

# Embitterment, Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorder, and Wisdom Therapy

Michael Linden



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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication**

information for the print version of this book is available via the Library of Congress Marc Database under the LC Control Number 2022934712

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Title: Embitterment, posttraumatic embitterment disorder, and wisdom therapy / Michael Linden.

Other titles: Verbitterung und Posttraumatische Verbitterungsstörung. English

Names: Linden, Michael, author.

Description: Translation of: Verbitterung und Posttraumatische Verbitterungsstörung. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20220200610 |

Canadiana (ebook) 20220200688 | ISBN

9780889376120

(softcover) | ISBN 9781616766122 (PDF) | ISBN

9781613346129 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Adjustment disorders. | LCSH:

Adjustment disorders—Treatment. | LCSH: Emotions.

Classification: LCC RC455.4.S87 L56 2022 | DDC

616.85/2—dc23

The present volume is a translation of M. Linden,

*Verbitterung und Posttraumatische*

*Verbitterungsstörung*, published under license from

Hogrefe Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen, Germany.

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USA: Hogrefe Publishing  
Corporation, 44 Merrimac St.,  
Suite 207, Newburyport, MA  
01950  
Phone (978) 255 3700; E-mail  
customersupport@hogrefe.co  
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EUROPE: Hogrefe Publishing GmbH,  
Merkelstr. 3, 37085 Göttingen,  
Germany  
Phone +49 551 99950-0, Fax  
+49 551 99950-111; E-mail  
publishing@hogrefe.com

#### SALES & DISTRIBUTION

USA: Hogrefe Publishing, Customer  
Services Department,  
30 Amberwood Parkway,  
Ashland, OH 44805  
Phone (800) 228-3749, Fax  
(419) 281-6883; E-mail  
customerservice@hogrefe.com

UK: Hogrefe Publishing, c/o  
Marston Book Services Ltd.,  
160 Eastern Ave., Milton Park,  
Abingdon, OX14 4SB  
Phone +44 1235 465577, Fax  
+44 1235 465556; E-mail

direct.orders@marston.co.uk  
EUROPE: Hogrefe Publishing, Merkelstr.  
3, 37085 Göttingen, Germany  
Phone +49 551 99950-0, Fax  
+49 551 99950-111; E-mail  
publishing@hogrefe.com

**OTHER OFFICES**

CANADA: Hogrefe Publishing, 82 Laird  
Drive, East York, Ontario, M4G  
3V1

SWITZERLAND Hogrefe Publishing, Länggass-  
: Strasse 76, 3012 Bern

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### **Citability**

This EPUB includes page numbering between two vertical lines (Example: |1|) that corresponds to the page numbering of the print and PDF ebook versions of the title.

Format: EPUB

ISBN 978-0-88937-612-0 (print) • ISBN 978-1-61676-612-2 (PDF) • ISBN 978-1-61334-612-9 (EPUB)

<https://doi.org/10.1027/00612-000>



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# **The Emotion Embitterment**

## **1.1 Emotional Reaction to Humiliation, Vilification, Breach of Trust, and Injustice**

Embitterment is an emotion that is known to everybody as a feeling in reaction to negative life events ([Alexander, 1966](#); [Znoj, 2008, 2011](#); [Linden & Maercker, 2011](#)). People understand what is meant by the term “embitterment” without professional knowledge, similar to how everyone knows what fear or anger is. According to the Old Testament, even human history began with a case of injustice and embitterment. The sons of Adam and Eve had brought a sacrifice to God, and “the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell ... and Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him” (Gen 4:1–16). Cain experienced this setting back as offensive and even more as unjust. His reaction was rancour and the resulting behavior highly dysfunctional. Similarly, cases of distinct embitterment are already described in antiquity – for example, in the person of Ajax in the *Iliad* or as described by Aristotle:

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Sulky people are hard to appease, and retain their anger long; for they repress their passion. But it ceases when they retaliate; for revenge relieves them of their anger, producing in them pleasure instead of pain. If this does not happen they retain their burden; for owing to its not being obvious no one even reasons with them, and to digest one's anger in oneself takes time. Such people are most troublesome to themselves and to their dearest friends. ([Aristotle](#), Nicomachean Ethics, Book IV, Chapter 5)

Embitterment typically arises in response to injustice, breach of trust, or vilification (see [Clinical Vignette 1](#)). To inflict injustice on a person and/or to vilify them is a form of aggression. A typical reaction is then counteraggression. If, however, a negative life event cannot be altered or undone, there may be a bitter counteraggression, which means to fight back without regard for losses ([Alexander, 1966](#)).

Although embitterment is a reaction to an experience in the past, it also must be understood as an anticipatory action and a target-oriented emotion. The target-related part of embitterment reflects the frustration (blocked <sup>[2]</sup> target) or disappointment (missed target), the anticipatory part anticipates the emotional assessment of future events (e.g., nothing can amortize my shame).

### **Clinical Vignette 1. A Case of a Severe and Lasting Embitterment Reaction**

Mr. S. was a manager in a big company. He was very engaged with his work and worked hard carving out a career for himself. He was seen as especially competent and entrusted with projects which were in trouble. For one of these that did get in trouble, Mr. S. worked all day and night to save what was possible. His superior who was responsible for the problem said one day during a project meeting: "If you cannot fix this, I will have to call in a 'real' manager." Mr. S. responded with acute agitation and a dissociative state. He

left the building but was not able to drive home and his wife had to pick him up. From that day on, he did not go back to work. He felt deeply hurt and embittered. He thought constantly about the injustice and vilification, and he felt powerless and helpless. He began a legal campaign against the company, which used up his assets and even those of his grandmother. The less successful he was, the stronger his hatred became against his former boss. He harbored violent fantasies, such as laying fire to the company buildings and killing himself, to find peace, but also to send a signal, so the world's attention would be drawn to such injustices in the business world.

