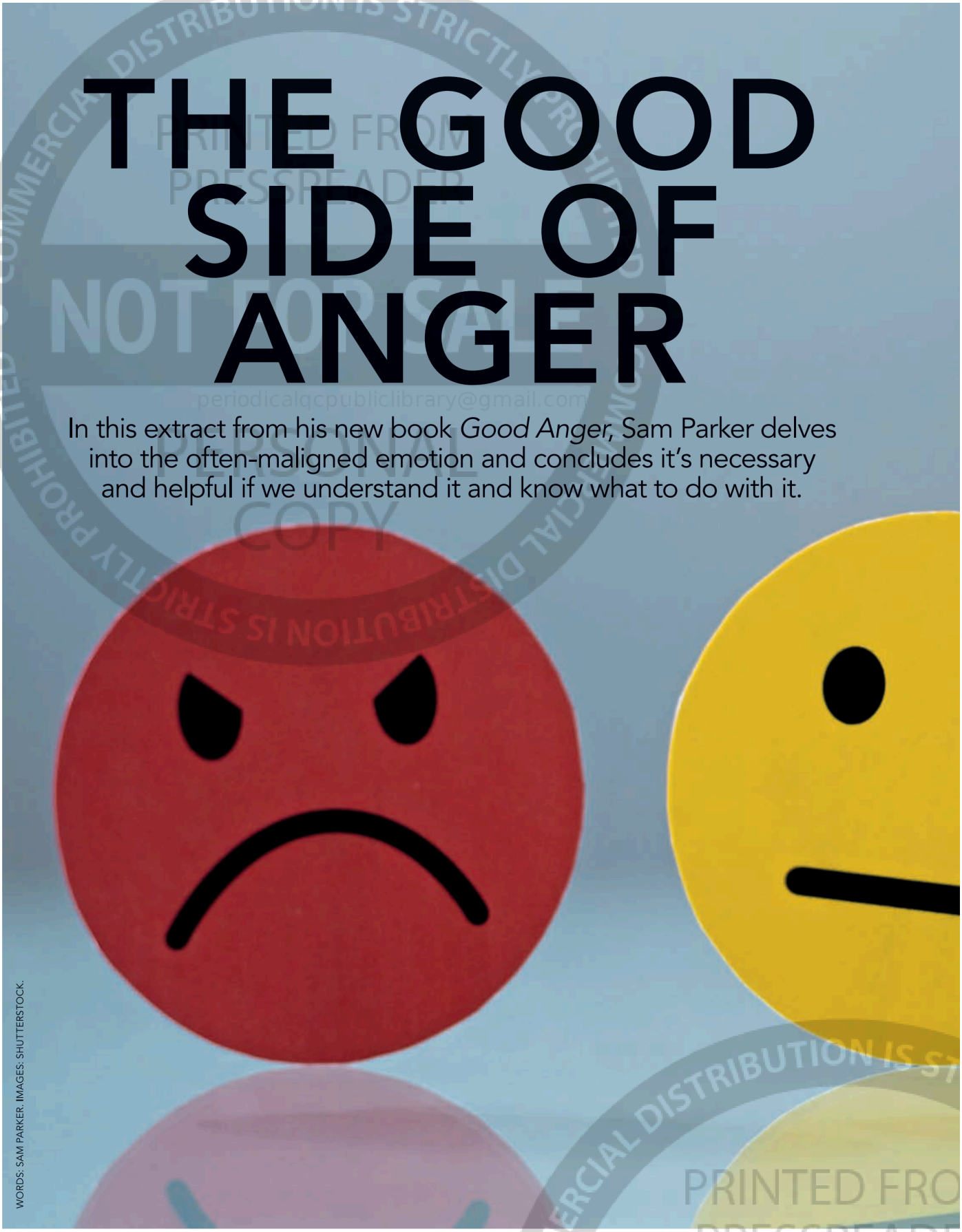
- Anger

THE GOOD SIDE OF ANGER

In this extract from his new book *Good Anger*, Sam Parker delves into the often-maligned emotion and concludes it's necessary and helpful if we understand it and know what to do with it.



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IT'S RAINING BIBLICALLY when I turn down a tree-lined street in a small town in southern England. Fat drops ricochet off the pavement like children bombing a swimming pool. With my hood pasted to my forehead, I arrive at the back of a large garden that has a small hut built into the back. Perched on its roof is a metal wind vane that sways slightly and glistens under the sagging branches and leaves.

Katrina, a psychotherapist who specialises in anger management, appears with a warm smile and ushers me inside where a cup of apple tea is already waiting on a tray on the floor. Art therapy is one way Katrina helps people contact and process their anger. Another, the one I'm here to discuss, is somatic – or body – therapy.

We sit opposite each other on a pair of sofas and I explain that I am trying to understand more about an emotion I have done my best to ignore all my life. Anger seems to have a bad rap, I say, but recently I have begun to see powerful glimpses of what it can do.

