



Science  
Societies

# Implosive vs. Explosive anger

By Xi Xiong Ph.D., Associate Professor, Division of plant sciences, University of  
Missouri

| April 22, 2021



---

Years ago, I stumbled onto a comedy, *Anger Management*, released in 2003. It was such a hilarious movie, and I remember laughing so hard at different scenes. This movie depicted a frustrated man, Dave, played by Adam Sandler, who was facing problems at work and with his girlfriend Linda, played by Marisa Tomei. It seemed that Dave was not able to properly handle interpersonal relationships, which irritated him, and in turn, affected pretty much every aspect of his life. Dave's life eventually turned around in this movie, after a renowned therapist, Dr. Buddy Rydell, played by Jack Nicholson, came into his life. Through a series of "crazy" actions, Dave was finally able to let go of the anger that he had been harboring unknowingly since his childhood and eventually fixed the relationships with his boss as well as Linda. While it was a comedy, it had an underlying serious message. In fact, it triggered me to think for the first time of the concept of implosive expression of anger.

In our day-to-day interactions with family members, friends, co-workers, and others, inevitably there are circumstances where we find ourselves being annoyed, irritated, and angered. How we respond to the powerful and potentially dangerous emotion of anger is a reflection of our "temperament, upbringing, age, and life experience," among other factors (Rosenhaft, 2013). There are constructive ways to handle anger, but both explosion and implosion contribute little value in solving an issue, and they can be destructive to others as well as our own physical and mental well-being.



*Image from Anger Management, 2003 Columbia-TriStar film with Jack Nicholson (left) and Adam Sandler (right). Source: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo.*

## **Understanding Implosive Anger**

We all understand explosion in the context of anger; however, what is implosion as a way to respond to anger? Let me quote the lines from *Anger Management* that in my mind are probably the best description of the two terms. Spoken by Dr. Rydell in a conversation with Dave, "There are two kinds of angry people, explosive and implosive. Explosive is the kind of individual that you see screaming at the cashier for not taking their coupons. Implosive is the cashier who remains quiet day-after-day and finally shoots everyone in the store. You are the cashier." I love those lines because they clearly describe how deceiving implosive people could appear to be before they explode in a manner equal to or even more catastrophic than explosive individuals.

Dave, like many regular people we encounter on a daily basis, appears to be harmless at first impression as he tries to deny the existence of conflicts and often pretends everything is fine and keeps going on as if everything is normal. Psychologists consider implosion is a result of fear, the fear of "being judged by others" or "the consequences of explosive anger (jail, physically hurting others, etc.)" (Segismundo, Jr., [n.d.](#)). Momentarily restraining oneself might disguise the anger, but the question is, how long can this superficial peace last, especially when one is repeatedly offended?

### **Real-Life Example**

I recall when I was in high school, we had a classmate who appeared to be a gentle person who seemed to always be smiling politely. Unfortunately, he was the target of a couple of boys who enjoyed teasing him between classes. He never really fought back except brushing them off lightly although clearly he did not enjoy the teasing. One time, I was in the same group with him for a music project, and since his father was a music teacher, we went to his home for some assistance. As I was there near lunch time, I was invited by his parents for a simple meal. At the dining table, I was utterly shocked to find out for the first and only time how rude and even mean he was

towards his parents for apparently no reason. I was astonished by the anger he clearly exhibited and the outward expression of his anger towards his parents without any restrictions. His parents, to my equal surprise, seemed to easily receive his anger as if it was common. I had no clue at that time of his contrasting behavior in school vs. at home, and only after I watched this movie years later, did I realize that this classmate of mine had been a victim of the anger that he accumulated over time for being teased/bullied on a regular basis at school. He internalized his anger instead of exploding. At home, when there was less fear, his anger rose to the surface like boiling lava. As I look back today at this sad situation, I wonder how long my classmate had been carrying on with this anger, and just like Dave in the movie, the anger did not go away easily.

### **Recognize the Nature of Your Anger**

What is the solution that brings peace back and relieves one from anger that might have accumulated? First, I think it is important to recognize the nature of the anger. Is this anger geared towards others for some injustice that was imposed, or is this anger more for oneself because you did not stand up and speak out when needed? There is no easy answer for this question in real life, but at least it appears to me that when handling anger, implosion is not better than explosion, and might be worse at times. The emotional scars caused by implosion could twist one's personality over time and destroy one's ability to pursue happiness, resulting in an uneasy, unsettled and angry person. Well, luckily in this movie, with help from Dr. Rydell, Dave went back and confronted his childhood bully, which changed Dave's life and set him on a right path to a healthier and happier life.

Editor's note: This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit [www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science), [www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science), and [www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science](http://www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science).

**More news & perspective**

**Back to issue**

**Back to home**

---

*Text © . The authors. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Except where otherwise noted, images are subject to copyright. Any reuse without express permission from the copyright owner is prohibited.*