

WALKING THROUGH ANGER, by Christian Conte, PhD.
Book Report by David G. Schwartz, M.D.
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Understanding how to deal with anger is very appropriate especially now, considering the enormity of the anger that can pop up at any time in various situations, much related to the current pandemic, current political polarization, and political activation among people who previously were not much involved with political issues. Families and friends split up and don't talk to each other any more because they don't want to have angry political confrontations, and have often lost respect for each other and their opinions. Of people anticipating Thanksgiving dinner, 60% said they would avoid political discussions. The author does not give specific advice about political conversation, but the principles involved obviously can relate to these issues, especially regarding listening. This issue affects public health in many aspects.

We humans naturally try to avoid conflict and angry situations because it could lead to violence. Dr. Conte shows us a road map for navigating through situations where anger comes up, involving our own anger, and the anger of others. Conflict arises because of a clash of egos. We need to recognize how our own egos set this up.

We often see 2 options, avoiding the situation altogether, or getting into a shouting match. There is a way between, through which Dr. Conte leads us.

The principles he teaches I often thought of as used only by saintly or "enlightened" beings, practices that would mainly be taught in Sunday School. But no, you don't have to be a saintly or religious person to use these techniques of love, compassion, self understanding, understanding others, etc. Most violence stems from explosive, impulsive anger, and there is a remedy for that. Dr. Conte counsels violent criminals and often leads them to a more peaceful life.

Dr. Conte is a licensed professional counselor and a world-renowned anger management specialist, a speaker, and a consultant for top organizations and athletic teams.

He uses yield theory, which encompasses the process called listen, validate, and explore options. The essentials are the following: You will master whatever you practice. Your mind always wants to match your body. Every emotional situation has a beginning, middle, and end. There is a huge difference between guilt and shame. We would rather be angry than anxious or depressed. Acknowledge the body's uncomfortable feelings without reacting to them. People see your actions, not your intentions. The world doesn't operate the way you think it "should." It does what it does. The more you concentrate on peaceful thoughts, the more peaceful your mind will be. Internal peace requires practicing skills that lead to that. Meet people where they are. Use diverse creative methods.

Dr. Ron Potter-Efron, PhD, writes the Forward, emphasizing non-attachment to your own thoughts and feelings so you can hear and understand those of others.

Dr. Conte describes each of our psyches as being separate rooms, and none of us know what is in the other people's rooms. If we want to help people who feel trapped in their rooms, we need to listen in order to understand better their experiences and emotions, and then to validate their experience (without condoning their violent behavior). This is yield theory. This is a little like a martial art, aikido, that goes with the other person's energy in order to redirect it.

Growing up, Christian had a dad who emphasized understanding oneself, and a mother who wouldn't tolerate his watching a fight without attempting to break it up.

We often act like the fool on the mountaintop yelling at the people at the bottom to stop going the wrong way and to be next to him at the top, all the while they can't hear anything he says. We need to not preach at people but to speak and think *with* them. We need to go to the bottom of the mountain to be of help to them, to hopefully get at the cause of the angry conflict. This metaphor illustrates Yield Theory.

He reminds us that there are 2 kinds of people, people with issues, and dead people. Compassion requires that we recognize that we all have issues, and seeing the world through other peoples' eyes, "meet them where they are, merge with them in the energetic direction they are already going, and then lead them away from their rage."

The metaphor of a labyrinth shows people muddling around in the darkness and bumping into each other. If they could see how their actions hurt each other, they would likely not do it. We can not light up the whole world, but we can our corner of it.

In a conflict, if you lead with compassion and nonresistance, you will likely find yourself in control of the situation. The key to handling conflict well is to help others get out whatever emotion needs to come out to get out of the energy of the mid-brain and then redirect them into the higher-level thinking in the problem solving region of the brain. The way you behave can help them feel safe, then they are more open to listening to feedback.

The 3 core actions of yield theory are listen, validate, and explore options. The 7 fundamental components are acceptance, authenticity, compassion, conscious education, creativity, mindfulness, and non-attachment.

You don't have to wait until a conflict situation arises to practice these things. These attitudes and behaviors can be practiced in many ordinary circumstances.

Listening is much more than we usually think. How often when we listen, are we thinking about what we are going to say next? How much do we listen to hear confirmation of our own biases and inhibit our understanding? Or how about listening only to the words they are saying and not seeing how they communicate those words? "To listen effectively is to lead with humility and genuine curiosity, which reflects to others that you see they are communicating to you from a place *you've never been* and really want to know about – that is, their internal subjective world..." When we listen to people as though they see a side of a situation that *we cannot see*, it lowers their defenses and helps them feel safe, which leads to de-escalation. We can look at a significantly larger picture. Understanding where someone "is coming from" doesn't excuse or justify their behavior, but we can react differently to it and take it less personally. When we are directly involved in a conflict, this helps us to set aside our egos and to operate from our *essence*.

Listening effectively means listening with our eyes also, noticing body language, the energy coming from them, noticing *process* as well as *content*.

