

# It's an angry time, but it can also be energizing

By Katherine Ellison

Rod Owens woke up furious on the day after the 2016 presidential elections.

On Facebook, he warned any friends who had supported Donald Trump that “I’m not in the mood for your [expletive] right now.”

It wasn’t a rare reaction for a liberal voter that day. But it was surprising, coming from a Tibetan Buddhist lama. Owens, who trained at the Kagyu Thubten Choling Monastery in Upstate New York, believes he is the world’s only “openly queer Black Tibetan monk.”



Rod Owens, a Tibetan Buddhist lama, wrote the book “Love and Rage: The Path to Liberation through Anger.” (Nate Taylor)

“I feel angry every day,” Owens said in a telephone interview from his home in Boston. “And I’m hearing from so many others who are also hurting, in anger and despair. The difference is that I have a practice that helps me.”

It’s an angry time, all right, with [political polarization](#) at record levels, cable news and social media monetizing outrage, and the pandemic, unemployment and fury over racial injustice heating the toxic emotional stew. Mental health experts worry about rising [domestic violence](#) and [drug and alcohol abuse](#), warning that Americans urgently need better tools to calm emotional storms.

Abundant research supports the adage that holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die. Study after study links simmering aggression with [heart disease](#) — the No. 1 killer of Americans before the pandemic. One found a [tripled risk of a stroke](#) during the two hours following an angry outburst.



Peaceful protesters rally against racial inequality. (Jay Paul/Reuters)

Chronic anger may also [weaken the immune system](#), while repeated and lengthy bouts of anger or sadness can increase [inflammation](#), raising risks of illnesses such as arthritis. In one finding, Harvard scientists found that men with the highest hostility levels had [worse lung capacity](#), with more chance of respiratory disease.

The uptick in outrage is bipartisan — as is its potential for harm: the looting, vandalism and assaults on police, and the tear-gassing and pepper-spraying of peaceful protesters.

In Brentwood, Tenn., chaplain and former police detective Robert Michaels hopes police can find better tools to deal with the trauma, frustration and anger that often come with the job.

As chief executive of the nonprofit “[Serve & Protect](#),” he’s calling on departments to offer more in-house support to help officers heal the emotional wounds that can undermine their training in conflict de-escalation.

“We need to pay more attention to officers’ emotional wellness, and the shame and stigma that get in the way of their getting the help they need,” Michaels says.

Emotions are rarely simple and neither are their effects, says Stanford University psychologist James Gross, a leading authority in the relatively young science of emotional regulation.

He and other mental health experts stressed that much of today’s angry zeitgeist isn’t irrational. Anger can also be energizing — author Toni Morrison called it “a lovely surging.” That’s one reason it’s so important in mobilizing for social justice. “It would be a shame to try to make that kind of anger go away,” Gross said.

At the Harvard Kennedy School, psychologist Jennifer Lerner has found that anger can be a healthier response to unfairness than fear or despair. By studying people’s facial expressions at times of high stress over perceived injustice, Lerner showed that people who got [indignant instead of afraid](#) were less likely to suffer high levels of blood pressure and stress hormones.

In the hierarchy of harmful emotions, seething anger is worse than occasional outrage, while a general sense of [powerlessness](#) may be the worst of the three. Amid worries that people are feeling more angry and helpless than ever during the pandemic lockdowns, Gross and Lerner recently joined several colleagues in an extraordinary new [study](#), supported by the Psychological Science Accelerator, which

fast-tracks high-quality and helpful behavioral research. The effort began last month with a survey of the state of the emotional health of more than 25,000 people in 55 countries.

After analyzing the results, researchers plan to test two leading strategies to cope with potentially harmful emotions, going beyond “the homegrown remedies like telling people to count to ten or go for a walk,” Gross says. Both involve the strategy of “reappraisal” — rethinking the thoughts that rile us up.

One group of participants will be asked to try to change their perspective on pandemic-related restrictions, perhaps replacing a thought like “This will never end!” with something like “I know from world history that keeping calm and carrying on gets us through tough times.”

The second group will be prompted to reimagine their goals. Someone upset about being unemployed, for instance, might try to focus on new opportunities to strengthen ties with family members.

These two groups will be compared to a third, in which members will do no such reflecting, to determine how much the tactics might help. The researchers hope as soon as possible to get out the message that easy, evidence-based techniques can stem the suffering from negative emotions and help people to have clearer heads as they cope with today’s enormous challenges.

The idea that we can change the way we feel by changing the way we think has ancient roots, extending back to the ancient Greeks and Stoic philosophers, according to Gross. “If thou art pained by any external thing, it is not the thing that disturbs thee, but thine own judgment about it,” Marcus Aurelius, the 2nd century Roman emperor, famously said.

It’s also a tenet of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), in which therapists prompt patients to question their angry or pessimistic thoughts, exploring more benign alternatives. Hundreds of studies have found CBT to help patients struggling with mental problems including anxiety, depression and alcoholism.

Still, the obvious caveat to these coolheaded strategies is that hotheads often find them impossible. That’s when you most need a mindfulness practice, says Owens, the lama.

Owens grew up in northern Georgia, where he says he was drawn to studying anger in part because of the charged and ambivalent relationship that many African Americans have with that emotion. On the one hand, he writes, “to belong to the Black community was to be angry” — for reasons including what he describes as a social system that has used black bodies for production and now regards them as expendable. Yet Owens had also learned that expressing his anger was dangerous, something that could get him punished or killed.

No wonder, perhaps, that when Owens first joined meditation groups, his teachers would note that he seemed angry, and Owens would retort “[expletive] you, I’m not!”

Later he felt that his teachers were trying to get him to suppress his rage. That made him work all the harder to acknowledge, first, his anger and then the grief and fear he discovered behind it. Without fully feeling those emotions — including disappointment in a world that didn’t seem to want him in it — Owens couldn’t have

moved on, he says. His anger would have continued to cloud his mind and make him react blindly, as if jumping out of a burning building without knowing where he might land.

What does this mean for the hundreds of thousands of Americans who've taken to the streets to insist that black lives matter?

"I'm not telling them to stop marching," says Owens, "but I am saying that at some point we're going to have to take some time to mourn, to take care of the suffering. Only then can we channel the energy of anger into benefiting others. Anger is helpful in the short term, but we're playing the long game now."

*[Serve & Protect](#) provides a 24/7 crisis hotline for police, fire and correctional officers at 615-373-8000. The nonprofit [Melissa Institute](#) for Violence Prevention and Treatment provides a free [Roadmap to Resilience](#) at [roadmaptoresilience.wordpress.com](#) with advice on how to manage difficult emotions.*

[Katherine Ellison](#)'s latest book is "Mothers & Murderers, A True Story of Love, Lies, Obsession...and Second Chances."