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Anger Management

*What to Do When Anger
Becomes a Problem*

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Introduction

When it comes to controlling anger, everyone is looking for that quick and easy solution. I admit, I've been guilty of it myself. The problem with this is that there are so many anger management solutions available, that we don't know where to start. Or if we do use a strategy or two, and they don't work immediately, we give up and go back to letting our anger control what we do.

That gets old, don't you think?

Something I've come to learn, is that in order to achieve anything in life, consistency has to be part of the mix.

Think about it. If we gave up every time that something didn't work out the way we planned instantly, we wouldn't have made any progress in our lives. Whether it was riding a bike, swimming, or even reading. Anger management is no different.

I know some things don't always work, but you've got to give them time to work, before you kick them to the curb. At least give them a thorough evaluation.

If you're someone that really wants to control your anger, then pick an anger management technique and be consistent with applying it to see if it works for you.

There are many techniques to choose from. But just pick one that you feel will work for you. Then you've got to commit to using that technique every time you notice that you're angry, for at least seven days. The longer the better.

The point is that by doing something with consistency you'll have a better idea on whether or not a technique works for you, or not. You give it a chance to work. While at the same time, you're forming a new habit.

Part of the work has already been done for you. In this guide, you'll find quite a few actionable strategies, laid out for you. So, there's no excuse for not getting started.

For your part, all you have to do is pick an anger management technique that you feel comfortable with, and give it a chance.

To your success!

Quincy Barrett

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CHAPTER 1

What is Anger?

Have you sometimes felt that the feeling of anger is unavoidable and that you'd better find a way to let off steam before the anger turns into aggression? Have you ever had a therapist tell you to stop holding in your anger? Have you ever gotten really mad and had a friend tell you that it's good to get it all out? Have you ever found yourself in situations thinking such things as "If I hadn't gotten angry and fought back, this guy would have continued to walk all over me" or "If they had treated me with respect, I wouldn't have yelled at them"? These are all common beliefs and misconceptions about anger—even some mental health professionals accept them. Yet, none of them are true. Each is based on a myth. They are harmful because they keep you stuck in self-destructive patterns.

The five basic myths of anger are:

Myth 1: Anger and aggression are natural for humans.

Myth 2: Frustration certainly leads to aggression.

Myth 3: Venting your anger is healthy.

Myth 4: Anger is always beneficial.

Myth 5: A person's anger is caused by others.

All myths of anger justify the expression of anger and aggressive behavior. Each myth suggests that anger is an unavoidable part of being human. This inevitability makes anger seem inescapable—and perhaps even gives it value as a human attribute. All of us have heard, in one form or another, that expressing anger—letting it all out—is the best road to physical and mental health.

However, you may already know from your own experience that something is wrong with this way of thinking. Has letting out anger really worked for you? Has it helped you live the life you want, or has it brought destruction to important areas of your life. Letting anger out does not work for most of us, and it probably has caused you, as well as others in your life, a lot of pain.

Through the research of experts, we've learned that expressing anger isn't unavoidable or necessary, and certainly isn't helpful.

Anger Myths

Myth 1: Anger and aggression are natural for humans

The idea that humans are born with a basic instinct for anger and aggression has been used to explain just about everything from marital arguments to global warfare. The thinking here is that instinctual biological pressures can push people past some built-in anger threshold. Even the APA - the American Psychological Association - contributes to this point of view:

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural adaptive response to threats; it inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors, which allow us to fight and defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.

Although this way of thinking makes some sense, it has one major flaw. Successful evolution has been based on cooperation, not destructive conflict and aggression. Even primates fight in an organized manner. They fight to preserve the species, not to kill their opponents. Acts of violence among species tend to occur in defense of the group, typically for purposes of protecting territory or resources.

When people feel threatened, it is natural for them to feel anger. But this feeling does not justify anger behavior. As human beings, we have always lived in small clusters of closely related members who have nurtured and helped rather than destroyed each other. Nurturing actions promote growth and survival. Violence aimed at one's own group or family undermines the survival and overall well-being of the group and everyone who belongs to it.

By looking at the pattern of existence from birth to old age, it is quite clear that humans seek nurture and thrive when they are nurtured. Humans and other primates deprived of basic nurturing fail to thrive.

According to research, there is no scientific evidence to support the belief that humans are naturally aggressive. Waging war and other violent behavior is not genetically programmed into our human nature. Except for very rare situations, genes do not produce individuals that are prone to violence. There is nothing in the wiring of our brains that makes us act violently.

Despite popular belief, aggression can occur without any feelings of anger. Violence (even murder) can occur for a number of reasons that have nothing to do with feeling angry. A prizefighter aims to hit another fighter without feeling angry. Soldiers in the military train to kill other human beings, but they may experience guilt and sorrow more often than anger. You can feel angry without acting that anger out in violent ways. In fact, experts say that anger feelings seem to be followed by aggressive behavior only about 10 percent of the time.

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Aggressive behavior is one among many choices you can make when you experience anger. You can learn to make other choices.

Myth 2: Frustration always leads to aggression

The idea that frustration leads to aggression was made by the famous Sigmund Freud, who believed that individuals are born with an innate aggressive instinct. He also thought that blocking the instinct for aggression only leads to it being redirected somewhere else. So, when you perceive whatever makes you angry as being too risky to attack (your boss, for example), you redirect your anger toward someone or something else that is less risky or threatening. Thus, you may redirect your aggression toward your boss by picking a fight with one of your coworkers, yelling at your kids, smashing something, or even kicking your dog.

This idea that frustration leads to aggression received quite a bit of research support back in the 1950s and 60s, but we now know that aggression is not the only behavior that can follow frustration and hurt. For instance, many Tibetan people were suddenly displaced from their homeland after the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1952. Most of these people now live in exile. Yet, despite the hardship they've endured, the Tibetans have refrained from taking any aggressive action toward the Chinese. In fact, their leaders shun violence and consistently encourage their people to practice nonviolence and compassionate understanding.

You will find that people respond in a variety of different ways to frustration. Some people will curse, hit, or kick something after losing money in a vending machine. Others will write down the name and address of the vending machine and request a refund by mail. Many more people will simply shrug their shoulders and walk away.

Despite new evidence that shows this myth is false, the persistence of believing that frustration leads to aggression is surprising. An unfortunate consequence of this misperception is that people use it to explain and excuse the anger they express when they don't get what they want. Frustration is far too often seen as a direct route to provoking anger and aggression, and anger is rationalized as an automatic and natural response. Many people assume that anger is the only possible way to respond when things go wrong and they feel frustrated. This myth leads people to buy into the idea that they have no choice about how they respond.

The truth is that there are always choices; anger is only one of several possible responses to frustration. This book will show you a whole new range of choices and ways to respond when you feel anger and experience frustration.

Myth 3: Venting your anger is healthy.

The idea that venting anger to let off steam is necessary and helpful has become a part of popular culture. It originates from misunderstood statements by Sigmund Freud.

The myth is that frustration can build up over time; that it must be released one way or the other. Bottled-up, unexpressed anger supposedly festers in your mind and body, creating both physical and emotional disease and poisoning relationships in all areas of life. The presumed basic cure is to express your anger by letting it all out; to cleanse and purify your body and mind. This cleansing is supposed to clear the air, resulting in healthier and happier communication with the people around you, giving you a good clean feeling, and increasing your self-esteem.

Through many years of research, the venting idea has been put to rest. Blowing off steam is not beneficial. Carol Tavris, a well-known anger researcher, found that people who are most likely to vent their rage actually get more, rather than less angry when they do. And those at the receiving end of anger outbursts get angry too. You may have noticed this with yourself in your interactions with colleagues, with friends, or perhaps with your partner or children at home. It all starts with some trigger event, which is followed by an angry outburst, shouting, screaming, or crying; a climax that include physical violence; exhaustion and finally withdrawal and/or eventually an apology. Have you noticed how this cycle can be replayed over and over with no decrease in your overall level of anger?

When anger is let out, it is typically met with anger right back. Negative energy breeds more negative energy. Behavior such as yelling or even talking out an emotion doesn't reduce anger feelings. Numerous studies have shown that venting anger typically serves to "freeze" a hostile attitude or opinion. Venting does not make hostile feelings go away; instead they tend to stick around longer and haunt you.

The bottom line is that venting is really useless. Expressing anger does not reduce anger. Instead it just makes you even angrier. Venting feeds an angry attitude and state of mind, escalates anger and aggression, and does nothing to help you or the recipient of your anger to resolve the situation.

Sometimes people do feel relieved after they vent their anger, yet several studies have found that such relief is not a natural consequence of anger, but rather a learned reaction. Some people have learned to feel relief following expression of anger, just as other people learn to feel shame or increased compassion after venting. You can learn new responses and change how you respond to your anger feelings. Your response to anger feelings with anger actions becomes a choice rather than a certainty. Acting on anger is not natural or something you need to keep doing.

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Myth 4: Anger is always beneficial.

Because it triggers a surge of adrenaline, anger can mobilize you to defend yourself or escape when you are physically threatened or attacked. This is called the fight-or-flight response. Anger can help you set appropriate limits and overcome any fear you may have about asserting your needs. Anger is also a common middle step in the healing process following sexual or physical abuse. Yet even in those tough situations, anger isn't helpful when the abused person is unable to let go of it. Consuming anger can actually leave you stuck and unable to move beyond your pain.

Anger is only beneficial when it serves as a warning signal that something is wrong. It can increase your sense of control and most importantly prepare you for action. This type of anger involves situations in which people have clearly been hurt or are at risk of being harmed. Anger in these circumstances isn't fueled by general hostility. Instead, it is an appropriate reaction to a real threat or danger.

Fear is an appropriate emotion upon seeing an approaching gang of hoodlums while walking alone on a city street at night. When the danger passes, so does the fear. Constructive anger can function much the same way. But when anger spills over into other life situations where it is uncalled for, it can become a problem for you. Take a moment to think about how often your anger occurs in response to situations that have little or no chance of causing you physical injury or risk of death.

Anger fueled by hostility is anger in its most harmful form. Hostility or cynical anger is a state of mind of ill will fueled by strong judgments about yourself and other people. This type of cynical or hostile anger, let alone hatred, is never useful or helpful. It can easily lead to aggressive behavior, verbal or otherwise.

Hostile anger damages areas of your life you care about; harming other people at the same time it harms you.

Myth 5: A person's anger is caused by others.

Anger experts say that they consistently notice that angry clients come into therapy with one or more reasons to explain and justify why they are so angry. Though the stories may differ, the message is the same: "My anger is caused by someone else or something else. I'm not to blame."

When you're in pain, it's logical to ask yourself, "Who did this to me; who's responsible?" As soon as you decide that someone else is responsible for your hurt or physical tension, the focus shifts from you to them. You can then feel justified in releasing your pain and hurt with anger directed toward those you believe to be responsible for it.

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Anger is triggered by people and events outside your control. However, how you react to your anger thoughts and feelings is up to you. By shifting the blame to others, you rob yourself of the opportunity to make changes in your behavior—and you keep yourself stuck in a cycle of anger behavior triggered by anger feelings.

Normal Anger vs. Problem Anger

Sure, everybody gets angry once in a while, but most people know how to deal with their anger. Their anger tells them something is wrong. Then they figure out what is bothering them. They do something to change the bad situation. They check to find out how well their action worked. If what they did or said didn't work, they think about it some more and try something else. If the action worked, they let go of their anger so they can get on with their life.

Here's how the normal anger chain works. Normal anger tells a person:

- that they have a problem,
- that they need to think about,
- and then say or do something,
- and then check out the results,
- and then change what they do (if the first thing failed),
- or let go of their anger (if it worked).

The angry person sees things much differently. Problem anger tells a person:

- that everything is a problem,
- that they constantly think about,
- and then they come on too fast and too strong with what they say and do,
- then they ignore the bad results,
- so they fail to change their actions,
- and won't let go of their anger.

Always Angry

Most overly angry people are also overly sensitive. They are too easily hurt, thin-skinned, and quick to feel insulted. One result is that they get angry all the time over things other people would ignore.

We all get tons of anger invitations every day. An anger invitation is anything that we could use as an excuse to get mad. For example:

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- The driver who cuts in front of you
- The too-hot coffee or too-cold soda drink
- Your partner saying, “Not tonight, dear”
- A child who keeps playing when it’s dinner time
- The lawn that keeps growing
- Someone at work who leaves early and often
- Just about everything else people say and do.

