t hesitate when he said, “I want my prayer for kindness and affection towards my kids and myself to kick in as soon as possible.”

I could tell by how much he had softened in his attitude and in his face that he was in touch with his heart in that moment. “Can you sense the kindness and affection?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said, his tone of voice reflecting his connection to his heart.

I knew that this would be an area of constant practice for Adam as he dealt with his kids on a daily basis, but he had reached underneath his aggression and he was finally feeling himself in a truly caring way.

### **BUILDING NEW GROOVES AND REFLEXES**

These kinds of breakthroughs that begin with a change of focus on what lies underneath our feelings, require numerous repetitions. The more we touch the vulnerability below the anger, the more we access a tenderness, the easier it is for a new reflex to develop. After some practice, most people gain a number of insights where they can see something beyond the anger. It could be sadness, fear, embarrassment, humility or simply the wish to be harmless.

Sometimes it might be the insight that the anger is hurting them. This is a key epiphany. When

we see that we ourselves, suffer the most when we get angry, it can motivate us to not only learn to contain it, but also to look for other parts of ourselves that we can access. Tibetan Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, best selling author and renowned teacher, says that our aggressive tendencies give us a false belief that we can hurt someone else, or at least impact them in a certain direction. But, she reminds us, we actually take the rat poison ourselves when we act out rather than contain our anger in a healthy way. The sad joke is on us.

Such realizations can lead us to a place where we can catch ourselves, perhaps in the moment or in the moment just before we express aggression. The idea is that, over time, we gradually increase the frequency of catching and containing our aggression. In the course of lives, as we normally go in and out of regression, when we dedicate ourselves to a repetitive practice, we can begin to build a new groove or habit. We become more interested in feeling what's underneath our aggressive attitudes, than acting them out or punishing ourselves or someone else. We are more interested in feeling what's in our hearts than justifying why we are angry or right. This takes time. There are no easy or quick fixes. However, there are some clear ways to build these peaceful structures inside ourselves.

Highly revered Vietnamese meditation teacher, Thich Nat Han, likens this process to planting compassionate seeds for the future and watering them in the present. Appreciating our courage and compassion will affirm our heart's true nature and deepen our relationship to our highest power, vision, or whatever name we wish to give it. This profound appreciation of our purest intentions is critical to becoming more familiar with our hearts.

Spending time alone and with others who support us in looking for what's underneath our aggression, is essential to our well-being. Most of us don't have a very good support team, but it is a great way to set your future radar on looking for friends, counselors and family members that will help. Keep in mind that the feelings and images underneath our resistant emotions are always the ones we have the hardest time tolerating. Practicing the meditation below can be a major act of caring for yourself and opening your heart.

### **MEDITATION: OPENING TO WHAT IS UNDERNEATH AGGRESSION**

*Choose a comfortable setting where you will not be disturbed. Take a few breaths to feel and enter into your body and heart. Slowly continue breathing, acknowledging that being with your inner experience is your top priority.*

*Now remember the last time you felt a resistant emotion. Make sure it is fresh in your mind. Feel the moments of aggression themselves in whatever way they were there. Were you conscious of your resistance? If not, pause for a moment and encourage yourself to remember next time. After a few moments of remembering, ask yourself, "What did I feel before the resistance or anger started? Look as closely as possible to discover those softer feelings underneath your aggression that were difficult to tolerate?"*

*If you can find these softer parts of your emotions, appreciate that. If you can't find them, appreciate that you're even looking for them, which is the real purpose of what you're doing right now. Sincerely looking requires a major shift from being resistant to being more humble. Recognize that this is no small task because this sincerity is the key to shifting out of aggression. Remind yourself that this looking is a place you want to return to whenever you feel aggressive.*

*If you can find these more delicate feelings, dwell in them for as long as possible. If you feel fear, failure, inadequacy, hopelessness or loss, encourage yourself with statements like, "Have the courage to just feel, and not do anything else."*

*Whether you're sincerely searching for what is underneath or have found it, you are fulfilling your original intention. No matter your results, appreciate yourself for your depth of honesty, courage and tolerance to face what you normally weren't even looking for.*

### SEEING OUR DEFENSES

Most of us have been trained to believe it is terribly dangerous to admit how aggressive we truly are. But if we could slow down enough, we would see that we are not alone in this. Others have the same attitudes and we all can help each other. The difficulty is that we've been trained by those around us that creating a good image is far more important than seeing what is actually happening.

We need to contemplate whether maintaining our self-image is more important than seeing the ways we feel and act when we don't get what we want. If you can see certain moments when you deny how closed your heart is, can you see the potential benefits even though it is painful? In much of the psychological world, there is a tendency to support

developing a good self-image through excessive validation. Therapists aren't necessarily taught this in their training, but it's common in the therapy world as it is currently practiced. In fact, a large percentage of clients unconsciously see a therapist primarily to be validated. This can be a great disservice to everyone if the validation is for their self-image, which may include justifying aggression, rather than an accurate reflection of what is really happening.

This might seem intuitively obvious, but we need to keep asking ourselves, if we are more interested in what is happening in the moment, or, how we want to appear to others and ourselves. If you're wondering why I'm discussing self-image in a paper about going beneath our aggression, a close look will demonstrate that whatever self-image you are holding on to that is false, will hurt those around you. Let's use a couple of examples to see how this really works.

- When you're angry with someone and you say, "I'm not mad at you," the denial of your anger creates a false image that you are relaxed and friendly. This automatically makes intimacy impossible, as there is no way to access what you both need.
- When you're gossiping about someone, and act loving to that person's face, you are in denial of your negativity that is rooted in keeping your self-image intact.

**LIST OF RESISTANT OR AGGRESSIVE DEFENSES CHART:** These powerful defenses that we hold might include withdrawal, denial, pretending, intimidation, contraction, all forms of direct aggression, withholding, competing against, and gossip.

**EXERCISE: LISTING YOUR DEFENSES:**

What are your three most frequent aggressive defenses?

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

**EXERCISE: WHAT ARE THE TWO FALSE SELF-IMAGES YOU MOST FREQUENTLY PROJECT THAT HIDE AGGRESSION:** examples: goodness, strength, peaceful, funny, adorable, intelligent, independent, receptive, fun

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_

The motivation behind holding on to our self-image usually stems from wanting something from the other person. For example, let's say you have withdrawn sexually from your partner.

She asks, “Does your withdrawal mean that you’re less interested in me sexually than you used to be?”

When you answer, “No I’ve just really been busy lately,” you’re trying to keep your withdrawal defense intact, so you can still rely on her for the things you want. You may even justify the defense by telling yourself; “I’m trying to protect her from getting hurt.”

The truth is that you’re already hurting her, and she is likely already aware of the truth anyway. Honesty with kindness from us would be the only true method of protecting someone else. Try saying, “I’ve had a hard time lately keeping my heart open and my body juices flowing. It has nothing to do with you.”

That is the beginning of a conversation that is alive underneath our defenses, as we open our hearts to the truth. How many times do we think we’re protecting someone else, when in reality, we have no idea how to speak about our own closed heart--with an open heart. We run into this difficulty because we don’t yet know how to care for ourselves when we are aggressive or defended. We end up getting caught in our own defense structure so we have no idea how to care for someone else.

Practicing these tools of accessing what is underneath our resistance is an act of love and kindness. It will allow you to love and be loved in a way that has never been possible before. Exposing the underbelly of your vulnerability is an act of strength, faith, and trust. It is the primary way we can find our essential heart and soul.