

ARE THEY ANGRY?

Different perspectives. Different meanings.

Sometimes we notice a change in another person and our brain immediately tries to explain it. Their voice sounds flatter, their reply is shorter, their face looks different or they seem quieter than usual. Before we have had time to gather more information, the thought can arrive: "They're angry with me." The feeling that follows can be powerful and physical. We may become anxious, start replaying the conversation, search for what we have done wrong or feel an urgent need to repair something that may not actually be broken.

What we notice is real - but the meaning may still be uncertain

Tone of voice, facial expression, body language and changes in communication are genuine pieces of information. The difficulty comes when observation and interpretation become fused together. "Their reply was shorter than usual" is something we noticed. "They are angry with me" is one possible explanation for it. There may be many others. They could be tired, concentrating, overwhelmed, worried about something unrelated, experiencing sensory overload, feeling low, managing pain or simply needing some quiet. Recognising uncertainty does not mean ignoring our instincts. It means allowing more than one explanation to exist until we know more.

SAME BEHAVIOUR. DIFFERENT POSSIBLE STORY.

Why does the brain jump to anger?

Our brains use previous experiences to predict what might happen next. If anger, criticism, withdrawal or unpredictable reactions have been part of earlier relationships, small changes in another person can become highly significant. The nervous system may have learned that noticing these changes quickly was important. Anxiety can also increase threat scanning, while rejection sensitivity can make signs of possible disapproval feel particularly intense. For some neurodivergent people, interpreting facial expression, tone, indirect language or rapidly changing social cues can require considerable conscious processing, especially when tired or overloaded.

The body may react before we have an answer

The interpretation "they are angry" can trigger a physical response before anything has been confirmed. The heart may beat faster, the stomach may tighten, thoughts may speed up and attention may narrow towards finding evidence of danger. We might over-explain, apologise repeatedly, withdraw, become defensive or send several messages seeking reassurance. Once the nervous system is activated, neutral information can become harder to notice because the brain is already looking for evidence that supports the threat it has predicted.

Separating observation from interpretation

A useful exercise is to describe the situation as though a camera recorded it. Instead of "They were angry with me," we might write, "They spoke quietly, gave a short answer and looked away." Then we can write the interpretation separately: "My brain told me they were angry." This small change in language creates room for curiosity. We can then ask what other explanations could fit the same observable information and whether there is anything we can clarify directly.

Asking instead of mind-reading

When it is safe and appropriate, clarification can be much kinder than spending hours trying to solve another person's thoughts. A simple question such as, "You seem quieter than usual - are you okay?" or "My brain is telling me you're upset with me; is that what's happening?" gives the other person an opportunity to provide information we do not have. Their answer may confirm that something needs discussing, or it may reveal that their mood has nothing to do with us at all.

When someone really is angry

Considering alternative explanations does not mean convincing ourselves that nobody is ever angry with us. Sometimes our interpretation will be accurate. If another person is upset, the same principles can still help: slow the interaction down, clarify what the issue actually is and distinguish their feelings from assumptions about our worth or intentions. Another person being frustrated does not automatically mean we are unsafe, rejected or responsible for fixing everything immediately.

A personal check-in

Think of a recent moment when you believed somebody was angry or upset with you. What did you actually notice? Was it their words, tone, facial expression, silence, delay in replying or body language? What meaning did your brain attach to those cues? What happened in your body next? What did you do in response? Now write down three other explanations that could also fit the information you had at that moment. You do not need to decide which explanation is correct. The purpose is to practise keeping the story open until more information becomes available.

What can help

Give yourself time before reacting when possible. Name the observable facts. Notice what your brain is predicting. Regulate the body before trying to solve the interaction. Ask a clear question rather than relying entirely on inference. In close relationships, it can also help to agree on direct ways of communicating mood, such as saying, "I'm overwhelmed, but I'm not angry with you," or "I am upset and I would like to talk about it later." Clear language reduces the amount of uncertainty both brains have to fill in.

Sometimes the question is not simply "Are they angry?" but "What have I noticed, what has my brain assumed, and what do I still need to find out?" That distinction can create enough space for a very different conversation.

Space to Breathe Therapy