Most people learn early in life to ignore most anger invitations because anger is actually a lot of work. It can really wear a person out. If a person gets mad at everything, that’s all they will feel. There won’t be room for anything else.

People who are consistently angry have never met an anger invitation they did not like. They say “yes” to way too many of them.

Your partner turns you down. Great! That gives you a chance to complain for hours. Shake your fist at that inconsiderate driver! Yell at the kids! Tell off that guy at work once and for all! All of these give you an excuse to be angry.

Always Thinking About What Makes You Angry

I’m so mad at him. He treated me like crap. I lie in bed for hours thinking of what he did. I wake up in the middle of the night with my teeth clenched. My friends are sick of hearing about it. My parents won’t listen anymore.

To think and think and think about something is called obsession. Angry people become obsessed with what they are upset about. They think about the harm that’s been done, how troubled they are about it, how they can get back at the person who hurt them, and on and on.

The more you think about what makes you angry, the angrier you get.

A person can spend hours dwelling on their anger, but they’ll only end up more upset. Remember, anger leads to more anger.

End of Chapter Thoughts

Anger has cost you dearly in many areas of your life. The myths that say anger is inevitable and helpful and that anger venting is useful, are all wrong. Listening to these myths works against you.

Point to Ponder: By not buying into the typical anger myths, you can learn to take charge of your life.

Questions to Consider: What anger myths have you bought into to justify your behavior? Have you let anger control your life? Are you willing to take responsibility for what you can do about your anger and with your life?

CHAPTER 2

Struggling with Anger is No Longer an Option

Face it, you want to change your anger. Perhaps your wish to change follows some incident where you lost control. Or maybe you've struggled for a long time, looking desperately for a way to stop the damage anger does to your relationships and your life. You've started reading this book because you no longer want to be trapped in your anger.

What are the Costs of Anger?

The battle with anger has cost you—in energy, of deep and painful regret, and of damage to your closest bonds. You feel that your efforts at anger control and all the ways those efforts have failed, have left a deep impact on you.

You probably already have a good idea how much responding with anger has cost you in the various areas of your life. Have you experienced broken and strained relationships? Sickness and poor health? Excessive stress? Difficulties at school or work? Problems with alcohol and other substances? There may also be other costs that are less obvious, or that you choose not to think about.

The following exercise on calculating the costs of anger can help you to see exactly what anger has cost you in your life. This will also give you a better idea of what you have missed out on by responding to anger feelings with anger behavior.

You may already have an idea that something is wrong. This is a good starting point. The difficult work is facing exactly what is wrong and coming to terms with what anger has cost you. In the following exercise, look at your personal experience with anger. If you are ready to get started, then grab a pen and a separate piece of paper.

EXERCISE: ASSESSING THE COST OF YOUR ANGER

1. *Interpersonal Costs*

Summarize the effects of anger on your relationships. Have friendships changed or been lost? Have family members been alienated? Do they avoid you, or do you avoid them? Have you lost a marriage or romantic relationship due to anger?

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2. *Career Costs*

Summarize the effects of anger on your career. Have you ever quit or been fired from a job because of anger? This includes overt anger as well as passive aggression such as slacking off, being late, being less productive, bad-mouthing people, gossip, etc. Have co-workers been alienated by your anger? Has your anger affected your school career (relationships with teachers and/or administrators)?

3. *Health Costs*

Describe the effects of anger on your health. There is a lot of research showing that anger stresses your body. Do you have any physical problems that could be stress related? Do you tend to get sick often? Do you experience physical symptoms during or after anger episodes (such as chest pain, muscle tension, upset stomach, and headache)? Do you sometimes mull over and stew over anger to the point of feeling sick or keyed up or having insomnia?

4. *Energy Costs*

Outline how anger has affected your energy. Does your anger sometimes exhaust you? Have you put time and energy into disappointing efforts at control? Have your attempts to manage anger left you feeling discouraged, tired, or worn out?

5. *Emotional Costs*

What has anger cost you emotionally? How much guilt do you carry for damage done by your anger? How do regrets about your anger episodes affect you emotionally? Are you affected by relationship losses due to anger? Do you suffer depression or hopelessness in the wake of your anger?

Completing your assessment of the costs of your anger is a crucial first step in honestly facing how anger has damaged you and continues to do so. But it also has another purpose. It's important that you recognize and feel the effects of your anger despite all your efforts, promises, and resolutions to change it.

The History of Your Anger Management

In the last exercise, you reflected on the costs of your anger. Many of these costs probably led you to do one thing or another to avoid doing them in the future. For example, you may have blamed yourself or others for your hurt. You may have insisted on you being right and others being wrong. You may have blown up and yelled at people. Have these strategies made you less angry and happier with your life? Have they moved

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you in directions you want your life to take? Now, we would like you to reflect on what you have done about your anger and how well these past strategies have worked for you.

The reason for doing this kind of reflection is that we don't want you to go on doing more of the same, especially when old anger management strategies have not worked for you. Successful anger transformation begins with facing—openly and honestly—each attempt at anger management, each past strategy, and seeing how it has worked.

Exercise: Taking A Look At Your Anger Management History

For this exercise, you will look at your past attempts to manage and control anger. This two-part exercise will help you organize your memories across different situations and relationships. The left-hand column of the grid lists categories of people who might trigger anger. If you've experienced anger in relation to one or another such person in your life, fill in the corresponding boxes in columns 2 and 3 (or use a separate piece of paper for your answers). Skip any people triggers that don't apply to you.

In column 2, describe what you do to manage and control your anger when it's triggered. What do you do with the feeling? Do you try to keep it from erupting? Do you push it down? Do you talk about it? Do you tell yourself not to react? Do you try to relax? Do you reach for a drink? Do you beat yourself up for past episodes with lots of negative self-talk? Do you promise people you're going to change?

In column 3, describe the outcome of your anger management efforts. Have you succeeded in reducing your anger feelings? Have you succeeded in controlling your aggressive behavior? Have you been able to protect your relationships? Have you dealt with triggering feelings (shame, guilt, stress, frustration) in ways that don't ignite anger. Think about both the short term and the long term when you respond to these questions. Most importantly, what have you traded in or lost because of anger management and control efforts? Examples could be lost time or energy, frustration, missed opportunities, or diminished relationships or activities that you might enjoy or care about. Some of these losses may be similar to the costs you mentioned in the last exercise.

People Triggers	Coping strategy (my behaviors)	Outcome
Parents		
Other family members		
Supervisors		
Coworkers		

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Friends		
Partner/spouse		

When doing an exercise like this, it can sometimes be helpful to see how another person filled it out. Take a look at the comments that Bob, a factory foreman, made about his anger management history.

People Triggers	Coping strategy (my behaviors)	Outcome
My father criticized me.	I act tough, withdraw, and stay away from him.	No relationship. Talk at Christmas on the phone.
My sister cuts me down.	I tell her nothing about myself.	No relationship. Feel alone.
Boss criticizes my work.	Get cold, distant, tell him he doesn't know what he's talking about.	Used to be friends. Now he doesn't invite me to do things anymore.
Coworkers give me sloppy work.	Only give them written feedback to avoid blowing up.	People resent my notes, make jokes about me.
Friends don't keep promises or aren't on time.	I don't say anything and pretend I'm okay about it.	I withdraw and stop calling them. Feel disgusted. Think about it for a long time.
Girlfriend disrespects or pressures me.	I get sarcastic or withdraw.	Feel resentful and more distant; lose sexual interest.

In the first part of this exercise, we looked at people who might trigger your anger. In the second part, you'll identify feelings that might trigger your anger. Examples of feelings are listed in the left-hand column. If you've experienced anger in response to any of the feelings listed, fill in the corresponding boxes in columns 2 and 3. Again, skip any triggers that don't apply to you.

Emotional triggers are often less obvious than people triggers, so you may find it harder to identify them. Pay special attention to feelings you don't like or that have an unpleasant quality to them. As before, in column 2, describe what attempts you make to manage and control anger when it is ignited. In column 3, describe the outcome of your anger management and control efforts. Some of these may be similar to the costs you described previously. Use a separate piece of paper for your answers if they won't fit on the chart.

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Emotional Triggers	Coping strategy (my behaviors)	Outcome
Frustrated		
Ashamed/guilty		
Stressed		
Afraid		
Controlled		
Disappointed		
Threatened		

Here is how Bob completed this part of the exercise. Notice that he altered the feelings category to more closely reflect his personal situation.

Emotional Triggers	Coping strategy (my behaviors)	Outcome
Frustrated	I try to keep frustration to myself or come up with a reason for why things have gone wrong.	Sometimes I hit something (like the wall) to release my frustration.
Ashamed/guilty after screwing up	Try to say nothing and just fight for control of how I feel.	End up feeling worse for it; push people away and they resent me.
Feeling stressed when rushing or late	Try to stay controlled and keep my voice calm.	Eventually lose it; blow up if slightest thing goes wrong.
Feeling controlled by my girlfriend	I get sarcastic and withdraw.	Feel resentful, distant, "not there." We fight about this.

When Bob reviewed this exercise, it was clear that his usual coping strategies such as being cold, distant, controlled, withdrawn, sarcastic, or silent weren't working. That is

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because the outcome was usually to get so distant from others that relationships were damaged or lost.

After completing this anger management history exercise, look at what you've learned. Have your efforts to control anger worked? Have you kept relationships safe from the corrosive effects of your anger? Have all your efforts to manage rage still ended in episodes of lashing out? Have your efforts to keep anger feelings down actually kept them down? Or has anger continued to eat at you?

Chances are, if you are like a lot of people nothing you've done to control anger has really worked. You keep doing things you regret. You keep damaging the ones you need and love. And you keep trading in more and more of your life flexibility in an effort to get a handle on your anger.

What does your heart and your gut tell you about your history of anger? In your heart, do you feel sick about it? Helpless? Hopeless? What does your experience tell you about your response to anger? Take a minute to take stock.

Anger is a powerful feeling that can sweep away your strongest determination. Despite your efforts to manage and control anger, you still pay for it. You keep feeling bad about yourself and those who trigger anger. You want to change, but no amount of remorse or effort seems to control the force of your ignited rage. This is not a time to apply more willpower, either. You've already been down that road. More willpower is not the solution. You only need to be willing to adopt a different strategy—take a different path.

Stuck in Anger, Now What?

Feeling stuck and at your wits' end is an important moment because there is a lesson here that can change your life. Knowing in your mind and heart—with absolute certainty—that the things you've done because of anger and to manage anger doesn't work is the first step of a journey down a new road. Admitting and accepting that your anger feelings are stronger than your efforts to stop them creates a new freedom. You can do something new—because all your old ways to cope aren't working and will not work.

When you look back at your responses to the previous exercises, you might think your situation looks hopeless. Yet there is hope, because there is another way. Hope starts with giving up on and stopping all your old anger management and control efforts. They haven't worked and will not work in the future. They've kept you trapped with a false belief that control is possible, that anger management is possible, and perhaps, if you work harder at it or trade in a little more of your life, things will get better. Your experience tells you this isn't so; so as long as you keep trying, you keep failing.

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You need to understand that all the old strategies for managing anger lead to a dead end. They hurt you. This is why you need to stop them. Your experience tells you this. It is time to let go of old, unworkable strategies.

End of Chapter Thoughts

- **Point to ponder:** Anger has cost you dearly. Liberating yourself from the struggle with anger is a way out of the anger trap.
- **Questions to consider:** Have you and others suffered enough from the effects of your anger behavior? Are you willing to give up trying to manage your anger feelings and go down a different path?

CHAPTER 3

Discovering the Center of the Struggle

You've already taken the first step toward understanding the struggle that lies within your anger. You've looked at the costs of your anger. You've faced all your previous attempts to manage and control anger thoughts, feelings, and actions. Then you've realized the difficult truth that nothing has really worked. No matter how hard you tried, no strategy to manage anger has ever helped long term. The costs are still there.

The healthiest response is to give up the struggle with anger, to surrender. By surrendering you will experience—perhaps for the first time—what your struggle with anger has really been about.

