



Exercise: Anger as a Symptom

Anger can be a normal, healthy and useful emotion that we all experience in certain types of workplace situations. Like any other emotion, anger exists on a continuum and varies in severity. Anger intensity ranges from minor annoyance, irritation or frustration, all the way to fury or rage. Anger can serve a useful function in some situations: when we are being threatened, attacked or treated unfairly.

Sometimes we become angry in situations where it does not serve a useful function, and where we are not under any type of actual or perceived threat. In these situations, anger is often a “secondary emotion” – meaning that it may be a symptom of an underlying “primary emotion” that may be hidden or more difficult to deal with. For example, if you tease someone about slacking off at work and they respond with unusual anger, it may be that they feel taken advantage of at work or fearful of losing their job. They may therefore interpret your teasing as a threat or attack even when it was not intended that way.

Think about situations that have elicited a strong anger reaction for you. Try to recall a situation in which – as seen in hindsight – anger was actually a secondary emotion, a symptom of another, underlying emotion. If you can, try to generate one example for each of the primary emotions below, and reflect on reasons why anger may be a more comfortable emotion for you in certain situations.

	Primary Emotion was Fear/Anxiety	Primary Emotion was Insecurity	Primary Emotion was Sadness or Hurt
Situation			
My reaction as seen by others...			
My thoughts at the time...			
Why might my primary emotion have presented as anger?			