

Feeling Good

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Cloudy...with a Chance of Rage?

When *Caitlin Moscatello* found herself snapping at everyone and mad at the world, she went in search of a sunnier disposition.

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THE MISERABLE FEELING STARTED TO CREEP IN last spring. I was toughening up, and not in a sexy, toned way, but in an “I’m becoming a bitch” way. One particularly dreary morning, I snapped at an exhausted Starbucks barista: “Does it really take 10 minutes to make a latte?” Another night, when two tourists stopped on the subway steps in front of me, I pushed past them in a huff, hissing “Move!” under my breath—as if the stairs were mine, as if I had laid them with my bare hands. A week later, when I found myself fuming at a doorman because he was following building policy by asking for my ID, I realized whom I’d become: the crazy angry lady.

Day after day, I was irrationally furious, and when I wasn’t feeling bad about myself for being so unpleasant, I was getting mad about the next thing. After a few weeks, my back started to hurt. Then my head. Eventually I had a dull ache all over. Therapists told me I wasn’t depressed; doctors told me I was physically healthy. I went to an acupuncturist. I took ibuprofen. But I couldn’t shake the feeling.

Anger is one of the most basic human emotions, and according to some experts, more and more women are seeking help to contain it. When Rachel McDavid, a licensed marriage and family therapist in New York City, started running anger management workshops in 2007, “it was mostly men,” she says. “But over the past few years, I’ve had several workshops that were almost completely filled with women.” The uptick is due in part to a cultural shift that’s made it more acceptable for women to display negative emotions. “While

women are still socialized to suppress anger, we now have some powerful female role models—Hillary Clinton, say, or Sheryl Sandberg—who aren’t sweet and happy all the time and who show that it’s okay to be assertive and express frustration,” says Stacey M. Rosenfeld, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist in New York and California.

But there’s also been a sharp rise in just how stressed women are. According to a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, 43 percent of women feel that their stress levels have increased over the past five years—and about 39 percent experience “irritability or anger” as a symptom of stress. “Women are juggling so many different roles in so many different settings,” says Mary Alvord, PhD, a psychologist and adjunct associate professor at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. “That’s not new; women have been doing this balancing act for decades. But these days the expectations—that you’re leaning in, plugged in, chipping in—are higher, while our network of support is smaller. It used to be that you had family and friends nearby, but that tribe is shrinking, because people are either just as busy as you are or too far away to help.” And when you consider that married moms with children under 18 are now the primary breadwinner in 15 percent of households (up from just 4 percent in 1960), that daughters are more than twice as likely as sons to care for aging parents, and that mothers still do nearly double the childcare and housework dads do, it’s not surprising that many women are nearing the end of one very frayed rope. ➤

When I asked my friends whether stress was making them angrier, they laughed and chimed in with stories of free-floating rage. One friend said she blew up at a cab driver who got lost when she was late for a meeting (“I didn’t even give the guy a tip,” she says now with a twinge of guilt). Another recalled how bad she felt after shouting at her cubicle mate for playing his music too loud. It was clear that this feeling—we jokingly called it angry woman syndrome (AWS)—had gotten under our skin.

And according to at least one study, AWS might actually be contagious: Researchers at China’s Beihang University recently discovered that anger is the fastest-spreading emotion on one social media network in the country; people were much more likely to repost or comment on things that made their blood boil than on those that conveyed joy. One reason for this may be our misguided belief that lashing out will purge us of negative emotions. In fact, it can just

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make the anger wheel spin faster. “When people become angry, the natural response is to do something aggressive: punch something, kick something, say something mean,” says Brad Bushman, PhD, professor of communication and psychology at the Ohio State University. “And after venting, about 75 percent of people say they feel better, which is right—they do. But what they don’t realize is that the good feeling is fleeting and reinforces the destructive behavior.”

Staying in this mad-at-the-world spiral can do more than just alienate coworkers, friends, and innocent strangers. When you feel you’ve just *had it*, your blood pressure shoots up, triggering the body’s fight-or-flight response, and in turn activating hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. And when these hormones are chronically flooding your system, they can do nasty things to your health: weaken your immune response, trigger chronic headaches, and cause inflammation. Researchers have even found that people who can’t control their anger heal from wounds more slowly than their mellower counterparts.

So, fine, getting mad isn’t the answer—but I wasn’t having much success curing my AWS with socially acceptable relaxation techniques like “walking it off” or taking 10 deep breaths. It turns out, though, that such remedies do work—I was just going about them wrong, according to anger management specialist Ronald Potter-Efron,



PhD, author of *Healing the Angry Brain*. “People assume they’re calm after 30 seconds of deep breathing,” he says. “But our bodies don’t recover that quickly. Though we may feel a pseudo calm, most people need at least 20 minutes to an hour to truly let the emotion pass. And as long as we’re still amped up, it’s easy to retrigger the anger that’s just beneath the surface.” The solution is to use your cooldown time to figure out exactly what’s at the root of your annoyance. “In many cases, people can fairly quickly pinpoint the real issue if given time to think it through clearly,” says Potter-Efron.

Of course I wanted solutions to pull myself out of an irritable rut—but I also wanted to learn how to avoid that rut in the first place. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, PhD, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*, believes that we can retrain our brains to focus on the positive and prevent ragey feelings from taking hold. This doesn’t mean thinking about glitter and sunshine when you’d rather

slam the bathroom door. It’s about consistently paying attention to what makes you feel good and then spending time actually doing it. The goal is to shore up reserves for when things go off track. It’s not unlike the logic of getting a flu shot—you want your defenses up *before* the bug hits. To inoculate against AWS, Hanson suggests taking note of as many small, happy moments as you can throughout the day and stopping to enjoy them. “Researchers have found that people who regularly practice mindfulness tend to have more neural connections in the regions of the brain associated with self-awareness—making them less likely to react negatively to frustrating situations,” Hanson says.

I knew my madness had to stop when I found myself cringing at the end of every day over how I’d snapped at someone—my poor boyfriend, a coworker, a cashier at the drugstore. Step one was buying a pair of sneakers and dragging my cranky self outside for a run. From there I inched my way

forward, making a point to reconnect with friends I’d been “too busy” to meet up with; doing little things for myself, like buying a new bottle of my favorite lotion; and cooking more often—an activity that, while time-consuming, relaxes me.

Don’t get me wrong—I still catch myself mid-eye roll when someone sits directly in front of me in yoga class. (It’s called *staggering*, girlfriend.) And last week when I was grocery shopping, a guy banged his basket right into my elbow and kept walking. I wanted to stomp up to him and say, “Um, excuse *you*.” Instead I reminded myself that a plastic basket isn’t an assault weapon and focused on the delicious stuffed squash I was planning to make. Sure, he’d thrown the first (most likely innocent) jab, but I’ve learned to stop jabbing back. **Q**

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Caitlin Moscatello is a writer based in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Glamour*, *Redbook*, and *Sports Illustrated*.



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