

*Meanie!*



ANGER MANAGEMENT FOR  
THE MODERN FAMILY

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**PLEASE NOTE:** Use of this guide WILL NOT fulfill any court-ordered obligations for completion of an anger-management course. This guide is for informational purposes only and WILL NOT be accepted by a judge as satisfying a court-ordered requirement.



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# INTRODUCTION

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*Anger Management??*



We live in a crazy world. It's always been crazy, but now, \*looks around expectantly\* - wait, *WE* are the grownups? Between natural disasters, violence, financial stress, [BREAKING]! news, international turmoil, and sandwiches cut into wrong shapes (iykyk), it gets hectic.

We are all just huddled up in our little part of the world trying to create some sort of haven for ourselves and for our loved ones where we can be safe, healthy, and happy. Yet, admittedly (and frustratingly), those dearest to us, those who bring us such joy and fulfillment, those whom we would go to any lengths to protect, are also often the very sources of our anxiety, stress, and anger.

Our modern lives, with all the technological advances and tools, are stressful. We often feel overwhelmed, scared, confused, and ill prepared to survive, let alone to thrive, in the many roles that we are expected to fill. With today's world of interconnectedness and constant streaming of information, it's also hard to separate our personal lives from the larger issues going on around the world.

If you're noticing that you've been having a harder time maintaining your cool lately, then this guide is for you: you who are tasked with the impossible which you are expected to deliver every single day.

It is meant to be a concise and practical guide with easy to implement strategies that you can try today to deal with ***the frustration, irritation, anger, and other strong emotions*** that inevitably come up for *all of us* as we make our way through this world.

This guide takes the oxygen mask approach to working with anger: put your mask on first! If you practice the strategies outlined in this guide, it has the capacity to transform your relationships with your family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and all the people who make up your world, but most importantly: with yourself. We do not have control over what happens in the world, but we can create a peaceful haven within ourselves that radiates out to our family and those around us. With a more peaceful inside we are much better equipped to deal with all that craziness outside.

SPOILER: Nowhere in this guide will I ever tell you not to FEEL angry! After all, anger is part of the range of our human emotions. Problems start to creep in because throughout our entire lives of getting angry, most of us were never taught how to express and manage our anger healthily. We do not understand the nature of anger and all its properties. We are not equipped to feel anger without reacting automatically in habitual patterns that sometimes lead to consequences worse than the original trigger that caused us to get angry in the first place.

But, fortunately, that is all about to change...

A few words about this guide:

First, it's important to emphasize that ***this guide is not therapy nor is it a replacement for therapy with a qualified, licensed therapist.*** Rather, this guide is an educational resource allowing you to learn some important and useful skills that you can use in your day-to-day life, just like any other set of skills you might learn.

There are several ways you can go through this guide: You can go through each section slowly, doing one or a few lessons at a time and spending time learning and practicing the skills from each section before moving on to the next. Alternatively, you can read through everything quickly and then go back over particular sections in more detail. Whatever would work best for you to allow you to earnestly internalize the strategies that you will be learning and to implement them into your life.

Most importantly, the intended purpose of this guide is for you to use it to make a genuine, marked, positive change in your day-to-day life. As you go through it, ask yourself how you are going to implement the things you are learning here and challenge yourself to put those new concepts, tools, and strategies to use in your daily life.

# CHAPTER ONE:

Why We need this guide



Anger management is actually one of my very favorite topics in behavioral health. Why is that? Why do you and I, regular everyday folk, need to talk about anger management? Why do we need a guide on anger management? Let's take a minute to reflect on these questions because having a deeper understanding of these WHYS will help us in building motivation to stick with this guide and more importantly to actively use it in our lives.

You may think that you have never studied anger management before. But if you reflect on this for some time, you will realize that you have been learning all about anger management your entire life! Every time your caretaker(s) yelled when something angered them; every time your caretaker(s) or someone you loved shut down or closed off from you when they felt frustrated; every time someone lashed out verbally or physically at you or someone/something else when they felt intense anger; every time someone hurt you or someone else when they mistook their own pain for righteous anger; every time little infractions brought down a world of stress and emotional pain on you by someone in your life - in each of these incidents and in many many more throughout the course of your life you have been learning all about how to manage your anger.



The problem, unfortunately, is that you were far more likely to learn ineffective and damaging anger management techniques than you were to learn healthy and effective ways of responding to frustrating and angering situations.

Further down in this section, you will have an opportunity to reflect in more detail on how the anger management techniques you learned directly and indirectly from your caretakers and others in your life have heavily influenced the very ways in which you manage anger, frustrations, and other strong emotions today. And you will also be prompted to identify the ways in which those techniques are not bringing you the effects and outcomes you'd like.

Anger is an emotion that every human is capable of experiencing and yet learning how to work with or manage anger is rarely directly taught to us. Instead, we are left to learn how to manage our anger through the modeling shown to us by those around us, who most likely did not learn how to do this effectively themselves. Sadly, when we don't have the tools and skills to manage anger, frustration, or rage in productive ways, we will likely experience increased levels of shame, guilt, stress, conflict, and dissatisfaction in our lives.

In my work over the years, I have built up an expertise in helping people manage their anger, stress, anxiety, and other difficult emotions. One may think that having expertise in anger management means that I never feel angry! In fact, the exact opposite is true (which is why I love this topic so much).

It is my own struggle with anger and stress management that I believe puts me in the position to be able to make this topic so relevant and accessible to others. I regularly have to utilize these same tools and concepts in my own life when I get angry that I teach my clients to implement. I know that the struggle is real. I live it.

Yes, sometimes I feel very angry. What I have learned to do is use the tools presented in this guide to much more effectively manage my anger; to learn valuable lessons about myself and the world through my anger; to lessen the intensity, length, and duration of my anger; and most importantly to vastly decrease the devastating effects that toxic anger expression was having on myself, my family, and my life.

I work daily to try to implement realistic and healthy strategies into my life and to teach my kids those same strategies as well so that they have the tools now and as they get older to effectively deal with their own frustrations, disappointments, and anger. I believe that through considering and implementing the approaches outlined in this guide, you and your family will be able to get these benefits too.

There are many things out there in the world today that we may feel justify our anger - whether in our home lives, work lives, community, political arena, on the world stage, or on social media.

However, if you're reading this guide, you may have found yourself getting angry too frequently, too intensely, and are having too much difficulty letting your anger go. You may have found that you are having difficulty expressing your anger without saying or doing things that you later regret. You may have found that you are having difficulty channeling your anger into constructive action. You may have found that your behaviors under the influence of anger are causing as much or more damage than good. You may be experiencing moments when you feel out of control when it comes to your anger.

***These experiences are not at all uncommon, yet they do not have to continue to be your norm.***

I've heard people say that anger is a motivating force and that with anger we can work towards changing what it is that we don't want to accept. Yes, anger is a very powerful force indeed. Yet we have to be careful about HOW we use it. We have to get a better understanding of it first, before we can master it and put it to work towards our own goals. If we don't have a good understanding of anger, and specifically the unique ways in which anger builds and manifests within ourselves, it will actually sap our energy and use it for its own ends. It can wreak havoc in our lives and in our relationships. In this guide, we will work towards acquiring a deeper understanding of anger and its qualities.

We will suss out its weak spots and vulnerabilities. We will learn how to use our strengths and learn skills that can take advantage of anger's vulnerabilities. In this way, we can gain mastery over our anger and remain in control of our actions and choices.

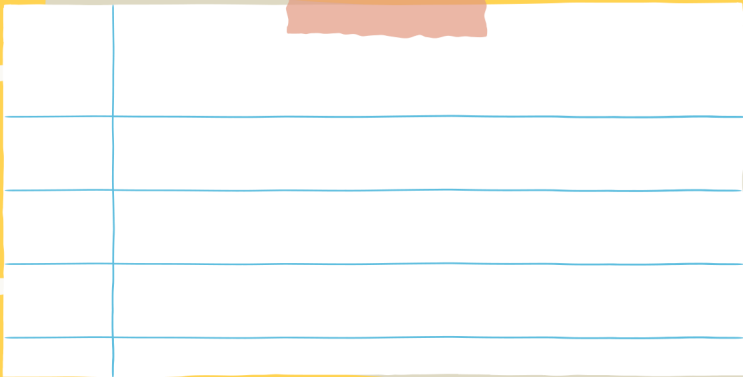
Through completion of this guide, I hope readers begin a life-long journey of identifying, managing, and expressing anger and other difficult emotions in healthy, productive, and effective ways. If any of this resonates with you as something that could be useful in your life, then now is the time to assert to yourself a commitment to read this guide in full and to implement what you learn in the chapters ahead.

