Feeling COVID Rage?  
5 Strategies for Managing Pandemic Anger

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Most of us thought things would look different by now. When the COVID-19 vaccines were rolled out to the general U.S. population in the Spring of 2021, and cases hit an all-time low in June, we breathed a collective sigh of relief and thought maybe, just maybe, we finally had this virus under control. But the Delta variant had other plans. Around July 4th cases appeared to be taking a turn for the worst, and we now find ourselves in the middle of a fourth wave that is showing no mercy. The late summer has left us with an eerie sense of déjà vu: full ICUs, masks back on, distancing, outdoor activities, debates about public health mandates, and canceled plans.

As a mental health professional, my clients are presenting with a broad range of difficult emotions as the pandemic drags on, including anxiety, worry, sadness, despair, and guilt, among others. But during this fourth wave one emotion stands out above the rest: anger. People are wondering – how did we get here again? Will this ever end? Why are other people not doing their part? Is it really that hard to wear a mask/get vaccinated? Anger is often related to thoughts of unfairness, and much of the anger people are experiencing may come down to the thought that this wave could have been prevented if everyone had followed public health recommendations.

While anger in the short-term is normal and even adaptive (as you will see below), there are long-term health effects of uncontrolled anger, including increased risk of hypertension, worse pain management, increased anxiety, weakened immune system, and headache. So, what can you do about chronic feelings of anger related to the pandemic? Check out the five evidence-based strategies below:

1. **Realize it’s okay (and even useful) to be angry:**
   
   We have emotions for a reason, and they can be useful. For example, if we never felt afraid, we may not take objective danger seriously, like being faced with a dangerous virus like COVID-19. And if we never felt sadness, we would not care when we lost a loved one, and therefore would not value our close relationships. Likewise, anger has its purpose. Anger gets a bad rep because it is often mistaken as hostile behavior or aggression. But anger is an emotion, not a behavior. Anger tells us that something isn’t right. Perhaps our safety is being threatened, injustice is happening, or some action is being required of us. If no one felt anger about the pandemic, we may never have developed vaccines or instituted masking and distancing requirements, because no one would care what happened to the people around them.

2. **Learn to respond to anger, not react:**
   
   Both behaving aggressively and bottling up anger are linked to hypertension and coronary artery disease. As a reminder, the emotion of anger isn’t bad, as it signals to us that something is wrong that needs to be addressed. It may feel tempting to virtually “tell off” an acquaintance on Facebook who is posting misinformation about vaccines, but hostile behavior is likely to backfire, as the message typically gets lost in the aggressive communication style and leads to defensiveness from the other party. On the other hand, constantly suppressing anger can lead to the “pressure cooker effect” of stewing, resentment, and unexpected anger outbursts. Instead of aggression or suppression, practice expressing anger in a healthy way through assertive communication techniques to articulate your feelings, needs, and desires.
Don’t water the weeds:

Once you’ve given yourself time to feel and acknowledge your anger, don’t continue to ruminate on the incident, news article, social media post, or conversation that made you angry. It may be tempting to rehash all the misinformation you saw on the Internet today and come up with hypothetical arguments in the shower, but this is an unproductive strategy. Redirect your attention by pivoting to what’s in your control. For example, if you’re seething after seeing a large group of people congregating indoors without masks, remember that you can choose to avoid or leave those type of situations, wear a mask, and get vaccinated. Gratitude also works well as an antidote to anger, so you can practice focusing instead on what you appreciate about the current situation, such as gratitude for the scientists who created the vaccines, your health, or your access to accurate public health information.

Practice radical acceptance:

“If only everyone would have worn masks, we wouldn’t be in the situation.” “If only I had worked harder, I could have saved them.” “Things should be different by now. Why is this still happening?” Do any of these thoughts sound familiar? Ruminating about the “shoulds” and “if onlys” is a red flag that you are fighting against reality. Pain is inevitable, but fighting against reality generates suffering, and suffering is optional. We can choose to radically accept reality as it is, not as we wish it to be. And the reality is that there are many, many things we cannot control about the pandemic (and life in general) no matter how much we care. Even the most robust evidence base may not change someone’s mind about getting the vaccine or wearing a mask, and even the best treatment and medical advice may not save a patient. Radical acceptance does not mean that you agree with what is happening or what has happened to you, but instead allows room for hope because you are accepting things as they are and not fighting against reality.

Tell your friends and family how you’re feeling:

This strategy may sound like a cliché but sharing your feelings with others is a proven strategy for managing anger. Be genuine and authentic with the people you trust rather than pretending like everything’s okay. Odds are that many people are feeling angry right now and realizing that you are not alone, plus being validated by others can go a long way for your mental health. When asking for support, be specific about what type of support you need. For example, do you just need someone to listen to you vent, or do you want help problem-solving a situation? Show appreciation for the person’s support if it was helpful and find a way to support the other person if they seek a safe space with you in the future. A therapist can also help you to process difficult emotions and learn healthy coping mechanisms for anger, so don’t hesitate to reach out for professional help when indicated.