

Embitterment, Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorder, and Wisdom Therapy

Michael Linden



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1

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 rancor 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:

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

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.

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

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 aggression and self-blame. This helps to understand the reactions of people who are cut off from socially rewarding situations and to see the cause of this situation in external causes (other persons; destiny).

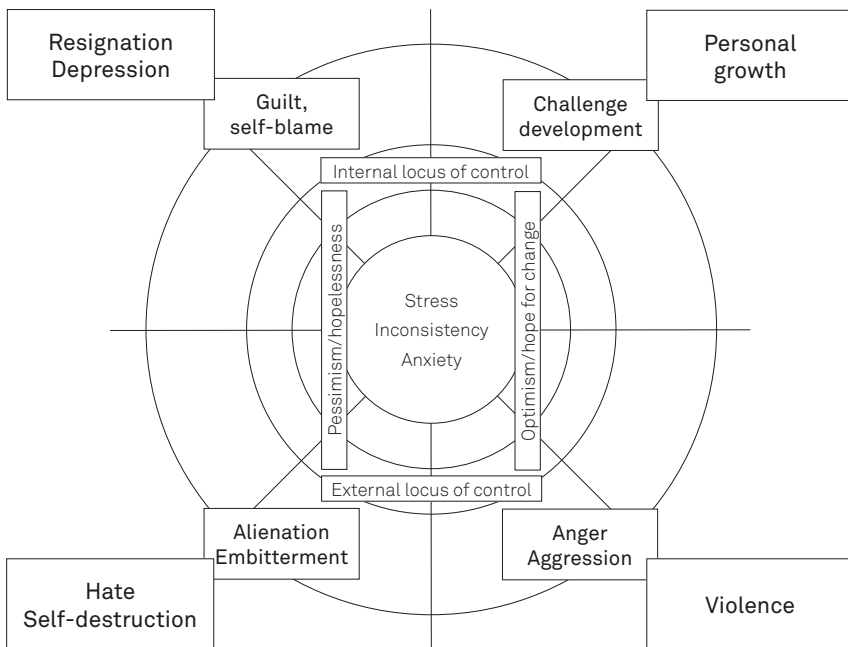


Figure 1. Psychological classification of embitterment in the context of related emotions (adapted from Znoj, 2011, p. 8).

Embitterment can be understood as the final stage in a sequence of evaluations with interconnected emotions:

- If something goes wrong, people react with *frustration*.
- If another person is responsible, the reaction is *anger*.
- If that other person could have done better, there is *reproach*.
- If the other person has acted with intent, this leads to a response of *aggression*.
- If it is not possible to defend oneself, this results in a feeling of *helplessness*.
- If it is probable that nothing can be changed anymore, that indicates *hopelessness*.
- If one feels belittled, this means it was an *insult*.
- If this is referring to something very important, which defines someone's life, then the consequence is *embitterment*, from which comes desperate counteraggression with some kind of self-destruction, and the driving and accompanying emotion is *bitterness*, which includes all of the emotions above.

Embitterment is a reaction to injustice, harm, breach of trust, or vilification. It is a mixture of resignation, down-heartedness, a sense of hopelessness, and at the same time of aggression, an urge for justice and retaliation, impulses to fight back, and acceptance of self-destruction.

1.3 Function of Embitterment

Emotions are linked to actions in congruence with a given situation. Anger leads to retaliation, disgust rejection, and fear avoidance. Emotions have a motivating function. They guide the attention of the person to a special event, advise strategies of coping, and furnish physiological preparedness. From an evolutionary point of view, emotions are strategies to cope with recurring challenges in the social and material environment.

Embitterment can help us to cope with desperate situations in which there is no way out, where we are cornered, and the enemy has succeeded. It then still gives us a last chance of fighting back regardless of the consequences, and even accepting self-destruction. Embitterment can be seen as a last-resort emotion, similar to panic. Panic in life-threatening situations can activate unimagined reserves of strength, which can even make survival possible. Embitterment also arouses the power to fight back against an overwhelming enemy and allows a self-determined response, while disregarding consequences. In certain cases, such behavior may surprise the enemy and