Before we continue with our reading, here are a few worksheets to help you reflect on how anger plays a role in your life. You can:

- Print out the worksheets and fill them out by hand
- Answer the prompts on a separate sheet of paper or on a device of your choosing
- Simply reflect on/contemplate the answers to the given prompts

# How Anger Management was Modeled to Me

When you were a young child, who do you remember in your life that seemed to get angry a lot? Bring this person to mind. Try to see them in your mind's eye. As you try to remember particular times when they demonstrated anger, what can you notice about how they expressed themselves when they felt angry, frustrated, agitated, or annoyed? What did they look like? What did they sound like? What were they doing with their body? What were the particular cues, clues, and behaviors that let you know that they were angry? Reflect on this for a few minutes.



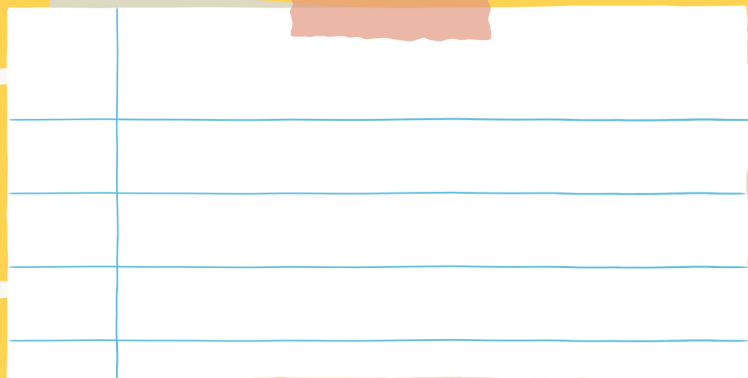

# What did people in your childhood home do out of anger?

- Suppressed their anger
- Shut down/distanced/isolated
- Stormed out/didn't listen
- Yelled
- Interrogated
- Twisted around others' words
- Shamed/guilted
- Cursed/insulted
- Blamed/vilified/scapegoated
- Bullied/threatened
- Broke things
- Hit

# How I Manage and Express Anger Now

Now, bring to mind your own current habits of anger expression.

Try to remember particular incidents or events when you expressed your anger or frustration in a way that you later regretted. What do you think you looked like? What do you think you sounded like? What were you doing with your body? What were the particular cues, clues, and behaviors that let others know that you were angry? What was the impact of these behaviors on the people around you? Take a few minutes to reflect on this.



A graphic of a piece of lined paper with a red tab, set against a yellow background. The paper has a vertical line on the left side and four horizontal lines, creating five rows. The red tab is at the top center. The paper is slightly offset to the right, showing a grey shadow on the left and bottom edges.



Now as an adult, when I  
feel mad, I

- Suppress my anger
- Shut down/distance/isolate
- Storm out/don't listen
- Yell
- Interrogate
- Twist around others' words
- Shame/guilt
- Curse/insult
- Blame/vilify/scapegoat
- Bully
- Threaten
- Break things
- Hit

# How I Would Like Things to Be <sup>20</sup>

How would you like things to be in your home? Visualize what it would lit be like for you and for your family to be able to express your feelings in respectful, healthy, and productive ways? What would that look like for you? What would be your family members' experience? Try to create a vivid scene in your mind that depicts how you would like things to be in this area. Don't worry if it seems impossible to attain at the moment or you're not sure how to make it happen. Before we do anything, it helps to be able to imagine. Let your imagination go. What do you see?

When I feel angry, I would like to be able to:

1.

2.

3.

*Who in your life would benefit from you making changes to how you express anger and frustration?*

Write in their names here:

1.

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2.

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3.

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4.

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5.

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6.

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# CHAPTER TWO:

*Looking Behind the Curtain*



***It's ok to feel angry.*** This may seem like an obvious statement. However, many of us worsen an already escalating conflict by not having accepted this important statement.

At times, I struggle with this concept myself. I tell myself *hey, you're a therapist, you're not supposed to get angry!*

Have you ever felt ashamed, embarrassed, annoyed, discouraged, saddened, disappointed, betrayed, or angry at yourself for feeling angry? Have you ever tried to suppress, shove down, hide, or push away your anger because you felt that you shouldn't feel angry, that you don't have the right to feel angry, or that you should know better than to feel angry? Have you avoided or pushed down your anger because you were afraid of what you might do under its influence?

As much as we want to see ourselves calm and rational, able to resolve conflict peacefully and with grace, to laugh instead of getting upset or to have the perfectly controlled and confident comeback in any situation, the reality is that anger is messy and it is a part of life. Sticking adamantly to a rigid identity of yourself as someone who should not or cannot get angry only serves to heighten the destructive effect with which anger shows itself - and it will show itself eventually!

On the other hand, some of us may identify quite closely with our anger. We may see our anger as a part of our identity. We may believe that how we express our anger is an inextricable part of our personality - completely unchangeable - and a part of us may not *want* to change it. We may have come to believe, through past experience, that expressing anger is the only acceptable and valid way for us to engage with the world around us. We may have given up on our capacity to feel and express other emotions and may be missing an opportunity to experience a healthy relationship with them.

Depending on a variety of factors, we may feel pressure from those around us (or put pressure on ourselves) to express our anger in certain ways or not to express it at all. However, how we express our anger, or if we express it at all, is a completely different thing than FEELING our anger. We may have gotten so used to not expressing our anger and other emotions outwardly or to only expressing anger in lieu of other emotions, that in all those years of practice we have also gotten expertly good at hiding our own feelings from ourselves. If this is the case, we have to start practicing not hiding our feelings from ourselves. Remember again, it is ok to FEEL angry and it is ok to FEEL other emotions.

Not accepting our anger when it arises can actually increase the strength of its force, like an exploding pressure cooker. Just like a pricey pressure cooker, we may think we are designed to handle not feeling anything, that we can withstand a long-term practice of ignoring our feelings or pushing them away. Unfortunately, I have met with too many clients who practiced that strategy to ill effect. There comes a time when even the strongest pressure cooker is stretched beyond its limits. And when it explodes, it is not pretty. I have had clients who describe themselves as calm 99% of the time, but they were court-ordered to be in my anger management group after that very destructive 1% eventually rolled around.

Anger, like all emotions, is fighting to be heard, seen, and experienced. Rejecting the anger because you don't want to feel it is like trying to stop the rain because you don't want to get wet or like trying to stop oncoming traffic with your hands - IMPOSSIBLE. Rejecting our anger by ignoring it, pushing it away, or shoving it down usually sets us up for failure because in the moment, as strong anger is arising, it's as impossible to stop it as it is to stop a speeding truck with our bare hands. If we do somehow manage to ignore our anger or push it away, we can be sure it will pop up again at some point in the future.

Stop here for a moment and reflect on this. When was a time when you did not ALLOW yourself to FEEL angry? What are the ways in which you have pushed away, hid, ignored, or judged your anger?

When anger is welling up inside of us, rushing to get out, it is with nearly unstoppable force. But interestingly, this force is not what actually hurts us or others. When we examine anger and other strong emotions closely, what we will likely realize is that the damage done is not by the anger or other emotions themselves, but rather by the force we use to try to push away or deflect them from us. We will get into much more detail about this in further chapters, but for now, let's begin by recognizing that when the strong force of anger is triggered within us, at that point, anything we say and do serves only one purpose: TO GET RID OF THAT ANGER.

We can liken this experience to picking up a boiling hot pot and then having to put it down immediately because it is way too hot. If I pick up a super hot pot with my bare hands, realizing it's hot, I will try to put it down as quickly as possible. There is no time to think it through, I am acting purely out of instinct and reflexes. If necessary, I will even hurl the pot away from me abruptly and strongly, spilling the boiling contents onto whoever may be standing in the way and even onto myself.



I don't necessarily mean to hurt them or me, but I gotta do what I gotta do to not be holding that hot pot any longer; at that moment, getting rid of it is my only prerogative. I would be doing it reflexively, without rational thought. 1. Hot pot. 2. Ouch 3. Throw. The boiling hot pot is a great metaphor for our anger. The anger hurts so much and is so uncomfortable that we will do whatever it takes to get rid of it in that moment, even if it means hurting others or ourselves in the process.

What does it feel like when we accept the statement "it's ok to feel angry."? When we allow ourselves to feel angry? It doesn't feel good. In fact, it sucks! Think about holding that hot pot. Ouch.