## 1.2 Theory of Emotion

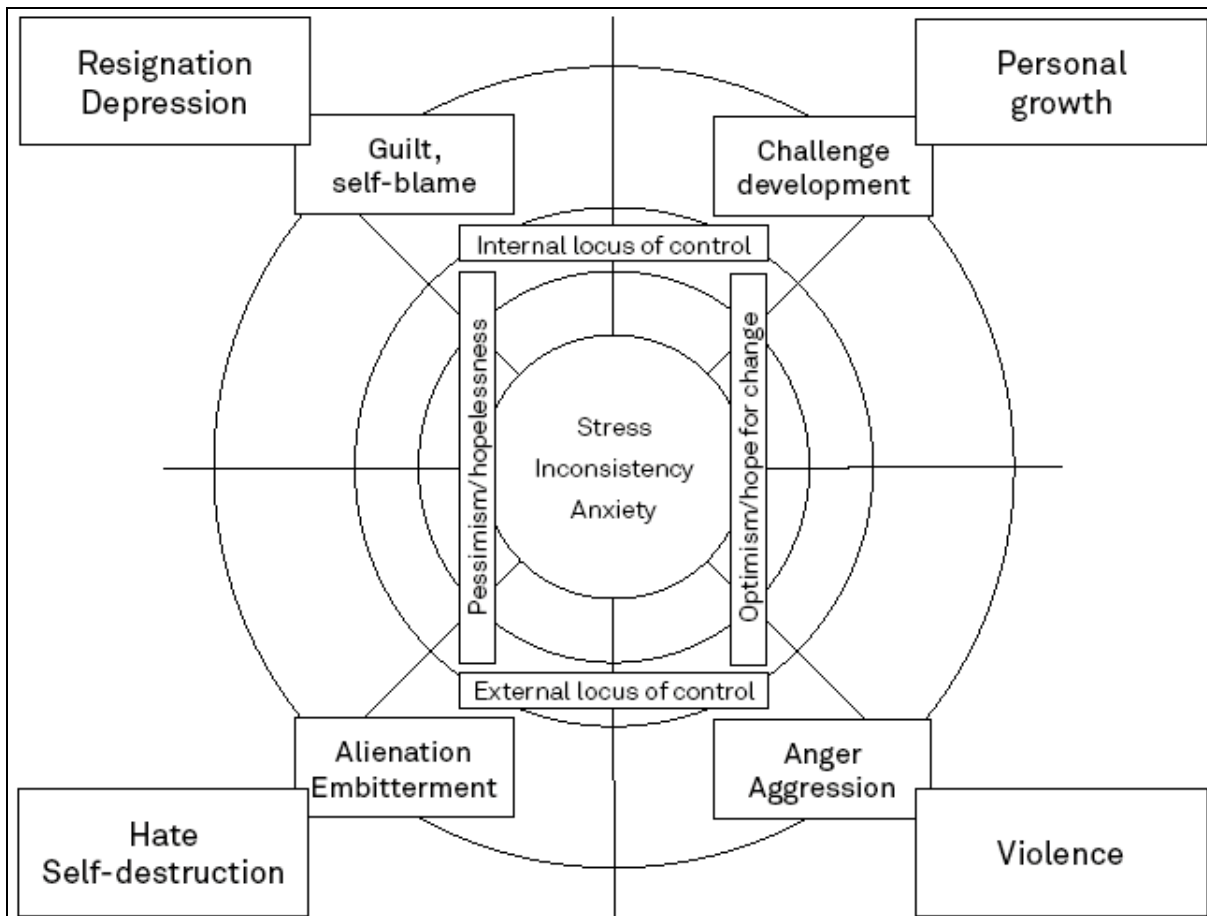
According to cognitive theories of emotion ([Scherer, 2004](#)), emotions are products of cognitive evolution processes. They are psychophysiological reactions to the meaning of a situation. Cognitive variables, which explain the quality and intensity of emotional reactions, include the relevance, congruence, and controllability of the given situation. *Relevance* describes the importance of an event for the person. Whether the emotional reaction is negative or positive depends on the *congruence* of the event with the targets, wishes, and norms of the person. Congruent events facilitate target achievement and trigger positive emotions such as joy, pride, or gratitude. Incongruent events facilitate negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, or disappointment, and complicate or prevent target achievement. A further important cognition is the assessment of responsibility for and controllability of events. Based on the attributions of the cause, controllability, and responsibility of events different emotions will occur.

Furthermore, there can be several subsequent steps of evaluation.

[3] Targets that are not reached result in disappointment and frustration. If the target was important, the emotion will be strong. If it is seen as a personal failure that the target was not reached, then shame will occur. Following cognitive emotion theories, bitterness can result from:

- ( a rejection or injustice, which is perceived as a threat;
- a ( a loss of resources, persons, important targets, or
- ) b physical functional ability; and
- ) (c the assessment that the possibility of coping with
- ) the situation is low.





**Figure 1.** Psychological classification of embitterment in the context of related emotions (adapted from [Znoj, 2011](#), p. 8).

According to [Znoj \(2011; see Figure 1\)](#), embitterment can be located in a circumplex model with the orthogonal dimensions hope/pessimism (“Can the situation be changed or not?”) and internal/external locus of control (“Can I do something or not?”). Target incongruent events can be associated with four emotional states in relation to the axes of the quadrant: (a) challenge and development, (b) anger and aggression, (c) alienation and embitterment, and (d) guilt and self-blame. Embitterment stands between