It seems like you've been fighting a tug-of-war, with the anger monster pulling at one end of the rope and you pulling at the other end. Yet no matter how hard you've pulled to defeat the anger monster, it has always come back stronger, pulling harder at the other end. While you were engaged in this endless and exhausting fight, with both your hands firmly clenching the rope, it probably never occurred to you that you don't need to win this fight. What would happen if you decided to stop fighting? You could simply surrender and end the fight by dropping the rope. The anger monster would still be around, throwing the rope at you, trying to get you back in to the fight. But it's your choice whether to pick up the rope again and continue the battle, or to keep your hands free so that you can start doing the things you really care about.

Dropping the rope and ending the struggle creates a doorway. If you aren't consumed with the effort to control anger, there may be an opening to see and experience something deeper, something that the struggle has masked.

You may be wondering how you can actually drop the rope. The first thing you would do is give up being a manager of anger. You can stop fighting against the feeling and the waves of pain. When you give up being a manager of anger, you can start becoming an observer of the anger process. You can watch your thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

The Anger Process

There are five components to the anger process. Each one can offer vital information about what lies at the center of the struggle.

- *Pre-Anger Feelings*

The first component is your pre-anger feelings. These are emotions, as well as the physiological sensations, that come before the anger. Pre-anger emotions are usually painful and something you want to avoid. Shame and guilt are examples

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as both of these feelings attack your basic sense of self-worth. They create a feeling that you are bad or wrong at the core. Anger is a classic way to avoid these feelings. Instead of you being wrong, anger turns the tables and makes it the other person's fault.

Another pre-anger emotion is hopelessness. A lot of male depression, which has hopelessness at its root, shows up in relationships as anger. The experience of hopelessness is somewhat covered up by the high-energy emotion of anger or disgust.

Other pre-anger feelings include hurt and anxiety. Both create alarm reactions. With hurt, you feel the sudden risk of abandonment; with anxiety, you have a feeling of an imminent danger. Anger converts alarm into a drive for action and the fear goes away—at least for a while.

Bodily sensations can also play a role in your pre-anger experience. Tension in your abdomen, shoulders, or jaw can be an indication of anger. Feelings of heat or heaviness, agitation, headache, shakiness, and the like are frequently mentioned precursors to outbursts of anger. Angry behavior can mask all of these unpleasant sensations.

- *Trigger Thoughts*

The second component of the anger process is trigger thoughts. These include painful memories and images brought on by the provoking incident. Memories of past hurts, failures, losses, and so on can become unpleasant to the point where you just desperately want to avoid them. Trigger thoughts also tend to be good or bad, right or wrong judgments about yourself or other people and their behavior. In fact, anger is essentially impossible unless your mind comes up with some type of judgment. Trigger thoughts usually paint you as a victim and blame someone else for your pain. They often contain broad labels such as stupid, incompetent, selfish, crazy, lazy, wrong, jerk, and so on.

- *Anger Feeling*

The third component is the anger feeling itself. It can show up as either a gradual or sudden surge of arousal. This arousal typically consists of autonomic nervous system responses, such as a pounding, rapid heartbeat, fast breathing (hyperventilation), trembling hands or legs, clenched jaws, muscle tension, and feeling hot or flushed.

- *Impulse to Act*

The arrival of the anger feeling usually generates a fourth component of the experience—an impulse to act. This impulse often feels indistinguishable from the trigger thoughts and anger feeling; but if you watch carefully, you can see

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them as distinct stages of the process. The high energy generated by escalating anger gets more unpleasant as it grows, and there's a natural pressure to discharge this anger physically. You want to do something—now—and so you begin to file through a short list of responses learned during past angry feelings.

- *Anger Behavior*

Up until this moment, you haven't actually done anything. To be sure, you have experienced quite a few changes on the inside, but nothing much has happened on the outside. Yet the pressure is mounting. Now it seems that this pressure will lead naturally to the last and most destructive component of the process, which is often some form of aggressive behavior. At the dramatic end, this includes shouting, finger pointing, run away, hitting, breaking things, and the like. Sometimes anger behavior is more subtle such as rolled eyes, a look of disgust, crossing your arms and looking away, a deep contemptuous sigh, cutting comments, sarcasm, gossip, emotional and physical withdrawal. And so on.

A person can cycle through these five anger stages again and again during a single anger episode, and likely see this playing out multiple times over the course of a day.

Michael's Story

Michael and his girlfriend got into it following a complaint she made that Michael isn't very affectionate. His pre-anger feeling was hurt with tightness in his stomach. Trigger thoughts included memories of other complaints, as well as the following self-talk: "What a hypocrite! She never hugs, never touches me, unless I start it." Then the anger feeling ignited and included the sudden impulse to do something. In this case, it was Michael saying something sarcastic: "That's funny, coming from someone with the warmth of an ice cube tray."

The argument didn't stop there. Michael's girlfriend came back at him: "Remember when I hugged you at your birthday party, and you wouldn't even hug me back because you didn't like the music I had on? Your arms just hung there." Now Michael had a new pre-anger emotion—shame. It felt horrible—like something was really wrong with him. He didn't want to feel that, so he started revving up for a real rage. His trigger thoughts included an image of his girlfriend turning away when he tried to kiss her later at the party, and the judgment—"I'm sick of her crap. She is totally selfish and ungiving." Now came a flush; his heart started beating like a trip-hammer. Big anger feelings equal a big need to do something. Michael roughly pushed his girlfriend out of the way and stormed out of their apartment.

Five minutes later, his cell phone rang. "I don't need this," she said. "I won't be here when you get back." Suddenly Michael was afraid—he felt the icy wind of abandonment. This feeling was too hard to stay with. He couldn't stand it. So the words came to him and he felt the urge to swear at her and call her a name, and so he did. "You're a bitch," he told her, and then hung up the phone.

Becoming An Unbiased Observer

To really watch something, such as how anger affects you, you have to plant yourself firmly in the present moment. The past and the future, where our thoughts so often dwell, must be abandoned in favor of the here and now. This is the place you are anyway, and where your life is lived out.

You do this, first of all, by deciding to do it. You decide you want to understand the heart of the struggle, to fully experience everything that happens when you get angry. You can make this choice any time and commit to it.

The second way to stay in the present is by listening to your body. This is achieved by noticing your breathing, your beating heart, your posture, and your areas of tension. You observe any significant sensations in your body: areas that hurt or feel hot, heavy, or shaky. This is not an easy skill to learn, which is why you will be given exercises throughout this book for you to practice everyday, so that you can apply these skills when anger arises. If you want to apply these skills in the heat of the moment, it's best to practice them at other times first.

The third way to stay in the present is to notice and keep track of your conscious mind—your thoughts, emotions, and drives. Throughout an anger episode, you need to keep asking yourself these questions:

- What am I feeling besides anger?
- What judgments am I making—what good or bad; right or wrong thoughts are going through my mind?
- What am I driven to do right now?

The final strategy for staying in the present is to use a simple phrase to remind yourself of your role as observer. Something such as, “Listen and watch; do not judge.” For the observer, there is no right or wrong—there is just seeing and learning. And if you find yourself judging, then simply observe that—without judging the judging. In the end, a judgment is just another thought.

As an observer you can simply observe what is going on (your experience) without having to take sides or decide what is good or bad, right or wrong. Being an observer allows you to end the struggle; it's one way of dropping the rope in your tug-of-war with anger.

However, this is easier said than done. Anger thoughts and feelings are so strong and powerful that they can seem to rule you. In the moment you experience them, anger thoughts and feelings are difficult to distinguish from your own separate identity. It becomes difficult to see that, while thoughts, worries, and feelings are part of you, they

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aren't you. They come and go. You don't own them. You can't make them go away if you dislike them. You can't hold on to them, even if you like them.

A "good" thought such as "I am confident" is not more like you than a "bad" thought such as "I'd like to hit this guy." They are both part of you, and they come and go all by themselves.

Try to think of yourself as being like a house. Just as a house provides the space for people to live in along with all their furniture and other belongings, we provide the space in which our experiences can occur. The structure of the house remains the same, regardless of who lives in it, how it's furnished, or how it's decorated. The house doesn't care about who lives in it, how people furnish it, or what they think or feel. The house simply provides the space in which all that living can occur.

Exercise: Mental DVD

Sometimes it is impossible to watch and pay attention to everything that is happening during one of your anger episodes. Things just move too fast and furiously. You get swept in to the anger and stop noticing key thoughts and feelings. But you still want to understand what happened—to look beneath the surface of that anger and see what's hidden there. Mental DVD is an effective technique for recovering forgotten details of a recent anger experience.

Begin by closing your eyes and taking a deep breath. As you release it, try to let some of the tension flow out of your body. Now imagine a white circle of light just above your head—kind of like an oversized halo. The circle of light starts to descend, first surrounding the top of your head, then moving down to your face, neck, and shoulders.

Try to relax each part of your body as the circle passes. Take another deep breath and watch the circle descend to your hips, thighs, and calves, then disappear beneath your feet.

With your body more relaxed, take one last deep breath, and focus your attention on the anger episode you want to understand. Start in the middle—where you're fully angry—and imagine you are watching everything on a DVD. Observe the scene for a minute. You're really angry. On this disk, there's a voice-over of your thoughts—listen to what is going on in your mind.

Now hit the button that takes you back to the beginning of the episode, before the anger started. Press Play. Watch the action; listen to what is being said. What are you feeling in that moment before the anger? Are you hurt, ashamed, scared, hopeless, guilty, feeling wrong or unworthy? Pay attention to your posture and your voice. Try to make contact with what is happening inside you just before the anger erupts.

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Now watch any memories or images that have been triggered. What are your thoughts? Do you have trigger thoughts that paint the other person or the situation as bad or wrong? Keep listening until you hear the words of this inner voice.

Now the anger is coming. Watch as it grows. Notice what it feels like, what it makes you want to do. Be aware of any impulses to speak or act on your anger. Don't do anything about your feelings. Just be the house and let your feelings be. Just observe them.

Mapping Your Anger Process

Now that you have learned how you can observe your anger, it's time to map how your anger really works—the process of your anger. For the next week or so, closely watch each anger episode. Use the techniques mentioned earlier to remain a here-and-now observer of your experience.

Either adopt the house perspective or use the mental DVD to recapture an anger event that was too overwhelming to track as it unfolded. What have you learned? On a separate piece of paper, record as much detail as you can in the following anger map exercise.

Exercise: Your Anger Map

Pre-Anger Feelings

Describe the emotions and physical sensations you noticed this week preceding your anger episode. Is there typically one feeling, or are there several that may show up at the beginning of your anger process? How do these feelings affect your sense of self-worth? Do you find yourself wanting to escape or suppress them? Are there physical sensations preceding anger that are painful or uncomfortable? Does anger help to push them out of your awareness?

Trigger Thoughts

Write down as much as you can remember about any painful images or memories that come up in anger situations. What judgments do you typically make about other people? Which of your expectations or rules for living do they fail to live up to? Note how your trigger thoughts may change your pre-anger feeling or distract you from them.

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Anger Feeling

Does your anger build slowly, or suddenly ignite full force? Does it sometimes stick around and brew for long periods of time, like a low-grade cold? Does it feel good, sweeping away hurt or shame? Does it feel scary or disturbing? Write down everything you've learned as an observer of your anger, every detail about the feeling and its effect on you. Especially note what happened to your pre-anger feelings and any changes in your trigger thoughts.

Impulse to Act

What did you want to do this week when your anger surged? What images or thoughts came to mind? Write down everything you imagined saying or doing. You may have done only some or perhaps none of those things, but it's important to identify as many anger-driven impulses as possible. How did you decide whether or not to act on them?

Anger Behavior

Write down what you actually did, via gestures, facial expressions, words, tone of voice, or overt behavior (acts of aggression, violence) as a response to your anger. How did the aggression feel at the moment? How did it affect your anger (both the emotion and physical sensations)? As time went on, how did your feelings change, if at all, regarding your anger behavior?

End of Chapter Thoughts

The path out of your anger and into your life will take you to places you've never been before. Some of these places may be scary and difficult for you to experience. Yet there is something at the core of this struggle that is soft and has extraordinary value: protecting a delicate human being (you) who fears two things—that people will judge and reject you and that you will reject and hate yourself.