But what if we were able to learn some ways to cool down that pot just enough so that we do not need to get rid of it so impulsively and quickly? What if we are able to learn to use a pot holder to hold the pot so that we do not need to hurl the pot away from us so quickly. With such new approaches and skills, we can learn to slowly and carefully put the pot down without causing any further damage to ourselves or anyone else. There may still be a pot of boiling hot water - that feeling of anger - but we don't have to add further damage and suffering to the situation, ourselves, or our loved ones through our own *hasty and unhealthy responses* to it.

Just like holding that hot pot, feeling angry *IS* uncomfortable, it hurts, it feels icky. Unless and until we learn new skills and strategies to work with our anger, when we feel angry we want to immediately make it stop. We will do anything and everything to make that icky uncomfortable feeling go away as fast as possible. This is why we may try to ignore it or push it away. If we are able to do so, we don't have that uncomfortable feeling - that hot pot in our hands. But if we can't ignore it or push it away, we usually find someone else to hand it to, someone else who will take our painful hot pot off our hands.

We will hurt the people we love most in the world, including ourselves, just to make that feeling go away even for a second. Think about how powerful that is. Think about things you have said or done that you later regretted, simply to get rid of that icky uncomfortable feeling of anger. How would that situation have played out differently had you allowed yourself to stay with that icky angry feeling without trying to get rid of it so quickly?

Reflect on who in your life tends to get this metaphorical pot of boiling hot water thrown on them when you are impulsively throwing it to get rid of your uncomfortable feeling of anger?

What if, instead, you could develop the ability to FEEL angry without having to get rid of it at all costs through destructive and self-destructive behaviors?

Here's something to try next time you feel yourself getting angry. Rather than berating yourself for feeling angry, *work towards accepting your anger as a permissible feeling*. This will take practice because you may be so used to rejecting anger. You may have received many messages throughout your life in different ways that anger is not permissible for you for whatever reason. When you feel anger arising, remind yourself that *it's ok, natural, normal, acceptable, reasonable, and allowed for you to feel angry*. Remind yourself that pushing away your anger may only make it stronger. Give yourself permission to feel the *full range of human emotions, including this anger*. Practice this every time you feel angry.

Earlier in the guide, I mentioned that anger has vulnerabilities. One of those vulnerabilities is that anger doesn't actually have the power or capability to do damage, hurt others, or even hurt us in ANY way. It looms large and scary and talks a big game, but at the end of the day, it is actually perfectly powerless to DO anything.

The damage done is by us misunderstanding anger's actual impotence, assigning it more power than it actually has, and then trying to push it away.

Think about the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Not knowing him, not seeing him, not understanding his role and power, the people of Oz assigned him great power. Through their misunderstanding of his abilities, he was able to influence and impact their behavior. Once Dorothy and her friends looked behind the curtain and understood who he is, he no longer had the same power over them. In this guide we are looking behind the curtain, analyzing our anger so that we can regain our strength and no longer give it the same power it has over us today. Similarly, think about a scary movie you watched when you were a child. It had the power to truly terrify you, maybe you even refused to go to sleep with the light off for a while. But once you realized that it was only a movie, it no longer had the same power over you.

*It is supremely powerful until it is utterly powerless.*

We can get there with our anger.

## Managing Anger (Vs. Controlling It)

I don't like to use the term "controlling anger," as in "I just have to learn how to control my anger!" To control something takes constant and unrelenting effort and tension. And there's a big risk that whatever it is we are trying to control will eventually rebel and get out from under us, the fear of which *causes even more tension and struggle*. Think about controlling a large wild animal. Not only does it take a lot of work, but eventually, there's a good chance that animal is going to rise up and get you at some point.

Using the term "manage" makes more sense to me because managing something or someone implies that there's more of a give and take, less of a power struggle, and that at some point, given some good managerial skills, it becomes easier and easier to manage whatever or whomever we are managing.

Unfortunately, when we don't effectively manage our anger, our anger can and will quickly take control of *us*. When anger is in control, we may lose all decision-making power. In the moment, when the anger is rushing out, we may do a host of hurtful and damaging actions under its control and in trying to push it away.

Not fully realizing that anger is the one in control, we may sometimes feel quite powerful when we're angry because we wrongfully identify with the anger and mistake its power for our own power. *Have you ever felt strong, powerful, and in command when you were angry?* We may feel invincible as we ride the powerful force of our anger. However, once the anger has subsided, we will be hit with the stark realization that it was *not us at all* in the driver's seat of our mind. We mistook our anger for our own personal power and were actually under *ITS* command. We were certainly along for the ride, and it may have been a thrilling ride, but we were not the one driving the car. How do we know, how can we tell that it was the anger driving and not us?

We look back at the swath of destruction that has been left. We get real honest with ourselves about the impact of what we said and what we did on those around us. We truly listen to our loved ones' experiences during our thrill ride, when we may have felt on top of the world, but they felt small, unheard, belittled, scared, or a host of other powerless emotions when our anger was busy sucking all the power out of the room. We regret how we acted and what we said. We have hurt those we love or ourselves. That is the anger.

The sneaky nature of our anger is that it deceives us into thinking that our opponent is out there and must be taken down, even if that opponent is our sweetie angel pumpkin pie who is now crying in front of us. Must we run down a few foes out there on the road, even the ones we love most in the world, in order to get back into the driver's seat of our mind?

Actually, it is really our anger itself that we must deal with directly, otherwise, our flailing actions from the passenger seat create a whirlwind of disasters that we will only need to clean up later -*uh oh, what did I say to me sweetie angel pumpkin pie when they looked more like my archnemesis and less like my kid/partner/parent/sibling/friend?*

Reflect on the last mess you had to clean up after anger took control of the wheel? What did you have to do to “make” up for your actions under anger's control?

Remember the first sentence of this chapter: It's ok to feel angry! When we find ourselves in the midst of an angering situation and ***we truly give ourselves permission to FEEL angry***, we are making a choice to take the ***first step*** towards remaining in the driver's seat and not letting anger take the wheel.

Good job, us! Ok, now what do we do next?

# CHAPTER THREE:

*Working with Our Difficult Emotions*





A major part of managing our anger so that we can regain control of ourselves is to get a better understanding of it. Anger is almost always an umbrella for a host of other underlying emotions. Commonly, fear, hurt, pain, rejection, abandonment, resentment, and insecurity bubble up to the surface as anger.

To effectively manage our anger, we must understand what emotions are underlying our anger. In managing our anger, just as when managing a team of people, it helps to understand who exactly is on the team, what their intentions are, what their role is, and other important information about them, otherwise we go into the process blind.

How can we tell what emotions are hiding underneath our anger? As with all the strategies suggested in this book, this will take some practice. Anger is loud, hot, and dominating, often overwhelming and covering the emotions below the surface.

But with practice, we can dig down beneath the surface and notice the underlying emotions. We can begin simply with the realization that beneath our anger lie other strong emotions.

Knowing this, we can begin to explore what they may be. A simple strategy for identifying emotions is to pause and reflect within ourselves when we feel the anger rising up.

We can ask ourselves “what am I really feeling right now?” Look out for physical sensations in your body that can give you clues to what you are feeling. Pay special attention to the thoughts running through your mind at the moment, they can also give you clues about what emotions may be at play.

Reflect on patterns and themes that seem to emerge over and over again when you feel angry. Can they be traced back to particular memories or experiences that you have had when you felt embarrassed, ashamed, abandoned, ridiculed, incompetent, unneeded, unseen, etc.?

Often such emotional themes replay themselves over and over again in different situations and contexts in our lives.

The strong emotions that are triggered during such incidents often have little to do with the present moment and much more to do with past hurts that are being rubbed afresh, triggering that icky uncomfortable anger. Instead of ignoring these patterns of emotion, look more deeply into them.

What insights can you glean about your anger through deeper reflection about past hurts and difficult emotions?

Look for patterns of insecurity. Is there something you tend to be insecure about? When that insecurity is bothered, do you tend to get angry at whoever or whatever is involved in that situation?

Look for hidden or overt fears? Fear is a major player when it comes to anger. Often when we are angry, we can trace the anger down to a fear - fear of injury, death, betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, aging, insignificance... What are you deeply afraid of?

Next time you feel angry, take a moment to reflect more deeply on the emotions and patterns of emotions at play within you. Challenge yourself to take the focus away from the person or situation that angered you and spend your energy instead on getting a better understanding of your anger and the underlying emotions. If a deeply held fear has been triggered, ask yourself if there is truly a legitimate reason to be afraid In THIS moment. Stare your fear in the face and determine whether you actually have something to fear right now, or is it just the fear talking?