Katrina nods in agreement and pulls out a large sheet of paper. In the centre of it she writes "anger", then she draws a series of lines coming off it, and starts writing more words. These are all the things we need anger for, she says: passion, aliveness, focus, boundaries, a sense of self, space. Childhood, she explains, is where our relationship with anger – our attunement to it – usually gets lost or damaged. Sometimes parents model unhealthy anger by raising children in an environment full of conflict and violence. Sometimes, when trying to stop their kids from displaying angry behaviour – tantrums and shouting and throwing things – they go too far and outlaw the emotion itself, so that it becomes repressed.



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BEGINNING IN CHILDHOOD

Listening to Katrina, I think yet again how these problems I keep encountering – the confusion between "anger" and "aggression", the hard-to-shake feeling anger is wrong or sinful – are buried so deeply, not just in society but in our earliest individual experiences.

On a second sheet of paper, Katrina writes down a list of the negative consequences of not being attuned to your anger. It takes her quite a while. The list contains: passive-aggressiveness, dissociation, no sense of self, no sense of boundaries, being open to attack or coercion, illness, inflammation, low energy, shame, doubt, depression, anxiety, addiction. I silently identify with more than a few of these. Next, she talks about "racket" feelings. This is when we learn to cover up an emotion we have internalised as unacceptable with a different one we are more comfortable with. A famous example of this is the "sad clown": someone who covers up feelings of depression by laughing and making jokes. Another of the most common racket feelings – particularly among women, Katrina tells me – is to cry when you are angry. Sorry to say it, parents, but this can be traced back to childhood again. If, when we are little, we are taught anger is a punishable offence, but we are picked up and cuddled when we cry, we can learn to replace one with the other to remain loved.

> 'Childhood is where our relationship with anger usually gets lost or damaged'

This one can carry an extra social cost later in life. Crying when you should be sticking up for yourself can look weak or manipulative. People might, like a distressed parent, try and be comforting, but they may also see it as a reason not to respect you.

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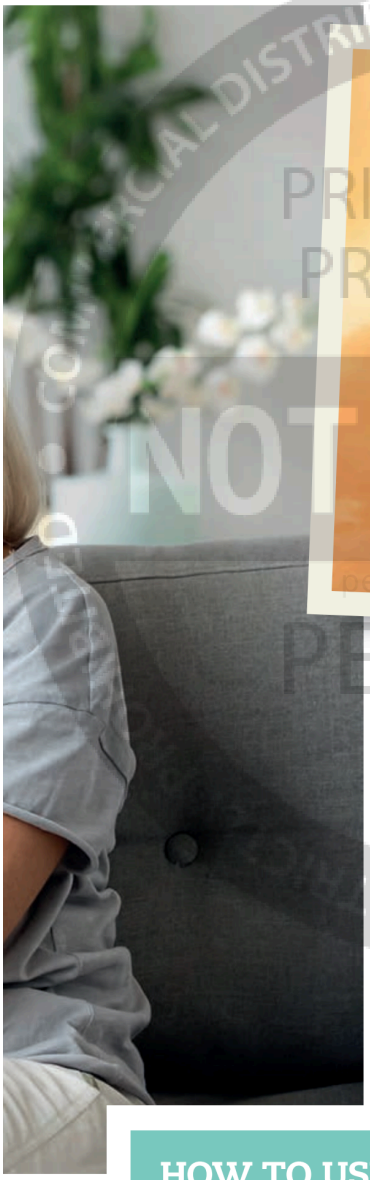



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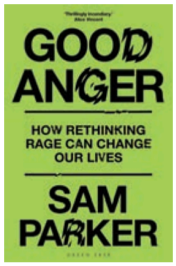
UNLOCKING ENERGY

In addition to traditional counselling, which involves lots of talking, Katrina practises the world's most widely established form of body-based therapy, called somatic experiencing. The basic belief of somatic experiencing is that when a person undergoes a traumatic event, the body's instinctual fight or flight response may not get fully discharged or expressed. Instead, the body freezes, and the intense sensations and emotions they are experiencing freeze along with it. This moment of intense distress can remain trapped inside the body for a long time, and lead to all sorts of emotional and physical problems. In somatic experiencing, a guide like Katrina takes you back to those experiences and tries to find a way to unlock or move the energy that's stuck, using a mixture of controlled movement, breathwork and posture alignments.

Read more in *Good Anger: How Rethinking Rage Can Change Our Lives*, by Sam Parker (£20, Green Tree), which is out now. Follow Sam at instagram.com/samparkeruk.



HOW TO USE YOUR BODY TO ACCESS REPRESSED ANGER:

1. Find a quiet space, close your eyes and try to feel anger in your body.
2. It is often trapped in the diaphragm or jaw. Visualise the anger spreading to other parts of your body: across your torso and down your limbs.
3. If it's helpful, squeeze something in your hands or grunt the feeling out.
4. Stay with the feeling for as long as you can, holding it as widely around your body as possible.
5. This practise, called Embodied Emotion, improves your capacity for anger, so that when something enraging happens, you can feel and act on it more calmly.