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The fear is that you will finally be seen—by yourself or others—as unworthy, broken, or bad. The only hope is to stay hidden, safe, and protected from those pre-anger feelings by trigger thoughts and rage. That vulnerable self you've been shielding has always felt like it could be broken or mutilated if the arrows of judgment were ever allowed to hit home. So you remain vigilant, on guard, and angry.

Anger is a way of protecting that delicate human being. It makes the feelings of inadequacy, hurt, shame, and guilt and keeps them out of view. Think, for a moment, what it feels like to have your buttons pushed. When others, either by their words or by their actions, push your buttons, you become angry, in part because those buttons represent aspects of yourself (including your past) that are painful, hurtful, and embarrassing to acknowledge openly and directly. A lot of us feel this way. When our buttons are pushed, the totality of who we are is right in our face, and not entirely by our own doing. Anger is a natural reaction to this process. We feel wronged and then we act on it to defend that fragile self that has been brought out in the open; this way we can push those unwanted feelings and old hurts and pains back out of view.

Here's a novel idea: What if all this protecting and defending and hiding is the problem? What if there is no need to hide anything? What if letting go of those painful feelings, of those moments of hurt and judgment, of the fear of being seen and rejected is the beginning of a solution?

You've tried the old way—running away from the pain—long enough. It hasn't worked. It only creates more problems; the struggle just keeps playing out in your life. Are you ready for a change? What if you were to stop struggling and drop the rope? What if you started to be an observer rather than a member of one team or the other?

Simply noticing what you feel means beginning to accept what you feel. It does not mean liking what you feel or agreeing with what somebody has done to you. It only means being aware of what you feel and acknowledging it for what it is (a thought, a feeling, a sensation, a memory, an image), without taking sides or doing anything about it.

Protecting yourself from hurt and pain using anger and blame is at the core of your futile struggle with anger. This has not worked; instead, it has caused numerous problems in your life. As you learn to acknowledge angry thoughts and feelings for what they really are, it will become easier to give up your struggle with anger. Learning to become an observer is a skill that can bring remarkable relief from suffering.

- **Points to Ponder:** You can learn to become an observer of, rather than a participant in, your anger. You are not your thoughts and feelings.
- **Questions to Consider:** Do you really need to hide and protect yourself from feeling hurt, shame, fear, and inadequacy? Are you willing to learn to be an observer of anger feelings and thoughts rather than participating in a struggle with them?

CHAPTER 4

Controlling Anger and Hurt Is the Problem, Not the Solution

If you are reading this, chances are that a good deal of your life has been plagued by anger, rage, unresolved hurt, and pain. This may be hard for you to face head on. You may still believe that managing and controlling anger is a way out. Yet you've been down that path, and it hasn't solved your anger problem. Each so-called solution—each attempt to stop or slow down the pain, to manage and control it—has gotten you to this place. And you are still angry.

It seems as if the most sensible solution to an anger problem is to control the anger. At least that is what the voice in your head tells you. This voice comes from the belief that anger is dangerous; that it's impossible to feel anger and still live a good life.

Well...the voice is lying to you. Controlling anger doesn't work in the same way that control works in other areas of life. In this chapter, you will learn why. You'll also learn how to begin letting go of the anger control agenda and get on with your life.

Two Areas Where Control Doesn't Work

Trying to control areas of your life where you don't have much control is a surefire guarantee of disappointment and anger. There are some situations where desirable choices seem nonexistent such as severe illness, deception by a partner, or getting laid off from a job. People can usually see that such situations are out of their control, and they don't beat themselves up for not being able to make things turn out differently.

Most angry people feel they must struggle fiercely to get a grip on their angry thoughts and feelings. Struggling with what you think and feel may be how you have learned to cope with your anger. You may even beat yourself up for not being able to control your hurt, pain and disappointment. You're not alone; it's natural to think that you should be able to control them.

However, the problem with control strategies is this: they work just enough to keep your painful feelings at bay, but in the long run you are left feeling angry and hurt. Once this cycle of struggle and control is set into motion, it can take over and become the dominant feature of your life.

Everyone's anger stems from two main sources: their struggle to control other people and their struggle to control painful emotions such as anger and shame.

YOU CAN'T CONTROL OTHER PEOPLE

Angry people go to great lengths to exert control over other people. You may achieve an illusion of control with infants and very young children, but it's impossible to even fool yourself when it comes to exerting control over older children and adults. The goal of control will fail 99 percent of the time.

When you try to control others, you're operating under the mistaken assumption that other people in your life ought to behave, think, and act like you think they should. The plain and simple truth is that other people don't like feeling controlled, and neither do you. Trying to control others sends the message that you do not accept them for who they are. You are expressing mistrust of their judgment—in effect, putting them beneath you.

Here, your mind is feeling you two lies. First, it is telling you that you have the right to control others. The second lie is that you actually have the ability to control others. Both are essentially false. You can't force your way into the minds of other people, just as other people can't force their way into your head to tell you how you should feel, think, or behave. If you think you can do this, then you are only kidding yourself. When you act to control others, you basically have a 100 percent guarantee that they will eventually find ways to resist and run from you. We can also promise you that your efforts will leave you feeling frustrated and angry.

Exercise: Control over Others is Misleading: A Self-Inventory

Here is a list of behaviors driven by efforts to control other people. All these efforts eventually lead to anger, frustration, conflict, bitterness, and alienation. Take inventory of your behavior as you go through the list and check off each statement that applies to you:

- I routinely offer advice that is unwanted by pleading, persuading, or lecturing.
- I repeat a point over and over in an effort to get others to align their thoughts and views with mine.
- I communicate by telling rather than discussing.
- I use “shoulds,” “musts,” “had betters,” and similar absolute statements when communicating.
- I use my anger to get my message across or force compliance in others.
- I use inflexible, strict statements, stubborn noncompliance, closed-mindedness, or chilling silence to influence others.

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- I impose my choices, beliefs, and standards on others with uncompromising stubbornness.
- I write off the behaviors, values, thoughts, opinions, and choices of others as wrongheaded and in need of my correction.
- I procrastinate or give a halfhearted effort as a way to get back or get even.
- I tend to be impatient with myself and other people.
- I feel uneasy about loose ends and strive for closure, even if it hurts me or others.

The following exercise will help you see the problems that arise when you try to control other people. All you need to do here is imagine that you are a puppeteer.

Exercise: The Human Puppeteer

Take a minute to think of the characters involved in a recent anger episode where you were trying to get others to do as you wanted. Then, go to your imaginary puppet box and pull out the marionettes, one for each character in the show. From your perch high above the stage, you begin to play out the anger scene below you. Try to play it out as you would have wanted it to go. As you do, notice how easy it is to get all the characters to do as you wish. You can make them bend over, gesture, and do whatever you want them to do. If you think “That person is making a stupid request,” you can simply replace what that person says with whatever you wish them to say in that moment. You can get them to think and say what you’d like to hear, and to show emotions that you think are appropriate in the situation. You and only you have control over the puppets.

Now, let’s mix this up a little. In the sequel, real people dressed to look like marionettes are the characters in this show. As before, you are high above the stage in your perch. The actors are still connected to the strings. But as you try to replay the scene, you notice that the characters are not doing what you are trying to will them to do. You want them to go left, but they go right. You say “They shouldn’t be doing that,” and you pull the strings, but now you feel them pulling back, resisting you. You try to force them to think and say this or that but hear them saying something else. You become frustrated because you really don’t know what they’re thinking and feeling and you have no way to get them to do what you wish. You feel anger building as the human puppets are now running this show—not you!

The real-life marionettes in this sequel are playing out the scene just as they should, because they are human beings. Unlike the puppets, they control their choices and actions, what they say and do on this stage. You, meanwhile, are powerless over them. But you are not powerless over how you respond to them. You have control over what

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you do here. You can either fight the characters and engage in a struggle, or you can let go of the strings and simply allow the characters to do as they would do, think as they would think, feel as they would feel, without trying to change how they play out their roles. You can simply watch, trusting that the characters know what is best for them, that they may choose to do this or that, and that in the end, they—and not you—are holding their own strings. You hold your strings.

Why You Can't Control Anger and Emotional Pain

Recognizing that you hold your own strings in life will put you face-to-face with your own pain, hurt, and other emotions, both positive and negative. You may think, “Well, if I can't control other people, then maybe I can control the negative energy and thoughts that arise in my mind and body when I hurt and feel angry.” This sensible-sounding solution is unfortunately another dead end. Control over your emotional reactions is just as misleading as your desire to control other people.

Numerous studies have shown that when people act to get rid of emotional and psychological pain, they end up instead with more emotional and psychological pain. You can't keep your unpleasant thoughts and emotions from burning you in the same way you can pull your hand away from a hot stove.

Trying to control unpleasant emotions, internal bodily sensations, and even disturbing thoughts will mostly backfire. You'll get more of the very thing you don't want to think and feel. This happens because your body is a system with a built-in system of feedback loops—your brain and nervous system. When you act against parts of this system—suppressing, avoiding, stuffing painful feelings—it sends out reverberations to all other parts of the system. This mind-body connection is like a sensitive spider web in this respect. Everything is connected.

Suppression and control take enormous effort. Suppressing unpleasant experiences—be they thoughts, memories, anger, anxiety, hurt, or bodily sensations—actually make matters worse. Why?

The more you try not to think about a particular thought, the more of this thought you'll actually have. The same is true of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and some internal bodily sensations. The message is this: You can't win a fight against yourself.

Such struggles with yourself are fueled largely by an unwillingness to make space for every aspect of your experience and identity. Your mind would like you to believe that to be happy and to live life fully, you must get rid of your painful and unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or memories. To have the “good life” means that you must be pain free. So you struggle to manage, stuff, bury, deny, or medicate the hurt and pain. All this time spent controlling tends to get in the way of what most people wish to spend their time doing—the experiences and relationships that you'd probably much rather be having.

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The lesson to be learned here is this: Control works against you when applied to unwanted and painful aspects of your private world, just as it works against you when you try to impose it on other people. In both cases, you are sending out a message that diminishes your own and others' humanity and dignity.

To get out of this cycle, you'll need to first come to terms with the fact that deliberate control is not a solution. It is the problem. Your thoughts and feelings—the good, the bad, and the ugly—always go with you wherever you go. These experiences define what is uniquely human about you. You cannot escape or avoid them so long as you're alive. They are part of you. To act against them is to act against your very being. To act against them means that you will remain stuck in hurt and anger.

Exercise: Pain Avoidance - A Self-Assessment

All efforts to suppress and control anger are essentially about avoiding pain. The goal is to make the hurt go away. However, this goal is unreachable; in fact, it is a dead end. Covering up hurt with anger does not make the hurt go away. Instead it bottles the energy for release at a later time. The release later on might take the form of unfettered anger. Or it may show up as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, or physical symptoms such as headaches, ulcers, backaches, and fatigue.

Let's take a look at how you may be suppressing your emotional pain and hurt. Here is a partial list of behaviors that suggest you are in the habit of suppressing your anger. Read each statement carefully, and think about them as they apply to your life. Take stock of your behavior as you go through the list, and put a check mark in front of each statement that applies to you.

- I tend to hide my painful feelings for fear that nothing good can come from showing my emotions.
- I act to push out of my mind upsetting thoughts or memories.
- I avoid feeling unpleasant emotions and act to reduce them quickly.
- I habitually stuff my feelings or use distraction, alcohol, or other drugs and strategies to feel better.
- I resort to anger to hide other unpleasant emotions and thoughts.
- I see my emotional hurt and pain as real barriers to living the life I want and becoming the person I want to be.
- I tend to withdraw from problems, even if that means they are left unresolved.
- I refuse to air personal problems, needs, or concerns.

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- I focus on maintaining the appearance of having it all together.
- I avoid controversial or troublesome topics.
- I second-guess my own choices.
- I play the role of people pleaser by putting myself second.
- I let my hurt and frustration pass without discussing it.
- I pretend that I don't have resentment, or that all is rosy in my life.

Areas Where You Do Have Control In Your Life

Conscious, deliberate, purposeful control works well in the external world outside your skin wherever the following rule applies: “If you don't like what you are doing, figure out a way to change it or get rid of it using your hands and feet. Then go ahead and do it.”