If an insecurity is triggered, ask yourself if your insecurity reflects an objective truth about yourself or is there more to the story below the surface of your immediate awareness. Remind yourself of your inherent value and of the good qualities you do have. Battle the fear and the insecurity, not your external “enemy.”

As we saw in the last chapter, vanquishing perceived enemies is a never ending project. There will always be more stupid drivers, more arrogant coworkers, more evil politicians, more shoes not put on little feet. If we waste our energy focusing only on how to solve and avenge all of these external perpetrators we will always be reacting, we will always be a step behind. Instead, though it is so hard to do, if we challenge ourselves to turn the focus on our own mind and our own anger, through greater and greater understanding of our own selves, we are creating a sustainable plan of attack of the internal foe: our anger and other destructive emotions, who rob us of our capacity to make conscious choices about how to respond to the outside world.

Practicing to do this does not mean we do not take action to address problems and issues in our life, community, or the world.

To the contrary, practicing this approach will allow us to find a healthier balance between doing and being: when I have more peacefulness inwardly, I will likely be a more effective doer outwardly.

Reflexively, we spend most of our lives focused on what's going on outside of us. However, this habit often comes at the expense of taking the time to observe the internal experience that is happening inside of us while we are in the midst of whatever external events are happening.

Unfortunately, this habit keeps us from understanding ourselves in useful ways. Without this understanding, it's more difficult to navigate the difficult situations that we encounter in our day-to-day lives.

Once you gain a deeper understanding of yourself and discover some repeating connections between your anger and your insecurities, fears, and other emotions, a pathway opens up. Are you willing to take this pathway - to use the deeper understanding about yourself that you are getting through your self-reflection - to make a change in your behavior when someone makes you mad?

Knowing that a pattern of underlying emotions, insecurities, and fears are bubbling to the surface as anger and that all of these phenomena are within me, can I use that wisdom to not lash out at you, to deal with annoyances and frustrations differently than I have before, given this additional information that I have about myself?

Ultimately, no one can do the work of navigating the waters of our emotions for us, it is a process we have to do for ourselves. For some of us, it comes more naturally. To others of us, it can also be overwhelming or scary. If becoming more consciously aware of and confronting your fears and insecurities scares you, that's ok. Take it step by step and give yourself permission to confront them even though it feels scary. Simply being willing to do this is the most important step in slowly, over time, working through those fears and insecurities and experiencing a greater sense of security, healthy confidence, and peace within yourself.

Depending on your present level of comfort with such endeavors, you may also consider asking the help of someone else such as a therapist, counselor, religious figure, relative, or friend. Doing the work of investigating our inner emotional work can be extremely gratifying and freeing.

To help you get started, below are a couple of worksheets you can use to identify some of the emotions you feel just under your anger. Take a few minutes with them. Once we get more practiced in being able to tune into our emotions and identify them, we can begin to work with them more effectively. We will then learn some strategies for working with our difficult emotions in the coming chapters.

# What am I Really Feeling

Think about a time this week when you got angry. What feelings were just underneath the anger?

- Scared
- embarrassed
- Ignored
- Rejected
- Incompetent
- Used
- Unwanted
- Betrayed
- Cheated
- Unappreciated
- Undervalued
- Uncared for
- Depleted
- Unheard
- Unaccepted
- Invalidated
-



# CHEAT SHEET

Use this handy cheat sheet to identify some of the common situations that tend to make you angry; Then identify some of the emotions that might lie just beneath your anger (see examples below).

When \_\_\_\_\_ does this:

\_\_\_\_\_,'

I get angry because I feel:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

When Jordan does this:

44

Whines and carries on at the store,

I get angry because I feel:

Embarrassed

Incompetent

Unheard

.....

When Ariel does this:

Leaves dirty laundry on the floor,

I get angry because I feel:

Unappreciated

Uncared for

Depleted

.....

When Kai does this:

Stays out with friends instead of  
coming home for dinner,

I get angry because I feel:

Scared

Rejected

Unwanted

## Spheres of Influence

I hope it's becoming clear so far, even in these first few chapters, that this guide is about giving you the tools and skills you need to shift the focus to your internal experience rather than solely focusing externally during angering situations. So far, we have begun to look at emotions and we will continue to look at them more closely and learn some tools for working with them. We will also take a look at other aspects of our internal landscape, such as our thoughts and bodily sensations.

But before we continue, we are going to pause here to learn about something that can further motivate us to shift our focus inward. We need all the motivation we can get because typically in an angering situation, looking inward is the last thing we want to do, after all, the thing that “made” me angry is out there, not in here!

The framework introduced below is popularly known as the *Three Spheres of Influence* and we're going to see how this framework can help us become more effective managers of our anger and other difficult emotions.

Using once again our analogy of managing our anger (versus controlling it), it's important to recognize that there are:

- some aspects of an angering situation that we have a pretty good chance of doing something about - that we can change in a way that we want to change
- some aspects of an angering situation that we may be able to influence to some degree
- some aspects of an angering situation that are absolutely not available to us to have any real impact on at all

Why is this important? Well, if we try to change something that is not available to us to change or impact in any way, we would be exhausting ourselves trying to change it without getting anything back for our efforts. By the same token, once we waste our energy trying to change something that cannot be changed, we might be too exhausted and depleted to do something about the things that can actually be changed for the better. Not a very effective managerial strategy.

So then how can we determine what can be changed for the better and therefore is worthy of our time and energy and what cannot be changed by us and is better left alone?

We can look to the spheres of influence to help us.

Using this framework, we can acknowledge that most things are, lamentably so, outside of our sphere of control. Sad face. This is a difficult statement to come to terms with but one that is difficult to dispute. The weather, traffic, the impossibly fast rate at which kids outgrow their pants (*I just bought you those last month!*) are likely more obvious as being outside of our sphere of control.

It may be harder to accept, however, that other peoples' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are also outside of our sphere of control. How can we determine this? Well, can you reach into your kids, spouse's, or co-worker's mind and MAKE them feel, think, or do something? Even if you really *really REALLY* want to change how they feel, think, or act and even if you act really, *really, REALLY* kindly or harshly or any other way, would you be able to guarantee that how they feel, think, or act will be exactly in line with how you want them to feel, think, or act? Because everything in this sphere is outside of our control, we would be wise to try not to spend our energy here. Doing so would exhaust and deplete our energy and at the end of our effort, we will have nothing to show for our hard work

If you can't control or *definitively* change how someone feels, thinks, or acts, can you at least influence them a little bit? The answer is... MAYBE.

It is *possible* that through your actions, you may have some influence, some impact on others. But it's crucial to accept that the nature of that impact or influence and specifically how that impact shakes out cannot be known to you. It's ok to spend some energy here since we may be able to get something out of it, but we don't want to spend too much time or energy on influencing those around us to change simply because we just don't have any *guarantees* about how this will happen or if it will happen at all.

We can put effort towards practicing whatever approaches and modalities we think might have an impact and they *MAY* indeed have some impact to elicit the changed behavior from those around us that we want to see. However, we don't want to spend too much time invested in any specific outcome within this sphere, as it is anything but guaranteed one way or another.

So where should we spend the majority of our energy? We should spend it where it has the best chance of getting us the outcomes that we are looking for. And, surprise, surprise, we get the biggest bang for our buck spending our time and energy on the least sexy option of all... working within ourselves.

While it's true that we have no guarantees here either, working with our own feelings, thoughts, and actions gives us the greatest chance of change. Ultimately, the only area where we can exert agency is in working with our internal landscape - what's happening inside of us during an angering situation, including working with our emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations. This is where we want to spend most of our energy and time during and after an angering situation.

As stated above, this is very difficult for us because we are so used to focusing our time, energy, and awareness on much sexier and more alluring things - what other people are feeling, thinking, and doing. But our efforts would be most highly rewarded if we were able to sustain our time, energy, and awareness within our sphere of control - working with what's happening inside of me.

