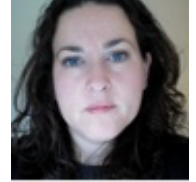


## Rising job insecurity, victimisation, and bullying mean we are getting angrier at work. And so we should be – anger often leads to change.

*With job insecurity and unemployment on the rise, many of us have reasons to get angry, and yet, anger is often seen as a character failing rather than a reaction to fear and uncertainty. In the second article in her series on public policy, work, and mental health [Elizabeth Cotton](#) looks at the virtues of getting angry.*



The trouble with anger is that it's an ugly emotion. When you are going through the process of redundancy probably the most consistent piece of "advice" offered is don't, whatever you do, get angry. When you are angry this is less helpful than you imagine, underlining the profound difference between advice and help, the latter being a rare thing and the former given in abundance especially from a position of relative security. The thing about telling an angry person not to get angry is that it's something of a vicious circle. You are angry, a demand is made that you CALM DOWN and regulate your feelings, you feel this denies the legitimacy of why you're angry, you get more angry, even harder to calm down.

For a start there's a lot to get angry about. Our work and the value of it are seriously threatened in the current climate. Public sector ethos now sounds like something from the 1950s, to those of us witnessing a devaluing of our contribution and experience. This is particularly true in education where we are starting to see the loss of our most senior academics and bright young things because of redundancies in subjects no longer seen to be valuable for future generations and what we now rather incomprehensibly call their "employability". The idea that philosophy and employment relations are of no value to people at work genuinely makes me angry.

The difficulty though with getting angry is how to direct it at the right things. The experience of anger feels like you've just swallowed a helicopter which you then have to drive in the right direction. There's a lot of anger around for people suffering from mental health problems. [Time to Change](#), a permanent campaign tackling stigma, [estimates](#) that 9 out of 10 people with mental health problems have experienced discrimination. This isn't just about being left out of staff football or after works drinks, it includes scapegoating, vindictive behaviour and even violence.

Mental illness often evokes anger – other people's confusion, pain and challenging behaviour affects us. It is a very difficult aspect for us to accept that often our reactions to people with mental health problems is one of revulsion and rejection, even anger. In psychoanalysis we often think about this as a process of projection, where people try to rid themselves of their own angry and aggressive feelings by projecting them onto other people. If you're someone suffering from mental health problems you can often present an ideal receptacle for other people's projections – she's the crazy lady, not me! In times of recession this rapid process of projection looks more like an Olympic ping pong match. The anger directed at people who are already struggling to regulate their feelings easily spills out into actual violence.

Anger is often misunderstood to be a character failing rather than an emotion linked closely to fear. Often, particularly for men, fear becomes anger very quickly. A new report "[Delivering Male](#)" by the National Mental Health Development Unit explains the additional difficulties that men have in disclosing depression and their symptoms can sometimes be unexpectedly angry, such as drink and aggressive behaviour. Just because someone is frightening you it doesn't mean that they themselves are not frightened. And the problems get worse in the workplace where we are not supposed to admit to being afraid or vulnerable, rather we tend to exhibit more aggressive and assertive characteristics. No wonder then, that there are so many angry people at work.

Under these pressures it is important to acknowledge the strengths of our feelings towards our own and other peoples' states of minds. According to Mind, there has been a doubling of attacks against people with mental health problems over the last 12 months. It is stigma that allows this to happen, with very few people feeling equipped or willing to intervene or challenge what is essentially hate crime. Mental health is the last taboo in the workplace and as a result hate crimes are under reported and silently tolerated. In a workplace where it is easier to talk about HIV/AIDS than self harming it is also easy to understand why we're so angry.

Much of the work around wellbeing and resilience at work is based on positive psychology, particularly the

[work of Martin Seligman](#) and the [PENN resilience programme](#). This approach has found a way into larger workplaces – promoting the idea that optimism is an essential and learned behaviour that promotes wellbeing and resilience. There is much debate about the value of this approach, specifically whether it denies the realities of people’s experience of work. In a context of job insecurity, victimisation and workplace bullying being told to focus on positive thoughts and breathing exercises can be highly provocative in that it denies the significance of what can go wrong at work. In this context optimism and positive thinking are a poor response to feelings of anger and hopelessness.

So given that there is a lot of anger around at work, what could be a healthy attitude towards it? It might lie in the understanding that anger is necessary to the process of change. The energy and focus that you have when you are angry is an important motivator in challenging things that we think are wrong (in my case a rather priggish attachment to fairness). I also think its one of the most important reasons why some people experience depression and others don’t. If you can get angry you are really living, really experiencing and reacting to what is going on around you. Depression is a numbing and dumbing process, to try to avoid feelings of sadness and anger. And it is precisely this that makes depression essentially an experience of hopelessness.

So this is why I’m all in favour of anger, because of its relationship to the future. If you’re angry, you’re also hopeful that things should and could change.