



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## breaking free

Over the last several months I have been swirling in a space of fear and anger. Neither emotion is pleasant but anger is especially unpleasant for me. I added to my suffering by feeling bad that I was angry and fearful. I don't like that in myself. At times I could let the emotions go, distract or soothe myself, but they always returned.

Sometimes fear and anger are appropriate emotional responses. These emotions help us recognize dangerous situations and have the energy to do something about them. Evolutionarily, anger helped us kill a predator and fear motivated us to get away.

Now what threatens us is not a saber toothed tiger. There are things going on in our country that threaten the very foundation of our way of life. There are powerful people who are using fear and anger to pick scapegoats for the real problems that our country faces. In doing so, they are compounding the problems instead of finding solutions.

### ACCEPTANCE AND CURIOSITY

We know from our personal experience that actions we take out of fear and anger are rarely wise and rarely serve us well. So how do we live with our fear and anger? First, let's choose to not act out in fear and contribute to the chaos. Let's decide we don't want to run from or suppress the emotions, refuse to face the problems or let the fear paralyze us. Instead we can practice acceptance and curiosity. We steel ourselves and accept the reality of our circumstances, as unpleasant as they may be. This is not a cursory acceptance but a real and deep acceptance, an acceptance that can shake us a bit and even make the feelings initially a little worse.

Then we approach our anger and fear with curiosity. We observe where we feel those emotions in our body, describe them, label them, and listen for any messages they bear. We breathe deeply and stay present to them. We accept ourselves just as we are, frightened and angry.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, advises that when we are angry, we should pick our anger up as we would an angry small child and hold it in our lap, accepting the anger and even loving it.


We have to allow the full extent of the fear and anger to settle in, feel the emotions deeply, let them wash over us and be okay with them. We allow the thoughts and memories evoked to flow but do

not get stuck in any particular story. We do not feed the emotions by going over past events and stirring the pot. We simply sit and experience the feelings as they are. There is no threat, they are just feelings. We can take them into meditation (or some might use prayer) and just hold them. Being with others who are not afraid to do this also helps.

Gradually two things may begin to happen. First, the feelings may begin to ease a bit. In a way feelings are like small children, having gotten our full attention they don't have to try so hard to be in control. Just accepting and no longer struggling against the feelings brings relief and a feeling of ease. We begin to realize that while we feel anger and fear, we are much more than those feelings. The fear and anger begin to recede in importance as memories and feelings of competence, efficacy, and personal power began to return.

The second thing that may happen as we practice acceptance, is that we may no longer feel alone and isolated. We may begin to feel aware of something bigger than ourselves—call it the power of love, the divine, the “arc of the moral universe” (in Martin Luther King Jr.'s words). We may feel a part of something far more powerful than we are and feel held in love. A deep shift can occur, a movement in how we see our lives, our problems and our world.

From that deep place of love and compassion, actions become clear. Actions from the heart flow naturally and are more powerful and effective. Rainer Maria Rilke describes what is desired: “May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and holding back, the way it is with children.” The negative emotions may still be present, but we are no longer stuck or ruled by them. We have broken free.

Do I still feel fear and anger? Of course I do, but they no longer have the grip they did before and when they begin to exert that control again, I go back through this exercise and remind myself of a bigger reality. Breaking free of the control of fear and anger has never been more important than at the present time. Acting from a place of love and compassion has never been more essential. There are those who would use our fear and anger to turn us against each other. We must not allow that to happen. We must work together in a respectful way so that everyone feels safe and has what they need to thrive. 

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