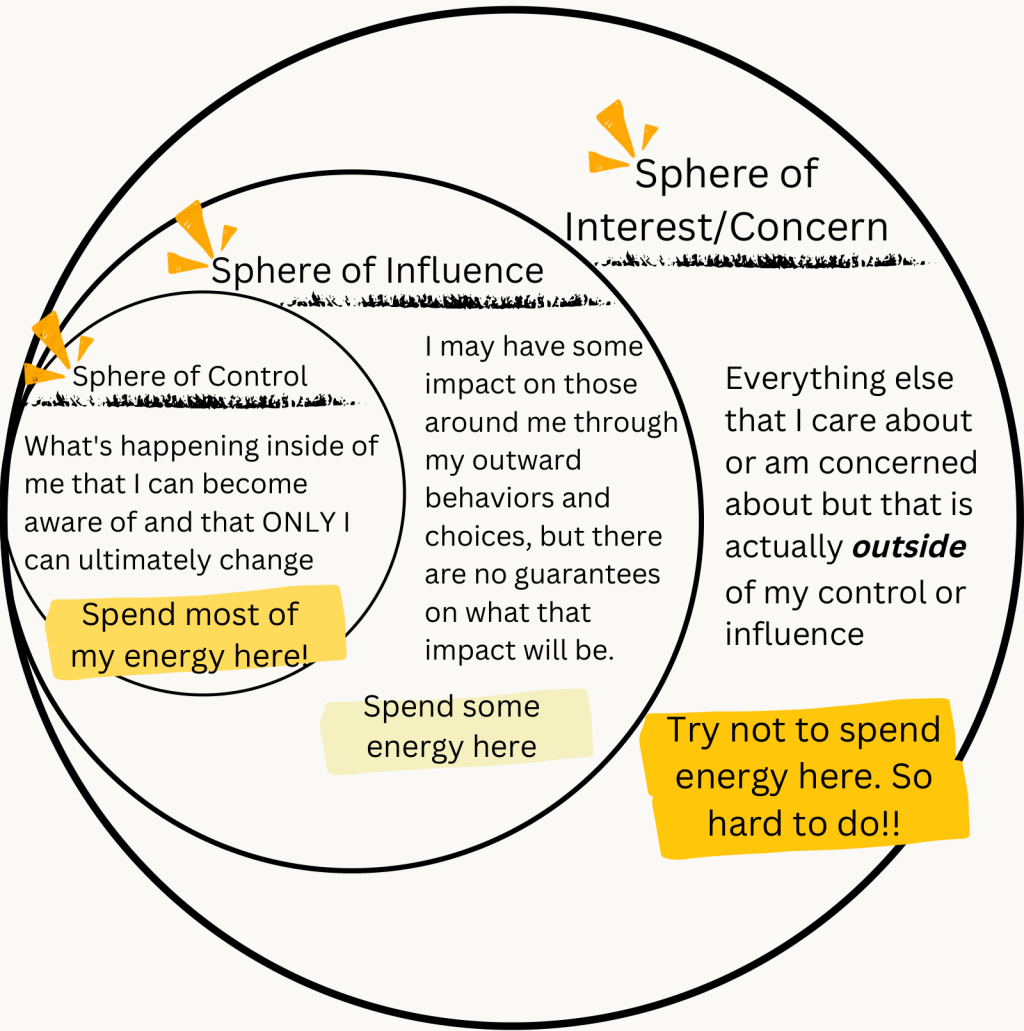
How would your next conflict, argument, or fight go differently if you were able to implement the framework of the three spheres? How much energy could you free up not trying to "fix" others' emotions, recognizing that how they feel is outside your sphere of control and that you cannot reach into their mind and change it through sheer will?

How much of that energy could you redirect towards practicing the tools in this guide so that you are more aware of the feelings, insecurities, and fears that may be coming up for you in the moment?

How might doing this impact your family member and their ability to regulate their strong emotions in the moment as well? Think about some real-life examples and replay them in your mind using this approach. How might have things gone differently? Take some time to reflect on this.

Next time you see a conflict beginning to arise in the home, try to implement the logic of the three spheres. Can you spend most of your energy tuning into what's happening inside of you? Can you spend some energy practicing to influence the interaction between you and your family members but without being attached to specific outcomes which cannot be guaranteed? Can you refrain from spending energy trying to impact what you ultimately have no control over?





Sphere of Interest/Concern

Everything else that I care about or am concerned about but that is actually **outside** of my control or influence

Try not to spend energy here. So hard to do!!

Sphere of Influence

I may have some impact on those around me through my outward behaviors and choices, but there are no guarantees on what that impact will be.

Spend some energy here

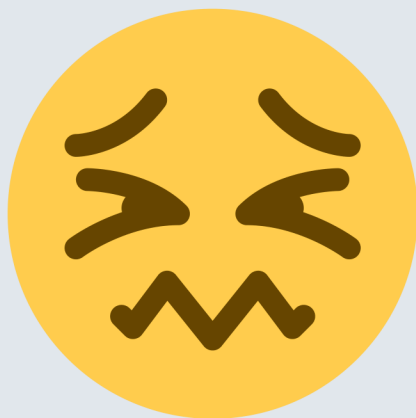
Sphere of Control

What's happening inside of me that I can become aware of and that **ONLY** I can ultimately change

Spend most of my energy here!

# CHAPTER FOUR:

Characteristics of Anger  
(and all emotions)



Now that we are strengthening our motivation for tuning inward as well as building an understanding of why it can be an effective strategy, we will continue with a closer exploration of emotions. There are three characteristics of anger and all emotions, that when understood, can help us work with and manage them more effectively:

1. Emotions are powerful
2. Emotions are temporary
3. Emotions do not reflect an objective truth

**1. Emotions are powerful.** I mentioned earlier that anger doesn't actually have power to DO anything on its own. HOWEVER, until we have a firmer grasp of this in daily practice, it absolutely does SEEM to have a lot of power in influencing our behaviors, attitudes, and even thoughts and that seeming power is plenty enough to influence us to do some major damage in our lives. That scary movie or the Wizard of Oz do maintain their power as long as we continue to assign that power to them! It is crucially important to acknowledge our emotions' apparent power, however fleeting it may be, otherwise we will continue to foolishly believe that without any *additional effort* we will somehow be able to stop being angry, frustrated, annoyed, etc. just because we want to.

We have to admit to ourselves that at this time we do NOT have what it takes to successfully deal with our powerful emotions. We have to get real about the destructive force that they have in our lives. When we can truly admit to ourselves this aspect of emotions, we will be putting ourselves in position to do the work of learning how to *take away* their power.

Unfortunately, most of us don't learn about the nature of emotions or how to manage them in healthy ways. This topic is not typically taught to us in school and usually it is not directly taught to us at home either. Therefore we are left to learn how to deal with strong emotions through the modeling of those around us.

Thus, despite personally experiencing strong emotions when we were young children, many of us were taught or shown that we should not pay much attention to them at all, the implication being that they aren't anything worth paying attention to and that simply by deciding that we don't want to feel something, we can just not feel it, it's that simple - *don't be sad! Don't be angry!*

Of course, in practice, most of us have experienced the faulty nature of this approach. As we come to recognize and accept that emotions are powerful and that they require effort and wisdom to be effectively dealt with, we realize that underestimating their power (and not learning how to take away their power through effective strategies) is misguided.

Without this recognition, cycles of unhealthy and even toxic emotional regulation are handed down to us and we will continue to hand them down to the next generation if we don't make a conscious effort to learn, practice, and model another way.

**2. Emotions are temporary.** Anger and all emotions are temporary. Another obvious statement but one that bears repetition and reminding. Emotions can certainly feel like forever things, especially in the moment we experience them. When I feel angry, sad, or even happy and peaceful, I may think to myself *I'm always going to feel like this from now on!* However, if emotions were not temporary, we would still feel whatever we were feeling when we were born! Feelings are temporary. Feelings are temporary. Feelings are temporary. This characteristic of anger and other emotions, while so obvious, is forgotten in the heat of the moment when anger has overtaken us.

Often, even after a moment or period of anger, we may feel shame, regret, embarrassment, confusion, disappointment, and discouragement. This is a great time to remind ourselves that these emotions also are temporary. The sooner we remind ourselves of the temporary nature of all emotions, the more we can get with their flow and not be swayed so dramatically by their movement.

As humans, we tend to compound our own suffering by fighting against the natural flow of what's happening in the present moment, especially what's happening in our internal world. We certainly don't want to feel rejected, insulted, disrespected, angry, sad, lonely, etc. When we feel loving, happy, calm, respected, loved, supported, etc we don't want that feeling to go away.

When "bad" feelings come in or "good" feelings go away, our instinct is often to tense up and reject what's happening, to keep the good in and the bad out. Often we fight hard because we have a sense that once the good feelings leave, they're gone for good, and once the bad feelings come in, they're in for good.

The more we practice understanding the temporary nature of our emotions, we won't have to fight so hard against the grain of the present moment. We will be able to recognize that even though our happy feeling is moving away for now, it will be back again in not too long. How do I know that? I've felt happy before, and then I didn't feel happy, and then I did feel happy again - this progression has happened before so I know it can happen again. Even though I am feeling angry, or rejected, or stupid, or alienated now, I know that soon these feelings will move out. How do I know that? It's happened before - I have felt angry before, then I wasn't angry anymore, etc.