Unfortunately, this rule does not apply to internal events that occur inside your skin, such as angry feelings, painful thoughts, and other emotions. Rather than trying to change these, you are far better off refocusing your attention and expending your energy on the three areas where you do have control: your choices, your actions, and your destiny.

You are the Only One Who Has Control Over the Choices You Make

You alone have full responsibility for the choices you make. Understanding this can feel both sobering and liberating. For example, you cannot choose whether you feel hurt or angry. However, you can decide what you do with that hurt and anger. You can choose to dwell on your hurt and anger, run from it, or bury and hide it. You also have the option of doing nothing about the feelings and thoughts. You can decide to let them be or actively meet them with compassion and patience.

As you learn to recognize that every moment of your life is about choices, you free yourself from being a slave to your impulses, your resentments, and your anger. In essence, you're free to choose how you respond to triggers for anger and what you do with your emotional pain and anger when you feel it. It's your choice whether you behave in a kind, forgiving, or accepting manner while recognizing your painful feelings; or whether you give in to your impulse to either deny your anger or act on it.

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Where You Have Response Choices

Take a look at some specific areas where you have the power to choose your response choices:

- Meeting your hurt and anger with compassion and forgiveness versus struggling with it to deny it.
- Hearing what others have to say (even if you disagree with them) versus refusing to listen and giving them advice they don't want.
- Speaking words of acceptance and understanding versus words of judgment and blame.
- Letting go of old hurts, resentments, and painful memories versus holding on to them.
- Practicing patience with others and yourself versus blowing up in anger and frustration.
- Acting in ways that uphold your humanity and dignity as well as that of others or acting in ways that shame and degrade.
- Moving forward in your life with anger or struggling with it and remaining stuck.

Exercise: Brainstorming Alternatives To Anger Behavior

For this exercise, recall an upsetting situation that brought on feelings of anger, blame, rage, and other unpleasant thoughts and feelings. Once you have the scene clearly in your mind, go ahead and list the main triggers (whether people, thoughts, or feelings), bodily sensations and emotions that you felt, and, finally, how you coped or behaved in this situation. Be as specific as you can. This exercise has similarities to the anger management history exercise you completed earlier, but this exercise takes you further.

Take a look at how Melinda, a nineteen-year-old retail sales clerk, completed the first part:

People Trigger: *My mother criticized me.*

Feeling Trigger: *Feeling frustrated and hurt.*

Emotions and bodily sensations: *Irritable. Anxious. Heart is racing and pounding in my chest. Surge of adrenaline. Tense in neck and shoulders. Feeling sad and humiliated.*

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My anger behavior (how I coped): *Acted cold. Told her to “shut the hell up.” Called her “a miserable old hag and a lazy, good-for-nothing bitch.” I left and drove to my friend’s house and vowed to keep away from my mother. Spent time venting with friends about how much of a witch she is. Spent a lot of time trying to think about reasons why my mom has to be so mean.*

Now comes the more difficult part: brainstorming alternative choices to anger behavior. Start with the triggers and see how they ultimately led to self-destructive anger behavior. Rewind the tape, and for each trigger, see if you can brainstorm other choices, apart from anger behavior, you had available to you in that moment. For a hint, take a look at your coping strategy. You’ll want to come up with fundamentally different choices than the ones you listed under coping strategies and anger behavior. As you do, be aware that there are no right or wrong answers here. These are your choices—what you do and can do for yourself. Later on, you’ll be guided through this process more deeply. With practice, you’ll find that you do have a broad range of choices when anger and hurt show up. Acting on anger is one choice among many other choices.

After Melinda analyzed this scene, she then went back and brainstormed other choices she had available to her. Here’s how she completed the brainstorming part of this exercise.

People triggers: *I had absolutely no control over what my mom decided to say. My mother’s choice of words and her actions are not my responsibility. She can say or do as she wishes. I can choose to simply listen. I’ve heard this stuff before. I don’t have to let my triggers be engaged. I can just let the words be words without reacting to them.*

Feeling triggers: *The frustration and hurt I feel are my own. I can simply notice what my body is doing here. I can decide not to push the feeling away, but not to use it as fuel for anger. I can just let it be, and experience it for what it is.*

Emotions and bodily sensations: *There is really nothing I can do about what my body is doing right now. What I’m feeling is unpleasant, but I don’t need to run from it. I can choose to sit still with the energy and do nothing to make it go away. I can allow the energy to go away on its own.*

My anger behavior (how I respond): *I can see that I have lots of choices here. I can choose to listen to my mother or leave. I can choose to respond to her in a calm voice by letting her know that I feel hurt and sad when she says those things to me, even though I’m enraged inside; or I can confront her with a loud voice, name-calling, screaming, and leaving. I can extend compassion to my mother and let her know that I do love her, even though her words drive me crazy. Or, I can act in ways that do not reflect my love for her as another human being. I can decide not to run from my mother, because this relationship is important to me. I can choose to carry the hurt and pain with me to my friend’s house, or let it go. I can choose to gossip and vent with my friends about my mom, or I can choose not to do that. Venting really did nothing to resolve the situation with my mom.*

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Above all, Melinda began to appreciate that how she responded to this situation was her own responsibility. Only she could do things to meet her needs and uphold her values. The same is true of you. The choices you make can lead you to anger and misery or the life you want to create and nurture.

Controlling Your Actions

In this chapter, your actions refer to anything you do with your hands, feet, and mouth—how you respond to the thoughts, memories, physical sensations, and feelings dished out by your body and mind.

Let's say you feel hurt. Then you act on it; perhaps you lash out with blame and accusations, or you shut down by withdrawing. These are both actions. Alternatively, you might do nothing about the hurt and simply notice it for what it is (not for what your mind says it is). You focus on doing things in your life that matter to you, even if that means taking the hurt along for the ride. Either way, you're doing something. But your choice of actions, in a very real sense, helps define who you are and what your life will be about.

Control works very well when you apply it to your actions. For example, if you want to clean up your yard, you can go and get a rake and get started. If you want to perform an act of kindness, you can do something nice for someone. If you want to change the color of the walls in a room in your house, you can paint them. You can exercise regularly and watch what you eat and drink to promote your health and well-being. The common element in these life examples is this: They all involve actions—what you do with your hands, feet, and mouth. Other people can see what you do and hear what you say. This is a critical point in terms of your anger.

By now, you know how tough it is to control the feeling of anger. You may also have trouble controlling anger behavior. Impulses to act are strong, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed by them. But even an impulse to act is still a feeling. There is a split second between the impulse and the action when you can intervene, determining what you're going to do and how you're going to respond. You can step back and ask yourself, "Is it really necessary to act on this emotion [or this thought]?" You have control in this moment, no matter how powerful the anger feelings, hurt, and impulses to act.

Ask yourself what has cost you more, your anger feelings or your anger behavior. It is very likely your angry behavior has cost you far more than your anger feelings. Nobody else knows what you truly think and feel inside. Your anger only manifests itself to others through what you do with your hands, feet, and mouth. You've paid for your actions, not your thoughts or feelings. Your actions are what have gotten you into trouble. This is where you need to take charge and make changes.

Controlling Your Destiny

Controlling your destiny is the real reward. The overall effect of your choices and your actions will determine what your life will become—in other words, your destiny. This does not mean that the outcome of your choices and your actions will always be what you desire; remember, you can't control what others do, think, and feel. And there are many events in life, both good and bad, that occur outside your control. What most people hope for is that the cumulative effect of their choices and actions will yield a sense that their life was well lived. Everything you do from here on out adds up to that. Choice is destiny.

Recognizing the Struggle for Control and Letting It Go

Letting go of the struggle for control is not as hard as it may seem. It begins with you making a decision to do so. The hardest part is putting your decision into action. One of the main obstacles to action is failing to recognize the difference between what you can control and what you cannot control. Falling back into the old control agenda where control is not possible is a surefire way to stay stuck and to allow anger to sidetrack you from what you want your life to be about.

To get unstuck and stay that way, you'll need to develop greater ease in the early detection of situations where control is possible in your life; those are the places where you need to spend your time and effort working. The exercise below is designed to help you to do just that. Think of it as a sort of review and preparation for the hard work to come.

EXERCISE: DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN WHAT YOU CAN AND CANNOT CONTROL

Read each statement and then, without giving much thought, circle the number next to each situation you believe can be controlled by you. Don't circle the numbers where you think the situation is outside your control.

1. What someone else is thinking
2. The choices I make
3. Others being on time
4. How I respond to other people
5. What other people value and care about
6. What I say in a situation

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7. The thoughts I may have from time to time
8. The direction I want my life to take
9. How others respond to me (my choices, actions, and expressed thoughts and feelings)
10. How I behave with respect to other people
11. The choices others make
12. How I speak with other people
13. The behavior of pets (mine and others')
14. How I respond to my thoughts and feelings (positive, negative, neutral)
15. Whether other people follow rules or standards
16. Whether I am on time and follow through with commitments
17. What others do
18. Whether I follow certain rules or standards
19. Whether other people like me
20. Whether I prepare for tasks and do my best
21. What I feel at any point
22. What I do with my precious time on this earth
23. Experiences in life that do not directly involve me (weather, equipment failures, political decisions)
24. My values and what I care about

Now go back and look at the numbers you circled. All the odd-numbered statements represent situations where you have absolutely no control. You may imagine otherwise; but if you go back and think carefully, you will see that you truly do not have control in any of these scenarios.

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Your mind may say you do or “should have” control of some of these odd-numbered situations. This is part of the problem. Remember, when you struggle to control what you cannot control, you will only end up feeling hurt, angry, and disappointed. Anger needs this struggle to grow. When these situations show up, you need to recognize them for what they are, stop, and then look for places where you can exert control over your choices and actions with an eye on what you want your life to be about.

The even-numbered situations represent a sampling of life situations where you do have control. They share one thing in common: they represent your actions, what you say or do.

End Of Chapter Thoughts

The path out of anger is learning to recognize the difference between what you can and can't control. You cannot control your emotional reactions or what other people do. You can control your choices and actions, what you say, and what you do, including how you respond to your anger, to your pain, and to other people. You can control your efforts and contributions toward life and the welfare of others, both at home and at work. You can choose how you respond to your thoughts, memories, feelings, physical sensations, and choices you've made. You can control how you respond to other people—without trying to control them. The challenge for you will be to drop the rope in your tug-of-war with anger in situations where control won't work, while learning to focus on areas of your life where you do have control.

Point to Ponder: Control is often misleading. The trick is to recognize what you can control—your choices, your actions, your destiny.

Questions to Consider: Where do you needlessly try to apply control in your life? What have your vain attempts at control cost you? Are you willing to give up trying to control what you cannot control so that you can move forward with your life?

CHAPTER 5

How Anger is Created

The prefrontal cortex—that part of our brain that uses language to evaluate experience—can literally manufacture anger by using the sense of judgment, attribution, and assumed intent. Here’s how these functions work to generate angry feelings and behavior.

Judgment

Judgment is the natural spillover of the mind’s tendency to categorize experience in black-or-white terms. With judgment, your mind is using the same strategies it has used to evaluate experiences as pleasurable or painful, safe or dangerous. Now, though, it’s judging other people and their behavior as right or wrong. This is a critically important shift. With judgment, your mind is declaring something or someone to be absolutely and objectively good or bad. When the mind makes judgments, experience is no longer about subjective feelings of pleasure and pain; it is about the intrinsic moral worth of your experiences and the people around you. You compare them to a standard of what should be. And if they don’t measure up to your standard, you may begin to get angry.

A second form of judgment is called toxic labeling. Here your mind transforms the very normal process of recognizing and labeling experience into a series of global judgments: people are stupid, incompetent, crazy, lazy, and so on. Toxic labels are a reflection of worth used to legitimize anger and revenge. They are difficult to shake once applied.

Attribution—The Blame Game

Our mind is wired to attribute underlying causes to events. We naturally seek to discover the why of things. This drive is the basis of scientific thought and work.

The natural tendency to make cause-and-effect connections can go sour when we have a painful experience (the cause); our minds work to figure out why and then look for someone to blame (the effect). Instead of thinking “Something’s wrong, I’ll find the source and fix it,” we get trapped in the blame game. “Something’s wrong (I’m in pain). I’ll find who did this to me, then I’ll attack them till they fix it.”

Blame keeps you helpless because you’re now depending on the other person to solve your problem. And you may use anger flowing from the blame game as a tool to coerce other people.