Then to validate is to communicate that you understand, to the extent that you can, what they are expressing about subjective feelings and perspectives, and it does not necessarily condone what they are doing. Some specific words and phrases said with compassion and concern that help to validate

are, “You seem really upset,” “That has to hurt,” “I can’t imagine every aspect that must be going through your mind,” “I can see you’re frustrated that I don’t seem to be getting what you want me to be getting,” “It sounds like you feel this with your whole being.” Saying “also” encourages them to elaborate more. Using phrases like, “I wonder if” or “It sounds like,” allows more flexibility, a counter to the rigidity that fuels someone’s anger. Practicing non-attachment helps you to be open to be corrected. You don’t have to be constantly clarifying what you meant; instead you stay focused on trying to understand others. Validating allows the other person to confirm whether you are hearing them accurately or not.

This can help to heal the loneliness and isolation people feel when they are not understood. They really *want* to connect, but have felt the anger and lack of being understood as a barrier to connection.

Continue validating until the person *actually feels validated*. Once the person gets the emotions out, drains the reservoir of anger, then exploring options is possible, using the frontal cortex of the brain instead of the amygdala, which activates “fight or flight.”

Considering an option the person wants to consider does not endorse it, but it also does not say they can’t do it. It is verbally discussing how the consequences of that action may play out. Examining a reckless option in a safe space, allows the person to allow you to help him or her to evaluate the option rationally and to make a better decision.

This all takes practice. We can practice listening, validating, and exploring options with many people and circumstances where there is no conflict involved. Then, “what takes moments to do in mastery has taken many more in practice.”

Encapsulation of yield theory in Lao Tzu’s words, “When two great forces oppose each other, the victory will go to the one who knows how to yield.” Note, he doesn’t say, the one who yields, but the one who *knows how to yield*.

This is the art of skillfully navigating the way between avoidance of conflict and forceful opposition. A novel, [The Way Between](#), by Rivera Sun, is a poetic illustration of peacemaking on a larger, more social or political scale. I highly recommend it. Avoiding conflict situations is appropriate many times, but when faced with unavoidable conflict, this way between is a vital approach.

Understanding yield theory requires acceptance of people where they are, and not where you think they should be, or expecting them to know what you know. Not seeing a cartoon picture of how things *should be*, but how they are. It means knowing who is involved. Systems theory says everyone in a given interaction plays a role, not that anyone *causes* anyone else to do anything. So yield theory begins with learning about *you*. Your ability to navigate conflict is in direct proportion to your own self-awareness and personal growth. Recognizing your own role in a conflict situation helps you focus on *controlling* the only person you can control – you. Then accepting at what stage people are in readiness to change and that they are more than what they seem to be at their worst moments. Generally they need 4 stages, 1. not thinking about change, 2. thinking about it but not ready to do anything, 3. making a small change, and 4. actually changing.

Being authentic, operating from your essence, being aware of how your own ego can cause trouble and setting it aside, can help to reveal to people that you genuinely care about them and are not judging them. Authenticity requires being true to your own essence, not your ego, seeing your essence as the unique center of yourself that wants to grow. Just as a flower being enough exactly as it is, but it

always wants to grow. When you are authentic and don't take people's defenses personally and are not affected (only the fearful ego can feel attacked), then they too will feel less threatened and can set their ego's aside. Humility works. As Mark Twain said, "speak with conviction, but be open to being wrong." Listening authentically is having genuine curiosity and not having confirmation bias.

Authentic validation involves acknowledging our inherent limitation in understanding others. When the other person says "You can't understand what I'm going through!" The authentic self responds, "You're right, I can't. But I am here with you and I am willing to learn." It is *trying* to understand without saying that you *do*, like running a race that you'll never finish, but trying as if you will.

Exploring options authentically means acknowledging *any* option the person is considering, but that it is not the only option, and considering the possible consequences of each option. It is important to avoid *confirmation bias*, which tends to want to prove the other person wrong, and also *hindsight bias*, which says, "I knew they would do that."

Compassion transforms anger. When you exude compassion for yourself and others, your energy is peaceful, and your presence is safe for others to be around, and it can circumvent the person's "fight or flight" response. Compassion gives a perspective that there's always a reason people act the way they do, even if you don't know the reason. Seeing anger as a heavy burden to bear, compassion leads us to lend a hand to carry the burden. Visualizing exuding compassion can amplify your compassion. Brain scans show that. Also you exude a safe energy that people pick up subconsciously with their "mirror neurons." The Buddha faced with compassion an angry elephant coming toward him, and the elephant stopped. The Buddha said anyone can send an "oceanic" wave of compassion, and can do what he did.

The more you practice wishing health, peace, and good intentions for others, the more those brain regions that light up grow in strength. All these methods require constant practice, and a good compassion practice is wishing these things first for someone close to you, then others, then to the person at whom you are angry. Say, "May x be healthy, may x be peaceful, may all of x's good intentions be fulfilled." First start with wishing these things for yourself, exercising self-compassion, then to others. Being mindful that you are or become what you think, repeating the phrase "loving-kindness," filling your mind with that, allows negative thoughts to fade into the background. You don't have to use that exact word, but you can choose any word or phrase with similar meaning. The author practices that, and it has helped him maintain his center, regardless of what is happening around him. Of course, you still set boundaries and take precautions to protect yourself from danger. But if it is only your ego that is in danger, then let it go.