Often, without remembering the temporary nature of our emotions, we become even angrier at our children or whomever we are mad at because we blame them for stealing our happiness and peace. We are so scared and resentful in that moment, worried that we have lost those good feelings forever.

We often punish our children or partner not for their transgression but for "stealing" the good feeling we had before their misstep.

When this occurs, due to our own fear and anxiety, we tend to escalate the situation quickly, reacting in toxic, hurtful ways, which on top of the damage we've done, may then leave us feeling like an evil giant ogre who once was human.

A quick shortcut out of this self-perpetuating mess is to remind ourselves in whatever way that works best for us of the temporary nature of our emotions and that due to this temporary nature, these emotions will surely be on the move again soon, so we might as well relax and allow them to flow without struggling against them. When we are able to bend and flow with the changing winds of our emotions, this flexibility allows us to be less vulnerable to their potentially destructive effects. We can become so good at being able to see the force of our emotions moving through us and flowing with it, that we become like bamboo reeds blowing in the wind- the wind can bend us, but not snap us!



### **3. Emotions do not reflect an objective truth.**

There's an old saying that feelings are facts. It is a fact that I am feeling whatever I am feeling right now and it would not make sense for someone to dispute that for me -no, you are not feeling sad - doesn't make much sense to say that to someone. However, we have to make an important distinction here and that is that while it is true that I am having a particular feeling, that feeling does not reflect an objective truth about myself or others, though it often feels that way. What do I mean by this?

When a child gets a wrong answer at school in front of the whole class or an adult makes a mistake during a big meeting, they may feel "stupid." That feeling does not reflect some objective truth that they ARE stupid, yet, neither should it be denied that they do indeed FEEL stupid in that moment.

Without the understanding that feelings do not reflect an objective truth, it may be easy to confuse feelings of being stupid with an actual objective reflection of our intelligence. When someone, especially children, tells us that they feel dumb, or ugly, or unworthy in any way, our instinct is often also to confuse the feeling with the objective reality by denying both! "No, honey, you are not stupid!" You may say this to your loved one if you're lucky enough for them to express to you how they feel rather than holding it inside.

But when you say to them that they are not stupid, they are left with something that doesn't add up -- "\_\_\_\_\_ told me that I am not stupid but I FEEL stupid, so who do I trust, \_\_\_\_\_ or this powerful feeling inside me telling me that I am stupid?"

It may be hard for your loved one to trust or accept what you tell them regarding their worthiness when you have contradicted something so visceral and powerful inside them. With the understanding that emotions do not reflect an objective truth, you may instead say "I hear you that you felt 'stupid' because you made a mistake. It sucks to feel stupid doesn't it? I've also felt dumb before and it didn't feel good at all."

By acknowledging their feelings, you are showing them that you are not disputing something that is going on for them strongly right now and they therefore may be more willing to trust and accept the next part of what you say: "FEELING stupid is not the same as being stupid. We all FEEL stupid sometimes." This would also be a great time to help them express some of the other emotions that they felt during that experience. "What else did you feel when you got the answer wrong in class/made a mistake in the meeting?"

If it's an adult, they may be able to express some other emotions, such as sad, embarrassed, judged, confused, etc. If it's a young child, they may not be able to put words to their feelings on their own, but you can help them out by giving examples of some emotions you would have felt in such a situation and check in with them if they felt those emotions.

Sometimes I may feel insignificant, invisible, unloved. These feelings are so strong that they definitely feel like they reflect a solid truth. But over time, with my realization that feelings don't necessarily reflect an objective truth, I can distinguish my feelings as FEELINGS and not hang on to the idea of myself as objectively diminished.

What does all this have to do with anger? After all, this is an anger management guide. Well, as I mentioned earlier in the guide, anger is often an umbrella emotion that masks other underlying emotions. When we conflate feelings with a concrete objective reality, all those unacknowledged emotions bubble up to the surface as anger. If I'm a stupid, monster-y, insignificant ogre - and if that is absolutely true of me - then yeah, I'm probably going to get pretty angry. I'll probably lash out as the stupid, ugly, insignificant, unlovable monster that I am. But wait, could it be that I simply FEEL stupid, unlovable, insignificant, and monster-y at this moment?

Could those feelings be totally normal and acceptable for me to feel when my kids are arguing over one g-d-mn Lego piece when there are thousands strewn all over their floor?! Maybe I feel those feelings but they don't actually mean what they have me believing about myself in this moment?

So how can we combat the insidiousness of our emotions that have us believing all manner of terrible things about ourselves, our loved ones, and our world?

Here's a great phrase to use when you are experiencing difficult emotions: "**right now.**" "*I feel really unloved **right now.***" "*I feel so invisible right now.*" "*I feel like a frickin ogre, ARRGGG, **RIGHT NOW!!!***"

By acknowledging that what we are feeling is something we are feeling "right now," we remind ourselves that this is a FEELING - and we know that feelings are TEMPORARY and they don't reflect an objective reality (I AM NOT insignificant, but I sure do FEEL that way RIGHT NOW). And since we also know that feelings are POWERFUL, we recognize the tremendous power that they have in influencing our thoughts and behaviors - but knowing that, we have a better chance of cutting off their power in that moment.

You might say that sometimes things really are shitty - OBJECTIVELY. Yes it's true, life hits us with shitty situations and it truly sucks sometimes, no doubt. In these times, it is even more critical to be aware of our emotions and their impermanent nature. Why?

Because in times of true difficulty, we don't want to be further weighed down and hampered by strong emotions that further incapacitate us. In times of great difficulty, we may have the need to ignore or avoid our emotions and we may be able to do this effectively sometimes. However, over the long term, a more effective way to develop and maintain clear-headedness in the face of strife is to get really good at identifying our emotions and understanding their nature. Things may suck and I may feel hopeless, powerless, and unable to deal RIGHT NOW, but those feelings are FEELINGS - acknowledging them and working with them will make whatever I *do* next more effective.

In my day-to-day life, I often will not have time to work through my emotions before I need to respond to a given situation. However, just acknowledging how I feel, even to myself with the addition of "right now" may help me to see through the confusion of a situation and understand that its difficulty is further compounded by my strong emotion. Knowing this, even for a second, I may be able to leave the door open for a more productive view.

Sometimes, people will do or say things to us to purposely have us feeling rejected, ignored, worthless, or other such negative emotions. However, much of the time, our loved ones and others in our lives are not maliciously intending to hurt us, but we experience difficult feelings anyway. For example, I may feel rejected, invisible, or incompetent when a co-worker talks over me, my boss ignores my suggestions, or a family member belittles me. In those cases, we can say someone is doing something **to** us.

However, when a two-year old child ignores a request to stop screaming, a teenager having a rough day storms into their room and disregards everyone in the house, or a close friend is going through something and doesn't return our calls, there isn't a malicious motivation or intent to make us feel bad, but we may still feel incompetent, invisible, or unimportant in those instances even though no one did anything to us. Is there a difference between the feelings we have when someone intends to hurt us versus the feelings we have when no one intentionally tried to make us feel bad? Reflect on this question for yourself.

Ultimately, in any of those cases, it is up to me to recognize that the feelings I may be having, whether intentionally elicited or not, do not reflect an objective truth about me.

I may feel strong emotions in both types of cases, but that does not mean that in either type of case I inherently *AM* any of those emotions as if those emotions define me. Once I am able to identify my feelings, name them, remind myself that they are temporary and that they don't necessarily reflect an objective truth about me, I can then approach and deal with the situation in front of me in whatever way I think is best. I will be able to do so with more confidence knowing that what ever *negative* feelings I may be feeling right now are likely not an absolute, overarching, permanent, and solid truth about me.

If we continue to hone our understanding of the concepts in this guide and practice these strategies, we will increase our ability to ride with the force of our emotions, almost like a surfer learns to ride a wave. Waves are a constant feature of the ocean yet each individual wave does not last forever. Surfers learn how to go with the flow of the wave and harness its power. As much as we may want to stop a wave from crashing on us, we cannot stand at the breakers and try to stop the wave by holding our hands out. Surfers learn about the nature, power, and timing of waves and how to get on top of them so that they can ride them out to shore, rather than getting pummeled by them. In the same way, we can practice to ride the waves of our emotions and experience getting pummeled by them less and less.