Blaming is a major source of human misery. It doesn’t undo the past, nor does it fix the pain. What it does do is keep you stuck and alienated from the very people who could help you live a better life. So the problems and your pain continue. And your anger grows from periodic to never-ending.

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Escaping from the blame game requires that you take responsibility for yourself. When you're in pain, you need to be the agent of change. Looking around to see who's responsible won't help here. You and you alone are responsible for your experience. Blame keeps you from seeing this simple fact. It leaves you waiting to be helped, wanting, desperate to be rescued and vindicated. All of this fuels more blame, because the source of help and responsibility begins and ends with you.

Assumed Intent—Becoming Mind Readers

Since we are wired to organize experience into cause and effect, we hate ambiguity. We are especially disturbed when other people do things we don't understand. Our minds try to solve these mysteries with something called "assumed intent."

Assumed intent is our effort to explain ambiguous behavior in others by trying to guess their intentions, feelings, and motives—essentially mind reading. The trouble is we're often wrong. And since the intentions and motives we guess at are usually negative, we get angry for nothing.

How Evaluating Affects Communication

Obstacles to healthy communication are a direct outgrowth of the mind's tendencies to judge, blame, and assume intent—collectively, the compulsion to evaluate. These tendencies put up walls and turn people who are simply different from us, or who disagree with us, into adversaries. The mind wants to label them as wrong and/or bad. The mind tells you they are misguided, stupid, and sinful. You may feel the need to show them their errors. Whether the issue is sexual behavior or something as trivial as washing the dishes, the outcome is the same: people who are different, who do things differently, or who disagree arouse anger and must be defeated or punished.

The compulsion to evaluate involves wearing emotional blinders. These blinders leave you so consumed with defending yourself that you likely miss what's really going on. You don't see when others are hurt or needing validation or are trying desperately to connect with you. You ignore vital information, including your own deeply felt pains and hurts, because it has nothing to do with winning.

Evaluation also hurts your relationships because it prevents you from seeing life through another person's eyes. Your sense of perspective is greatly diminished or distorted. You're unable to connect with what other people know and understand, including what you may learn from them via their life experiences, pains, hurts, disappointments, joys, and perspective about the world. The blinders keep all of this from view.

How Evaluating Creates Resentment

Judging, blaming, and assuming are mental habits that are made worse by dwelling. When you dwell, you get stuck in mind loops, endlessly recycling the past through the same good or bad judgments, the same toxic labels. Over and over, you play tapes in your head of what someone did or said, blaming them for hurting you. The result is chronic resentment and a growing need for revenge. You feel righteous, strong. You imagine justice finally being done.

But what comes of this? Does the pain or hurt ever really get better? Is the relationship somehow healed? In reality, nothing changes. The rumination provides a moment of relief—an assertion of one’s rightness, a shining fantasy of revenge. But the long-term emotional consequence is to feel hopeless and stuck. The resentment deepens; the pain just goes on and overflows into other areas of your life.

How Evaluating Triggers Destructive Behavior

The more we ponder or dwell, and the more we believe and buy into our evaluative thoughts, the stronger the impulse gets to hurt others. In truth, evaluations are just mental constructs. They are no more real than the Tooth Fairy, and if you tell a big enough lie often enough, people will believe it. Judgments and blame work the same way. If you keep pondering upon a thought, and keep repeating the same thing to yourself, you can come to believe just about anything.

When you really start to buy into a negative evaluation, it then begins to take on a life of its own. It starts to require action. Something must be said to set the offending person straight; something must be done to awake them so they’ll finally see the error of their ways. Psychologists say that a phenomenon called emotional reasoning starts to take control.

Emotional reasoning goes like this: “If I feel pain, someone must have done it to me. If someone did this to me, I have to hit them back so hard that they never hurt me again.” This is schoolyard logic; the same kind of thinking that gets a lot of kids beat up. It’s the same logic that motivates drive-by shootings and destroys friendships and marriages.

When the mind decides that others are bad and wrong, when the mind obsesses about revenge, there’s often no end to it. The will to inflict damage goes on and on, and it can quickly get out of control. Inflicting damage becomes all that matters, all that motivates.

What to Do

One of the keys to becoming less ruled by what your mind tells you is to learn the skill of watching your mind. You can do it, but it takes time and practice. Your mind didn't start throwing evaluations at you overnight. It's been going on for a long lifetime. The skill of watching your mind will take practice and commitment, but it's a powerful tool for changing your experience of anger.

To get started, try completing the exercises as described below. Each exercise will help you detach from the compulsion to evaluate and believe those evaluations. Do one exercise at a time to see which ones work best for you.

It's important to give yourself enough time with each exercise. These exercises are not magic bullets. They require practice. A good starting point is to set aside at least ten to fifteen minutes each day to practice an exercise. Give each of them a few days of practice before moving on to the next.

Exercise: Mind Watching

Mind watching requires you to be a true observer of your consciousness. Here's how you do it:

Start by taking a series of slow, deep breaths. Keep this up through the entire exercise. Imagine that your mind is a medium-sized white room with two doors. Thoughts come in through the front door and leave out the back door. Pay close attention to each thought as it enters. Now label the thought as either judging or nonjudging.

Watch the thought until it leaves. Don't try to analyze or hold onto it. Don't believe or disbelieve it. Just acknowledge having the thought. It's just a moment in your mind, a brief visitor to the white room. If you find yourself judging yourself for having the thought, notice that. Do not argue with your mind's judgment. Just notice it for what it is and label it "judging—there is judging." The key to this exercise is to notice the judgmental thoughts rather than getting caught up in them. You'll know if you're getting caught up in them by your emotional reactions and by how long you keep the thoughts in the room.

Keep breathing; keep watching; keep labeling. A thought is just a thought. And you are much more than that thought. Each thought doesn't require you to react; it doesn't make you do anything; it doesn't mean you are less of a person. As an observer of your thoughts as they pass in and out of the white room, let them have their brief life. They are fine the way they are, including the judging thoughts. The important thing is to let them leave when they are ready to go and then greet and label the next thought—and the next.

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Continue this exercise until you feel a real emotional distance from your thoughts. Wait until even the judgments are just a moment in the room—no longer important, no longer requiring action.

Exercise: Separating Thoughts From Angry Feelings

This exercise will help you learn to detach your thoughts from angry feelings.

Start by recalling a recent situation where you felt angry. Try to visualize what happened, what was said. Take some time to carefully build a picture of the event. Now remember some of the thoughts you had during the episode. As you recall what you were thinking, notice if the actual feeling of anger is starting to return. If it is, that's good. Let it happen.

Keep focusing on the judgmental or blaming thoughts connected to the incident. Really get into them. And if your anger feels a little sharper, a little stronger, that's fine, too.

Now go back to the white room. Imagine that your anger is hurling those judgmental and blaming thoughts through the front door. Take a deep breath. Inhale slowly, then let your whole body relax as you release the breath. Keep this up while you start watching your mind. Observe and label the thoughts. Watch each thought from a distance—without believing or getting entangled in it. Don't make the thought bigger or smaller, don't agree or disagree. Just watch and breathe, noticing that the thought eventually leaves and a new one takes its place. Keep this up until you feel a growing distance from the thoughts—and perhaps from the anger itself.

Exercise: Riding The Wave Of Anger

You now have a chance to learn to ride the wave of your anger rather than be tumbled about by it. Think of a recent situation where you felt mistreated and upset. Visualize the scene; try to recall any irritating things that were done or said. Notice your judging or blaming thoughts. Keep focusing on the upsetting scene, as well as on the judgments you made about it. Let your anger rise till it's a four or five on a scale of one to ten.

Now go back to the white room mentioned previously. Observe your thoughts. Label the judgments. The thoughts aren't right or wrong, true or false. Acknowledge their presence without trying to control or change them, without trying to push them away. Breathe deeply; keep watching your mind.

At the same time, notice the emotional wave in the room with you. Be aware of the point where your anger stops climbing. Feel it leveling off and starting to diminish. Experience the slow ride down the back of the wave. Accept wherever you are on the wave. Don't

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hasten to get past it. It moves at its own speed—all you can do is let go and let it carry you.

Just watch your thoughts entering and leaving the white room, and notice the progress of the wave, nothing more. Keep watching until the anger has completely passed.

Exercise: Finding Compassion In The Dark

Imagine that it's night. You are in a field with hundreds of unseen people. On one edge of the field is a cliff—it would be an extraordinary and terrifying fall. The cliff is really everyone's worst fear—death, shame, failure, aloneness, loss, helplessness. No one can see it. No one knows where it is.

Now imagine that you and all the other people in the field will live your lives there. You must find food, love, and companionship in the darkness. You must keep moving yet somehow avoid the cliff. You're always a little afraid, always uncertain, because the darkness never lifts. And you must find all that you need to live without falling into the abyss.

This is our human condition. People cope in different ways. Some race headlong; some hesitate to make the smallest step. Some cling; some push others away for fear of being dragged past the edge. Some give up; some seek to understand, forever trying to pierce the darkness. Some demand help; some comfort themselves by trying to help others.

Close your eyes and be in the field. Feel how we all struggle there. Feel how we try to move, to take care of ourselves, while always sensing the presence of the cliff. Everyone walks that dark field; everyone is scared; everyone is doing the best they can.

Now think of someone you care for (such as your partner, your child, or your best friend). Keep observing your thoughts and feelings while imagining that person walking around in the dark field. They are hoping not to fall, just like you. Be aware of their fear and struggle. As you do so, the wish may arise in you to help them, to be by their side, and perhaps to comfort them. That is all fine. Keep holding the same image while watching each thought and feeling come and go.

Now think of someone who makes you angry; watch the judgmental thoughts that start to form. Keep observing your thoughts and feelings while imagining that person navigating the dark field. They are hoping not to fall, just like you and the person you care for. Be aware of their fear and struggle. Is it different from yours? Keep holding the image of their fear and struggle while watching each arriving thought and feelings. This may be more difficult to do, because you don't like that person very much and you may keep getting caught up in judgmental thoughts. Still, keep holding the image of their fear and struggle while watching each arriving thought and feeling.

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Notice that your task in this exercise is not to stop your anger or your judgmental thoughts. There's no reason to change what you experience. Your experience is what it is, and it does not harm you. But what you are doing here is something extraordinary that you may have never done before: you are adding compassionate awareness to your experience, so that your anger is balanced with full appreciation of the challenge of being human.

End of Chapter Thoughts

The most important concept to remember from this chapter is that your mind—those good or bad judgments and toxic labels—has a powerful impact on your emotions. But if you observe instead of trying to control your mind, if you watch instead of trying to control your feelings, your anger will ironically stop controlling you. Judgments are a necessary and inescapable part of living. They'll always be there. But you no longer have to be attached to them or believe them. They're ultimately just thoughts to notice and let go.

Points to Ponder: Minds will always do what minds do. You can bring compassion to what your evaluative mind comes up with and learn to ride the wave of anger

Questions to Consider: Do you really have to believe all the judgments that your mind dishes up for you all the time? Are you willing to learn to see judgments as thoughts and not act on what they say?

CHAPTER 6

Using Acceptance to Get Out of the Anger Trap

Many people feel trapped by their anger, unable to retreat or withdraw once their anger feelings are triggered. It's like being launched on autopilot into a tight space where there doesn't seem to be any room for other choices or other ways of responding. In this chapter, you will learn how to make room for other choices.

Although recognition is an important start, it is not sufficient enough to get you out of the anger trap. You will also need to learn a new way of responding to your anger; approaching it—and the feelings underlying it—with acceptance and compassion. Practicing acceptance is an act of kindness toward yourself that allows you to heal and move on with your life.

The Four Steps of Acceptance

By using acceptance, you're going to meet the fire that fuels anger with active compassion and kindness. To get there involves a commitment to learning four interrelated steps: acknowledging your anger; accepting the situation as it is; identifying the hurt, fear, and judgment; and responding with forgiveness and compassion.

Step 1: Acknowledge Your Anger

First you need to learn to acknowledge that you are angry when you're feeling angry. If you don't recognize or acknowledge anger, you'll never find out what is fueling it. And, if you don't know what is fueling your anger, you will have no way to learn new ways of relating to the source of anger within you.