Letting go of attachment to your ego clears the way to see other's perspectives without taking on their emotions. Non-attachment does not mean having no beliefs or opinions, but it is a state of openness and lack of rigidity. It is recognizing that every moment is an opportunity to see an angle or perspective that you didn't see before. To recognize that you have only partial knowledge. An attitude you can carry into *every* encounter (not just angry situations) is, "Teach me about your perspective, what you see. Because I genuinely want to learn."

When you are validating what others said, non-attachment allows others to correct you if you misunderstood what they said. Non-attachment allows you to explore options, hearing the other person's options, not putting forth your book full of options. It means letting go of the ego's sense of omnipotence, the belief that we are somehow responsible for others' actions. Non-attachment in compassion means we are not tied to living out the emotions of others.

Non-attachment in your life is not about not having any concerns or plans, but it is letting go of the attitude about *how your life should be*.

He presents conscious education to maintain authenticity. Practicing these principles yourself, integrating the wisdom into your life helps you to share this knowledge with others at the right time effectively. Knowing that emotional experiences have a beginning, middle, and end. Knowing that anger will end softens the intensity of it. (That is, providing the angry person gets this support that we have been discussing.) Otherwise I have known people for whom the anger seems to never end, always seething under the surface, especially political anger (My comments). Understanding that your mind tries to match your body may help avoid pitfalls of going with an emotional reaction that stems from physical feelings. Be aware that hyperbole and extreme language can elicit extreme reactions in others. A few of these extreme words and phrases are: always, never, everybody, nobody, and “can’t stand it.”

Understand also that anger feels better at the time than anxiety, depression, or shame, but lashing out can result in worse feelings later.

Staying in the “adult” ego state from Transactional Analysis, rather than the child or the parent state helps to keep you from being reactive, not going up with other peoples’ anger, or down with their self-pity. It helps them to de-escalate and to find their own adult state. Doubting your own assumptions certainly can help people doubt theirs also. Recognize that some people are crisis-prone because of brain circuitry set up by trauma, but that they can handle their emotions through emotional regulation techniques, mindfulness, etc. You can be of more help to them by focusing on the process more than the content.

Creativity and intuition in practicing these principles can help people move through the stages faster and easier. For an example, the puppet metaphor can lead to insight. If someone insists that someone else “made them mad” and had no recourse except to react angrily, you can ask, “So all anyone who wants to control you like a puppet has to do is to say the right combination of words, then they’ll be in complete control of what you think, how you feel, and what you do?” This starts them thinking about consciously taking control of their lives. Telling stories can redirect attention away from the energy of the conflict, take it less personally, and put the person in a listening mode. Appendix B in this book is full of teaching stories.

Mindfulness training is important for you to be aware of your own emotions, thoughts, etc. in the midst of a conflict. Being mindful of your own physiologic state, fatigue, hunger, etc., can help you not match the physiology with emotion. Sitting down, not pacing, gives rise to calmer neurotransmitters and hormones and calmer breathing (which affects the other person’s reactions). Sustained eye contact can increase stress hormones in you and in the other person. (Certain animals consider it a threat if you look them in the eye.) The author gives instructions on mindfulness meditation. See also [Mindfulness For Beginners](#), by Jon Kabat Zinn, a report in the archives, for more extensive instructions.

Finally, he gives a list of things not to do. These are some of them. Not to say, “We need to talk,” “Let me tell you why you are wrong,” “First of all,” (suggests a long list of grievances), and “you need to calm down.”

Do not judge others. Do not minimize or downplay the harm you have caused. Don’t assume you’re responsible for what others do. Do not base your self-worth on what others say or do. Don’t say “You said.” or “I understand how you feel.”

Reading the stories in Appendix B, if you get the book, can help to grasp more concrete understanding of what I have been presenting in a more abstract way. In the text of the book, there are more concrete examples of what the author's experiences have been, working with angry people. So reading the whole book yourself can help in your practicing these principles. The book is also full of great quotations.

I would just add a postscript about our politics. If we just accept that disagreements are what politics is all about, and that we need to get skilled at expressing our disagreements without judging, demonizing the opposing party or position, we could deal with the polarization in a more civilized way. I can get embarrassed at people of my own political groups for their catastrophizing about the opposing party as being an existential threat. The opposing party can also see us as an existential threat. We need to get savvy about the news media. It gets ratings and makes more money by stoking people's fear and anger. So part of our violence prone political behavior is augmented by the news media. Understanding that, we can choose what we want to listen to or read or watch based on the rational frontal cortex of our brains, and not the amygdala, the more ancient basic survival region, sometimes called the reptile brain. We can choose to not act like reptiles, if we get more judicious about the news media we choose, and if we do not choose our "echo chamber," that confirms our own biases. If we do this, we can influence the new media to do more quality journalism and less opinion. If we choose to "calm down," maybe the other side will be more likely to calm down, and we may have more of a chance at building democracy. The strong emphasis on listening in this book can tell us a lot about how we do our politics. We have 2 ears and only one mouth. That should tell us something.