Right  
Now

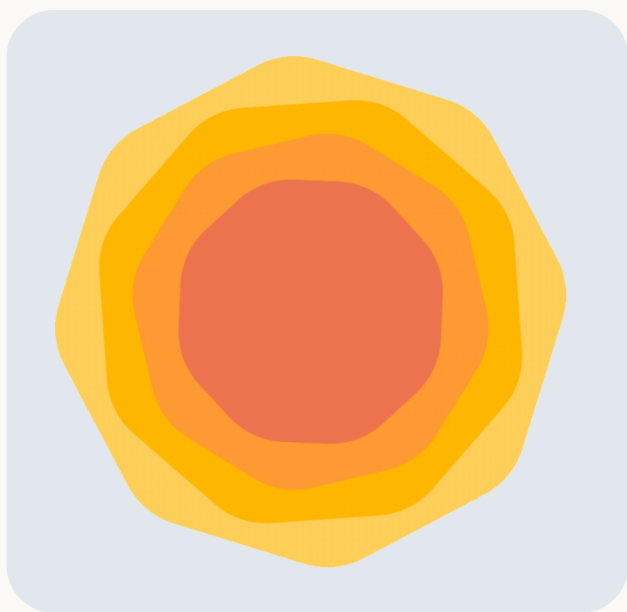


CHAPTER

FIVE:



*Breathing*



One cannot put together a guide on anger management without including the use of breathwork as a complementary tool to use in conjunction with every other anger management technique and strategy. Regardless of what other strategy or technique we use, using our breath effectively is a must. Our breath is involved in distributing and regulating the oxygen that circulates throughout our bodies, including to our brain. Our breath is connected to all of our major bodily systems and so it makes sense that the breath would be involved both in our anger as it is escalating and in any antidote we may put into place to manage our anger.

It is obvious that we are always breathing. However, we typically do so without much or any awareness or effort. Think about the past few minutes of reading this guide, have you been aware of your breath? If you participate in activities such as yoga, tai chi, martial arts, sports, singing, playing certain instruments, or other activities that require a focus on the breath, then maybe you are more likely to be aware of your breathing throughout the day and that is great!

It takes years of study and practice with a qualified teacher to master advanced breathing techniques and exercises that have been developed through various traditions and disciplines. With this guide, we are going to learn and practice how to use our breath in a basic, simple, and rudimentary way by simply slowing down our exhales.

If you are able to notice your breath when you are angry, you would probably notice that your breathing is short, fast, uneven, and restricted. Next time you feel angry, go ahead and observe your breath and see what it feels, looks, and sounds like.

Through my own studies and personal experience, I have found the breath to be a powerful ally in working with anger. There are many nuanced explanations out there about the benefits of working with our breath. While I have many years of personal experience practicing the simple breathing exercise I outline below, I am not a doctor of any sort nor am I an advanced practitioner of breath work and so therefore I will not go into a detailed explanation of how focused breathwork acts specifically on our various systems. If you are interested in a deeper exploration of how the breath is connected to our body and mind, I recommend consulting additional resources on this topic.

I will say generally, that once you make a concerted effort to slow your breathing down a bit and draw it out when you start to get angry and practice doing that regularly, it will become such a natural part of what you do when you feel your anger escalating that after a while you will not even have to put any effort into doing it; you will find yourself automatically doing so.

To practice the simple exercise of slowing down and drawing out your exhales, begin by sitting upright on a chair with your legs uncrossed, feet placed firmly on the floor, and your back straight. Place your hands on your lap. You can close your eyes or leave them open, however you are more comfortable.

We begin with the next exhale:

On the next exhale, breathe out all the air from your lungs. To fully empty your lungs, you will likely have to give your exhale a *few extra seconds*, waiting for all the air to come out. Take your time and notice how much extra air comes out of your lungs when you take time to fully exhale rather than rushing into the next inbreath.

Once your lungs have been **fully emptied**, sit back and allow a fresh new inhale to flush back into your lungs, putting *no extra effort* into it at all. **Let the new breath naturally fill into the space left by your exhale.** See if you can feel your belly and chest expand with the incoming air. Exhale once again, long and slow, until you have emptied your lungs fully. Then once again let the new breath naturally fill into the space left by your exhale. Continue like this.

It doesn't matter if the inhale is long or short. You are not inhaling "deeply" or anything of the sort. You are simply giving your exhales a little extra time *so that once the lungs are emptied*, they can do the thing that they are beautifully designed to do: fill up naturally with life-sustaining air once again.

If you prefer to exhale through your mouth, that can also be effective, but if you do so, try to narrow the opening of your mouth a bit so that it slows down the process and allows the air to move in and out more slowly, rather than rushing in and out.

That's it!

If you are new to breathing exercises, start with just one minute at a time breathing in this way. You can set an alarm to ring after 60 seconds or have a clock in front of you. As you get more comfortable, you can increase the time slowly as you are comfortable.

The purpose of including this breathing exercise in this guide on anger management is so that when you get angry you will be familiar with this slow, drawn out breath and can use it to help manage your anger. It will be much easier to implement this slow, drawn out breath when you're angry if you have already been practicing it beforehand when you are calm and so I do recommend practicing this at least a few times when you have a few spare moments. In fact, go ahead and put this guide down now for a minute and practice your slow, drawn out breath. It will help you better utilize the rest of this guide.

In the rest of this guide, it will be assumed that whatever strategies and techniques are described, that in conjunction with utilizing them, you are also engaging your slow, drawn out breath.

# CHAPTER SIX:

Anger-Perpetuating Thoughts



We have now spent some time strengthening motivation to turn inward when an angering situation occurs. We have looked more closely at our emotions. So now we are ready to move on to another aspect of our internal landscape: our thoughts.

As we've acknowledged so far, shitty things happen. They happen around us and they happen to us. Let's call these shitty things "triggers." (we will look more closely at triggers in a later chapter) We've also come to recognize that we may not be able to control when, where, or how many of these triggers occur, as much as we may like to be able to. And lastly, we have recognized and acknowledged that an area where we do have some agency is in our reaction and response to these triggers.

When a trigger goes off, it creates a psychological fork in the road in front of us: we can call one road *the self-calming path* and the other road *the anger-perpetuating path*. The self-calming path refers to a series of thoughts, speech, and actions that de-escalate our anger and help us to move the anger out more quickly, without ratcheting it up further.



The anger-perpetuating path refers to a series of thoughts, speech, and actions we do once the trigger has already occurred that actually increase our anger, hyping ourselves up, getting madder and madder the more time has passed following the trigger until we say or do something that we end up regretting.

Now, we already know that anger, being temporary, will eventually at some point subside regardless of what we do or which path we take - we are not going to be angry every minute always and forever - so these two paths will eventually merge again. The question is, how much more damage will we do in our anger before we are not angry anymore? The decision is somewhat up to us. The reason I say somewhat is because, as mentioned earlier, we are in some ways beholden to habits and patterns of anger expression that we have ingrained into ourselves since we were kids. A large part of how we react to anger triggers now has to do with how we learned to do so and how we have been accustomed to reacting over the past many years. However, despite our habits, we can exert some agency in making this choice: *self-calming path* or *anger-perpetuating path*.

The self-calming path sounds very sweet, gentle, and lovely, doesn't it? While the anger-perpetuating path sounds harsh, rocky, and turbulent. But actually, it is the exact opposite!

The anger-perpetuating path is actually the much easier path to take and the one many of us choose more often. It is sexy, beautiful, and alluring. It lures us unto it time and time again with sweet thoughts of self-righteousness and revenge - it feels so good. It tempts us along with self-pity, indignation, and feelings of victimhood and superiority. It compels us to stay on it with funhouse-like mirrors that twist the situation to justify our building anger, disguising the warning signs that show us our destructive actions and words, keeping us from seeing or acknowledging our role in the conflict, hiding our ability and even our desire to de-escalate the situation. And by the time it's all said and done, leading us right off a cliff - that's when we will have said or done something that we truly regret. And like a bad nightmare, we wake up after falling off the cliff when we have done that thing we regret and at that point, we may no longer be angry anymore, but we look back at the path of destruction that we have wrought behind us while we were on the anger-perpetuating path, too blinded by the lights to see where we were headed. Sounds fun, doesn't it?

What about the self-calming path? Is it any better? Well, actually, no, it's awful! It is rocky, desolate and difficult beyond measure to traverse because it hides nothing, it exposes us to dark parts of ourselves, it asks of us to do such difficult tasks as taking accountability, facing our fears and insecurities, forgiving, and letting go. The self-calming path is not for the frail of heart. But if we choose this path, and if we keep choosing this path again and again, we will get so much better at not going off the cliff.

Ok, so you choose the self-calming path because you are a warrior! Now what? The rest of this chapter will focus on common anger-perpetuating thoughts (commonly known as cognitive distortions) - thoughts we tend to have right after a trigger occurs that twist around our perception of reality and tend to hype up and increase our anger and/or other emotions. We will learn and practice how to implement the antidotes to these destructive anger-perpetuating thoughts so that we can build and strengthen our capacity for navigating the rocky terrain of the self-calming path.