The next time you sense anger coming—when you feel the emotions surging and the evaluative mind in high gear—just acknowledge, “There it is. There is anger. I'm angry and I need to take care of it.” Taking care of your angry feeling does not mean acting on it. You will see exactly how to attend to it in step 4. At this point, it's only important to acknowledge that you are angry—and that you stay with that feeling. Don't try to pull away from it or make it go away.

Step 2: Accept the Situation as it is

Learn to acknowledge that the situation is what it is. Your mind may not accept the reality of whatever is happening; it may tell you that things shouldn't be the way they are. If you keep insisting “But things should be different” or “But people should treat me with

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more respect,” you’ll get stuck waiting for someone else to fix the problem. You need to accept the situation as is and take full responsibility.

To do so, you’ll have to recognize your mind machine at work. You can recognize it more easily if you label what it’s doing. “There is my mind, judging,” “There is my mind, blaming,” “There is my mind, scheming to get even.” Remember, your mind is good at creating anger. It’s important for you to learn not to believe or do what our mind is telling you, or what your body appears to be telling you when you feel like you’re about to explode.

You can learn to not buy into your mind machine by recognizing and acknowledging your thoughts and feelings for what they are. For example, when such thoughts pop up as “This jerk could have paid more attention” or “She really shouldn’t have done that,” you can say to yourself, “I’m having the thought that this jerk could have paid more attention,” and “I’m having the thought that she really shouldn’t have done that.” In regard to feelings you can say, “I’m having the feeling that I’m about to explode” or “I’m having the feeling that [insert whatever you typically feel].”

These admittedly awkward and cumbersome labeling and language habits will help you recognize thoughts as thoughts and feelings as feelings. They help you create some space between yourself and your anger thoughts and feelings so you can start becoming responsible and changing what you can change.

Step 3: Identify the Hurt, Fear, and Judgment

This step is about identifying what is fueling the flames of anger—the hurt and judgment that underlie it—so that you can start the process of letting go of them. It’s particularly important to notice what evaluative statements your mind is coming up with about you, the people in your life, and the current situation.

Look at the experience of Justin, a thirty-five-year-old engineer working for a construction company. Justin made several important discoveries about his struggle with anger.

Justin’s Story

I’ve always had anger, but lately I’ve come to see it as a problem. I get angry about everything, and I fixate on whatever got me angry. It’s the little things that tick me off. It seems like not one day can go by without me being angry at something. I feel like I really hurt the people around me with my blowups. And doing that makes me feel bad about myself. I’ve always disliked angry people. And it seems like everything I don’t like, I am. I don’t want people to avoid me or think of me as being mean because I can’t control my anger. I’ve put so much effort into dealing with my doubts and insecurities about myself. For the last six years, life has felt like a chore. I can’t get through a day without feeling sick or scared. My life feels like a job because I’m always working so hard at it. I’m angry because I don’t know where all these bad feelings come from. I’m angry because I

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don't know how to fix them. I'm also mad because I thought they would be gone by now, given how much I've worked on them. Now I'm scared that I'll always have these feelings about myself. When will I be free?

This sad story may relate to the experiences of many people who struggle with problem anger. However, Justin is ahead of the game in one important respect: he discovered that being angry is very much about him rather than other people. Being angry has to do with his negative feelings about himself and his tendency to beat himself up for having those feelings and not being able to resolve his anger.

The following exercise is about helping you recognize what fuels your anger so you can learn to accept the sources of your anger and start taking better care of them. Be mindful that the quality of pain and hurt can change from anger episode to anger episode, from situation to situation, and from person to person.

This exercise will take a bit longer than the previous ones. Since you can't read and close your eyes at the same time, read through the following script a few times first. Then close your eyes and follow the instructions.

Exercise: The Anger Armor

Begin by getting in a comfortable position in your chair. Sit upright with your feet flat on the floor, your arms and legs uncrossed, and your hands resting in your lap. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Relax. Allow your body to rest without drifting off to sleep.

To get started, re-create a real image of yourself being angry. Think of a recent example when someone pushed your buttons and you got angry. Think of the moment. Notice the anger coming and all the surging bodily changes. Notice the trigger thoughts your evaluative mind comes up with. Enter into the whole image as best as you can. Watch as the feeling grows and notice how quickly it is there in full force. Also notice how quickly you want to do something about the angry feeling, and what it makes you want to do. For example, do you have any impulses to speak out or act on your anger? Be aware of the evaluative thoughts you're having about the event or yourself. Hold those thoughts clearly in your mind, put them into sentences, and watch them as if you were watching them in a mirror. Keep focusing on what you're feeling. Notice how your body and mind harden, consumed by anger. It's everywhere.

Now imagine for a moment that all these harsh, judgmental thoughts, intense anger feelings, and strong impulses are connected. They form one big piece of armor—the kind of heavy armor that knights used to wear to protect their whole body. You're in it. Feel how heavy it is and how hard it is for you to move.

Anger is like wearing heavy armor. The armor masks the pain and vulnerability we all have by simple virtue of being human. Behind the pain, there may be something you're attached to, something you're holding on to. What is it in your case? See whether you can

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identify what you're trying to protect or defend with your anger armor. There might be feelings of guilt, shame, hurt, fear, loss, helplessness, rejection, inadequacy, or unworthiness. Or perhaps it's your reputation, image, the approval of others, rules, beliefs, past mistakes, missed opportunities, or decisions that did not go right. It could also be that you fear losing a person, or a possession, or place, or money. See if you can identify what exactly fuels your anger.

Every time the pain and hurt touch the inside of the armor, they corrode it. Your armor begins to weaken and rust from the inside. And as it rusts, you begin to feel vulnerable. To keep yourself protected and safe, you've been fixing the rusty parts and holes that start to show through by welding new patches of metal onto the old ones, so the armor gets heavier and heavier. It weighs on you, dragging you down physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. You don't seem to be able to do much except clank around in your armor.

Next, imagine yourself stepping out of the armor and putting it right next to you. Imagine yourself standing there just looking at your anger armor. If it helps, try to visualize looking at yourself and the armor in a mirror. You and anyone around you can finally see who you are. You're standing there with your naked emotions and imperfections for everyone to see. You're exposed and vulnerable. See whether you can stay with this feeling.

Notice how much lighter you feel now. Without the armor, you're no longer tied down by all that weigh. You can move more easily and more quickly than before. Your hands, arms, and feet are free. By stepping out of the armor and just observing it, you have gained flexibility and freedom of movement.

The lightness that comes from acceptance won't develop overnight. It's like learning to ride a bike—sometimes you will fall. You will occasionally reach again for the armor and spend your time patching and repairing it, because it makes you feel safe when pain shows up. As you learn acceptance, your need to hide from pain and hurt inside the anger armor will gradually decrease. Accepting yourself and being patient with all your flaws, weaknesses, strengths, and talents involves taking many small steps in that general direction. You're on the right track as long as you keep practicing and stay committed to that path.

Step 4: Respond with Forgiveness and Compassion

Acceptance is about opening up to the pain inside you with kindness, love, patience, and compassion. Because of this, we need to address the pains and hurts—what anger is helping you protect. We're not going after your pain with cheap fixes or more patches. Instead, we're going to expose it for what it is and meet it with acceptance, compassion, and patience.

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Accepting yourself is the most important and often the most difficult step. It's useful to acknowledge having feelings of anger, worthlessness, and failure, but putting yourself down for them only leads to more resentment and self-hatred.

Expert Jeffrey Brantley says that we often don't recognize what our minds do to us. Our evaluative minds provide us with a constant supply of judgments and self-critical statements. It may seem as if you've always had these thoughts. Most of the time you may not even notice them, at least not until the feelings or the comments become exceptionally harsh. Until you pay attention to them, you may not know where they come from. But when you start believing those comments and acting on them, you become your own worst stressor.

If you want to break the vicious cycle of anger and aggression, you must recognize that your mind is at work here. When you catch and observe the mind doing its judging, you've taken the first step toward being kinder to yourself and to others. Recognizing judgments for what they are will help you let go of judging and blaming yourself as you are, with your flaws and all that has happened to you. Remember, you cannot stop your mind from dishing up evaluative statements. What you can learn is to see them for what they are and relate to them in a different way.

Acceptance and Patience

Acceptance and patience are very much related because both are about allowing what is to be there without judging or responding to it. If you experience anger and you accept it, you are patient with it. Patience is the most effective antidote to anger. Look at it this way: If anger is like poison from a venomous snake, patience is the anti-venom that can heal you and keep you alive.

Let's say that someone pushed your buttons and criticized you. You feel the anger rising; your mind and body are quickly getting ready to defend, justify, blame, and attack. What would being patient look like in this situation? Pema Chödrön says it well in the book *Working With Anger*:

Patience has a quality of enormous honesty in it, but it also has a quality of not escalating things, allowing a lot of space for the other person to say what they want to say while you listen. You don't react to what you're feeling, even though inside you are reacting. You let the words go and just be there. When you practice patience, you're not repressing anger, you're just sitting there with it—going cold turkey with the aggression. You will really get to know anger and how it breeds violent words and actions. You will see the whole thing without acting it out...and you will be cultivating enormous courage.

Being patient has nothing to do with suppressing anger. Patience means that you are honest about the fact that you are angry. At the same time, you're doing nothing to feed your angry feelings and thoughts. You don't get involved with them or react to them.

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You don't argue with them. You also don't blame or criticize yourself for having them. You just let go of that whole internal dialogue.

Acceptance and patience are ultimately about choices you make every day. There is no guarantee that acceptance will carry over from one anger episode to the next. It's a choice you need to make again and again. After a while it may seem like almost every moment of your life you're making a choice: to open or close, to harden or soften, to hold on or let go. If the old pattern of closing, hardening, and holding on to resentment has not worked for you, it's to open up, soften, and let go.

Debunking Myths About Acceptance

Many people misunderstand what is meant by acceptance as it relates to anger.

Myth 1: Acceptance Means Condoning Wrongdoing

This is probably the biggest misconception about acceptance. People worry that when they accept, they give approval to what is happening or what has happened to them. Acceptance is not about approving, liking, or condoning what is happening or what has happened in the past. Acceptance is a matter of acknowledging and experiencing what has happened without judging.

Acceptance does not mean you sit still when someone hurts you. If anyone harms you now, you have every right to protect yourself from further harm and do what it takes to be safe. Yet, holding on to old pain about past situations will never resolve those situations. They are in the past, and you are in the present. You cannot change the past, you can only change how you respond to the past in the present.

Myth 2: Acceptance is Weakness

Acceptance takes courage and strength. When compared to the tendency to give in or blow up, acceptance is the harder path to follow. Noticing anger and the full strength of the emotion without acting it out is like riding a tiger. You may notice your mind criticizing and blaming both others and yourself. You may also notice feeling guilty about blaming when you "should" be accepting. It can be agonizing, because you feel bad about being so angry at the same time that you really are angry, and you can't drop it.

Sitting with this energy and edginess without trying to suppress it or make it go away is the opposite of weakness. Staying with the anger and pain without acting on it or because of it is one of the most difficult things you will ever do. This decision is courageous, honest, open, compassionate, and empowering because it is liberating.

Myth 3: Acceptance Means Liking My Experience

It feels uncomfortable to experience anger, fear, insecurity, and hurt. Acceptance is not about liking those feelings. It is a matter of no longer fighting with your experience or denying its reality. It's like dropping the rope in a tug-of-war match. Once you're no longer fighting the anger team, you free up energy to create the life you want to live.

Myth 4: Acceptance is a Feeling

When you accept your experience, you respond differently to it. This is not just a feeling—it's a stance that will completely change your point of view. It's stepping back from your experience to develop a new way of relating with it that's guided by the kindness you have tucked away inside of you.

For example, when you practice the suggested exercises, you observe your anger and other feelings without judging, suppressing, or getting rid of them. It's like looking at your experiences as if they were playing out in a movie. You're not the movie, but the observer of what is happening in the movie. Such skillful observation of life in the present moment, without judgment and with compassion, is an active response—just not in the way we usually think of being active. Acceptance is a new posture toward your experiences where you allow them to simply be as they are.

Myth 5: Acceptance Means Diminished Responsibility

Acceptance is the highest form of responsibility you can take. By acknowledging and allowing your unwanted thoughts and emotions to be there rather than letting them dictate what you do, you actually increase your responsibility or ability to take charge of your life.

Myth 6: Acceptance is a Clever Way to Manage Discomfort

Acceptance cannot prevent the pain of losing a loved one or getting hurt by another person. Feeling this type of pain is normal. No human being can escape such pain. It happens to all of us and is simply a function of living.

However, acceptance can prevent pain from turning into suffering. Pain turns into suffering when you don't accept the pain and hurt, when you don't acknowledge your pain, or when you struggle to get rid of it by lashing out at someone. Just like the old Chinese finger traps you may have played with as a kid, the discomfort increases the more you try to pull away from it.

It is this unnecessary suffering that mindful acceptance seeks to end. By practicing mindful acceptance, you can gradually teach yourself to be less reactive to your evaluative mind and stay with emotional pain, rather than running away or trying to fix it. When the pain of anger shows up and you allow it in without struggle or reaction, you are

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free to act in ways that matter to you. The goal is to develop a place of calm above the storm, to promote health and vitality, and to foster caring kindness toward yourself first and then extend that to others.

End of Chapter Thoughts

By approaching anger thoughts and feelings with compassionate acceptance, you deprive anger of the fuel it needs to burn. This will ultimately lower and cool the flames of anger. The prize for being more accepting, compassionate, and patient is that you become more flexible. Acceptance adds options to your life that are different from the same old things you are used to. It changes you by allowing you to be who you are as you are and by making you aware that you have control over what you do. Whether pain and hurt come or not is outside your control. How you respond to pain and hurt is one area where you have choice. By staying with, and being patient with, your anger and hurt when they come, rather than running away from or attempting to fix them, you become free to focus on the life you want to live.

Points to Ponder: Acceptance is a vital and courageous activity. Patience paired with acceptance can lead you to a new place.

Questions to Consider: Are you willing to accept yourself with all your flaws, weakness, and vulnerabilities. Are you willing to forgive others and yourself so that you can move on and reclaim your life?

CHAPTER 7

Taking Control of Your Life

It is important to understand that you are not your anger. Anger is something you experience periodically. It explodes into your awareness and, after a while, it lets up. You are not the anger. You—the person who experiences and observes your life—are separate from your feelings of anger.

Do not take your anger so seriously. It's just a moment in time, a wave on the sea of existence. You don't have to fight it—and you don't have to join it either. Your task is to disentangle yourself from your anger, not to become your anger. Just let the wave of angry feeling come and go.

Think of it as this: All your feelings and thoughts are projections. You are the movie screen on which they play. While the screen never changes, the images change constantly, and the movie itself changes all the time, too. When an angry thought or feeling shows up on the screen, wait. It will change soon. The screen doesn't fight or resist the projections. It merely provides the space for the movie to play out and waits for it to end.

So if the thoughts, feelings, actions, and your observing self are all quite separate, how come they all seem fused in an angry explosion? The reason is that emotions can drive—very quickly—a patterned set of thoughts and habitual behaviors. And for a few moments, we feel taken over by them. This apparent fusion of feelings, thoughts, actions, and self is an illusion that our mind creates. It's time now to pull each element apart so that your observing self can watch—with mindful acceptance—your anger experience as it really is.

What To Do When You're Angry

Watching the Flags

As soon as something occurs that you didn't expect or want—whether it's an event, in a conversation, or the fact of something not happening—stop what you're doing and start watching the flags. These are the red flags signaling that you're starting to get angry: feeling hot, clenching your jaw, throbbing temples, tight stomach, pointing your finger, making fists, voice getting high or loud, heart pounding, feeling shaky, shortness of breath, and so on.

You watch the flags by looking with mindful awareness at what's happening with your body (muscles, breath, heart, and temperature), your posture, and your voice. Make no attempt to suppress, reduce, or change the sensations. Just ride them out. Stay firmly in

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your self observer position for as long as the problematic conversation or situation continues.

Watching Your Mouth

Once you become aware of feeling angry and you're in a situation with other people, switch your focus to your words—both planned and uttered. Stop and listen to the words in your head before they take shape in your mouth. What is your anger pushing you to say?

If you are in a social situation and it is okay to do so, just be quiet and say nothing. In fact, if it's socially appropriate, leave the situation so you can be alone and stay with your surging anger. It's best not to talk to anyone for as long as you're angry. The reason is that it's virtually impossible not to sound angry when you are angry and feel like you are sitting on a bomb ready to blow. Even saying something like "I love you" may come out sounding more aggressive than kind. Saying nothing or leaving the situation doesn't mean suppressing anger or running away from it. Quite the opposite: You're actually staying with and attending to your anger. That takes more courage and is much harder to do than to speak out in anger.

If you are expected to say something or it's socially inappropriate to leave the situation, say as little as possible. Listen to each sentence as you start to say it. Each spoken word is a choice you have that can promote harmony or discord, prevent wounds or make them, solve problems or deepen them.

Learning to Forgive

Unforgiveness is the root of resentment and bitterness. It's the key ingredient in the feast of anger that transforms emotional pain and hurt into suffering and misery.

Unforgiveness allows anger to grow and your heart to harden, while breeding judgments, criticism, blame, ill will, and a host of other harmful tendencies.

When people fail you in some way, the natural tendency is to feel hurt, used, robbed, or wronged—like they owe you. This is what you get when you don't forgive—an ever-present debt to be repaid, with you stuck as the victim. This is why forgiveness is vital. "Forgiveness" means "for giving," the release of an imagined debt: softening up to the pain and hurt you experience, giving it loving compassion and acceptance, and then letting it go. When you choose forgiveness, you cut out anger at its root and allow peace to settle in.

Practicing Patience

What do you do when the anger is hot and raging deep inside of you? In the heat of the moment, it's sometimes difficult to remember exactly what you're supposed to do. The answer is: Do nothing and practice patience.

- **Say and Do Nothing**- Although it may not feel like it, you do have a choice here. You can do what your mind and body tell you to do. As in the past, everything's pushing you to act: you want to be right and you want to straighten things out. You could do that—and what does your experience tell you about that choice? Or you can make a choice that seems ridiculous and unnatural and choose to act with patience. You stop, shut up, sit still, and wait until the hardness of the stirring, raucous, and searing energy gradually soften and cools. You aren't suppressing here. You're just honest with the fact that you're angry, or hurt, or sad, or lonely, or fearful, or whatever you're experiencing at the moment. And you stay with it, without feeding it or reacting to it.
- **Watch as an Observer**- In the heat of the moment, it is guaranteed that your mind will be in overdrive doing its blaming. But don't get tangled up in what it is doing; don't respond to it. Just watch what it's doing from the compassionate observer perspective, and practice gentle acceptance.
- **Ride the Tiger**- Sitting with the discomfort and doing nothing while you feel like exploding is like bull riding; it's very scary. In that moment, bring attention to the physical experience of anger. Is there pressure? Is there tightness? Where, specifically do you feel it? Does it have a shape? Observing your feelings will help you see them as separate from you.

Here, perhaps for the first time, you can make a choice to sit and stay with the enormous energy that you have for so long acted to push out of view. And you can do so in your daily life. Once you are still, you can bring compassion and curiosity to the energy and pain. Look deeply into your experience without attempting to resolve it, fight it, or suppress it, and without acting on it. Just let it be. As you look, see if you can find the pain. Once you locate the pain, look more deeply behind it for something that you are attached to or that you are holding on to. The attachments will be different for everyone. If what you find seems too big, start with the little attachments that are also there.

Approach this act of patience with softness and curiosity. You do have a choice to hold on here or let go. This quality of patience is very much like the practice of extending forgiveness. As you practice patience, you may find that letting go of your attachments and resentments can bring a sense of enormous relief, relaxation, and connection with a softness and tenderness of your heart. Patience breeds connection with others where anger does the opposite.

Suggestions for Nurturing Comfort

Emotional pain and hurt will show up in many areas of your life. The suggestions below will help you when faced with pain and hurt. Each suggestion builds on skills described in earlier chapters. All take you into your pain and discomfort, and help you develop comfort in your own skin. The payoff is this: Your emotional pain will no longer be fertile soil for your anger. These suggestions will help you choose to open up to and embrace these painful experiences when they show up and learn to bring compassion and forgiveness to them.

Facing Your Fear

Start by making contact with the dangerous or painful thing you are afraid of. What is the nightmare or worst-case scenario? Notice the bodily sensations that accompany these thoughts. Be specific. You may fear being exposed as incompetent or being embarrassed, humiliated, criticized, or devalued. Or perhaps you fear the emotion of fear itself. The problem here is not the emotion, but what you do about it and how that action gets in the way of doing things you value. Adopt an observer perspective and watch your fear-related thoughts, worries, bodily sensations, and images. Don't try to resolve or fix them. Simply watch as you've been practicing.

Facing Guilt

Start by asking yourself this question: "When I started feeling guilty, what is the rule I violated for how I am supposed to be or act?" You may have one rule that emerges again and again (such as, I must never miss an appointment or fail to follow through with what I said I would do); or there may be other rules that get in the way of you moving in the direction of your values. As you contact these rules, notice the hard and rigid quality of each of them, the feeling that breaking them is bad. Also notice how each rule stands in the way of something that's important to you. Now examine the rule for what it is. Does this rule come from your own experience? Is the rule life affirming? Has it worked for you? Is this rule getting in the way of something you cherish and hold dear? Within cultural boundaries, you need to decide whether following the rule is more important than what you value in this situation. Are you willing to let the rule go if that means doing what is important to you? If so, then let go and get going.

Facing Hurt

The active task of facing hurt is to acknowledge it openly, directly, and honestly, without blame or accusation. Focus on what hurts and how that hurt is getting in the way of aspects of your life that are important to you. Focus on communicating the feelings of hurt directly to yourself and others who may have brought these feelings on. For instance, you might say "I feel hurt when you joke about my cooking." Don't look for apologies to resolve your hurt. Simply acknowledge it, bring compassion to it, and let it go with the

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gift of forgiveness. You will need to practice this repeatedly and over time, you will get better at facing your hurt with compassion.

Facing Helplessness

Many things in life occur outside of our control. It's essential that you detect the difference between what you can and can't control. As learned earlier, trying to meet uncontrollable circumstances with control only gets you frustration, anger, and a sense of helplessness. Feelings of helplessness redirect our attention from what we can control to what we cannot control. Acknowledge feeling stuck. Focus on what you can control to have your needs met and to keep you moving forward in directions you care about. These are both things you can control and do something about. Be specific. Write down a plan that keeps you moving forward, even in the face of adversity.

Feelings of Emptiness and Loneliness

Most people will go to great lengths to block feelings of emptiness and loneliness from their awareness. It's important to separate blame from the pain. You need to experience your own loneliness directly without linking it to the faults and failings of others. To encourage the feeling and to develop comfort with it, you could take a brief walk in a quiet place, sit alone for ten minutes with the TV and radio off, or resist the impulse to call someone to fill the void, and instead notice what it's like to postpone contact for ten minutes or so. These little exercises will make you aware of your loneliness and may generate a sense of calm and inner peace. The most important element of these exercises is to notice and embrace what it feels like to be alone with yourself instead of running away from emptiness and loneliness and filling these voids with anger and blame.

End of Chapter Thoughts

As long as one is living, pain and hurt are facts of life. Anger and unforgiveness feed off unresolved pain and hurt. This is why we have tried to show you the pathway into your own pain and hurt, so that you can douse the fuel that drives your anger.

By learning to develop compassion and loving kindness for your experiences, rather than stuffing them or running away from them with anger and aggression, you are exercising control where you truly have it.

Become masterful at bringing compassion to all of your experiences. Then commit to extending compassion, forgiveness, and kindness to others, regardless of how they respond. Forgiveness is the most courageous, honest, and loving gift you can give to yourself. Expect big changes as you work with these exercises, but don't expect changes overnight. Continue to work with the skills and exercises suggested in this book. Stay committed and on the path. The outcome will take care of itself.

What to Do When Anger Becomes a Problem

Points to Ponder: Practicing forgiveness and patience are the most powerful antidotes to anger.

Questions to Consider: Are you willing to choose the path of forgiveness and extend kindness to yourself and others? Are you willing to face your emotional hurt and pain with patience, compassion, and kindness so that you can move on with your life?

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