## Should statements

Should statements are like fertile soil for anger. In the rich fertile soil of our should statements, anger can grow tall, big, and powerful. So what are should statements? Should statements are strong and rigid ideas about what we feel we absolutely need and deserve to have. “You *should* know what I need without me asking for it.” “I *must* get 8 hours of sleep.” “We *have to* have dinner together every night.” If we reflect on all of our should statements, we will notice that we probably have A LOT of them. Some should statements are necessary for our very survival “I must have food, water, and air to live.” However, if we are honest with ourselves about all of our should statements, we will more than likely find that we have many many more of them than are necessary for our survival. For every additional should statement that we have, we are setting ourselves up for possible disappointment, frustration, and anger when that should statement is not fulfilled. Therefore, we do ourselves a disservice by tacking on many of them and would be helping ourselves by being more discerning about how many of them we hang on to.

Take a look at how many should statements you have in your relationships with your kids, partner, parents, family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, etc? Take a look at how many should statements you have regarding your own thinking, speech, and behavior? *I shouldn't rest when there are dishes in the sink.*

Look for patterns. Are there any should statements that are repeatedly involved in conflicts you have with others? What are your shoulds with regard to your children and your expectations of them? *My son should get ready for school quickly without any delays.* What about your spouse? *My spouse should know what I want to do this weekend.* What shoulds do you have with regard to your parenting? *I should speak softly to my child always. I should never yell at my child.*

How can we work with our should statements within the context of anger management? Instead of believing firmly that we are entitled to something as if it is an inalienable right or that we must absolutely attain a certain standard of behavior, we can think of it instead as a preference, something we would like to have or be able to do if possible. Things that would be convenient or nice, but not things that we absolutely must have. *I would like you to speak respectfully to me. It would be cool if we eat dinner together every night. I prefer to get 8 hours of sleep.*

By turning shoulds into preferences, we understand that we may not get what we want, and that's ok. Although it's a bummer to not get what we want, the flip side of seeing these shoulds as preferences rather than must-haves is that we are then able to avoid triggering a self-righteous, entitled anger that is very uncomfortable, monstrous and difficult to manage.

Are there any should statements that you can let go of? Which shoulds are absolutely important for you to hang on to and which ones can you transform into preferences? Remember, the more shoulds you have, the more opportunities you will have for righteous anger and frustration, so be very choosy.

# Should Statements

Here are some examples of shoulds transformed into preferences:

1 My kids should eat dinner quickly without complaining

---

I prefer that my kids eat dinner quickly without complaining, but they're kids, I guess I get it if they take longer to eat than I would prefer.

---

2 My spouse should arrive on time from work everyday.

---

It would be nice if my spouse arrived on time, but I understand that things come up at work sometimes or there's traffic.

---

3 We should be able to get through the weekend without any fighting.

---

I would like to be able to get through the weekend without an argument, but it's a stressful time for us right now and it's unrealistic that everything goes smoothly at every minute. Sometimes we argue, and that's ok.

---

4 Drivers on the road should zipper in when there's a lane closure.

---

I would looove for people to zipper in at the merge point rather than backing up in one lane, however, I know that I cannot control what other drivers on the road do.

---

# Should Statements

What are some things you feel entitled to from others or expect from yourself that upon further reflection you can transform into preferences rather than must haves?

1

-----[NAME]----- should...

---

It would be really nice if \_\_\_[NAME]\_\_ would...

---

2

-----[NAME]----- should...

---

It would be really nice if \_\_\_[NAME]\_\_\_ would...

---

3

We should...

---

I would like us to...

---

4

I should...

---

I would like to...

---



## Catastrophizing and Fortune Telling

Remember that this is the chapter on anger-perpetuating thoughts. We are talking now about what is going on in our mind after an angering situation has occurred. Catastrophizing and fortune telling are definitely milestones on the anger-perpetuating path. When we catastrophize and fortune tell we are creating, in our minds, a situation that is completely untenable; a situation so horrific and catastrophic and that will lead to such sheer future horrors that we have absolutely no choice but to totally freak out. In common parlance, we would call it making a mountain out of a molehill.

Catastrophizing and fortune-telling have roots in anxiety and fear. I create an unrealistic scenario in my mind about how terrible your offense is and what a terrible future it will lead to in worst-case scenario fashion and then these thoughts justify my hurtful response to your offense. Often, we do not realize that we are catastrophizing or fortune telling because it may happen below the surface of our consciousness. Nevertheless, by engaging in this anger-perpetuating trail of thoughts, we increase our anxiety and anger.

For example, look at this series of catastrophizing thoughts that are followed to their horrible conclusion. It may sound ridiculous to say them out loud, but this is what may be going on for you on a subconscious level:

“The dishes are not done...now we will get bugs...our house will be overrun with bugs...the kids will get bugs all over them...the kids will get sick...my kids are going to die...I am afraid that my kids are going to die.”

With that fear and anxiety bubbling up via catastrophizing and fortune telling, it is no wonder you will fight tooth and nail with your partner when they didn't do the dishes, your kids' very lives are on the line!

Take a look at when you have engaged in catastrophizing and fortune telling. Look for patterns. What specific fears, anxieties, and personal dislikes tend to be triggered during certain types of conflicts?

Engage with your catastrophizing and fortune telling thoughts directly when you are aware of them. Is the situation really as dire and bleak as you are making it out to be? Is the offense that angered you really going to lead to the disastrous future that you are picturing? Are the rising fears and anxiety based on demonstrated evidence of danger? Walk yourself back from the catastrophic situation you have envisioned in your mind and see if you can look at it with more clarity and calm.

### Minimizing and Maximizing

We tend to perceive other people's offenses towards us very sensitively. We can say that we maximize the effect of others' behaviors on us. On the other hand, we tend to minimize the effect that our own behaviors and speech have on others. Minimizing the effects of our own behaviors on others and maximizing the effects of others' behaviors on us leads to heightened conflict because I see myself as an innocent victim whose injury must be avenged rather than a complicit partner in the unfolding conflict.

For example, you may feel very upset that your partner is yelling at you right now which they know you find very disrespectful. However, you may not have noticed the many times that you laughed off their requests over the past week and that through your carelessness they felt ignored and unheard. You maximize the effects on you of their yelling, yet you minimize the effects on them of your carelessness.

When I minimize the effects of my actions on others, I absolve myself of any responsibility in the conflict. It feels great to be the one in the right who did nothing wrong. But with that perspective, conflict resolution is nearly impossible because rarely is it the case that one person is completely free of responsibility in the conflict. It is so important in any relationship, but especially in a relationship with someone we love, that we place as much importance on their experience as we do on our own.

If we want to resolve conflict within our family and build healthy relationships, it's vital that we take a long hard look at our own behaviors and how they impact our family members. In looking at the felt experiences of our family members, do we care as much about their feelings and experience as we do our own?

Do we want them to feel good about themselves? Do we want them to feel loved, supported, accepted, heard, and seen as we want to be? If we focus solely on our own experience and others' effects on it, not only do we strengthen our anger, but we are also moving away from the possibility of resolving the conflict at hand.

It takes courage and emotional strength to be able to face our own shortcomings and even more so to acknowledge them out loud to someone else, especially to a child. However, with great effort comes great reward. If you are able to do so, it can lead to a greater sense of freedom and ease within your relationships and with yourself.

### The Fallacy of Change

The fallacy of change has us thinking that we can, through sheer desire and forceful effort, change someone else to be more like how we want them to be. Hopefully, we have now begun to recognize the futility of this effort through the chapter on the spheres of influence. Here it is showing up again in the form of an anger-perpetuating thought. Reflect earnestly on this, have you experienced the fallacy of change? Has it worked out for you to engage in it? Why or why not?

Why is the fallacy of change in the section on anger-perpetuating thoughts? How does this type of thought increase our anger? Because it forces us into a position of thinking we can do something that is actually IMPOSSIBLE and in the process of trying to do something impossible, the most likely scenario is that we become increasingly frustrated, disappointed, hurt, and angry. It may be difficult to accept, but we do not actually have the power to change others!

We can have some influence in some ways on what someone may choose to say or do and in some very limited cases, what they think, but ultimately, the only true and consistent sphere of agency we inhabit is in how we manage and express our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. We cannot do that for someone else and they cannot do it for us. This is true even for those we love most in the world.

What is the antidote to the fallacy of change? Recognizing and reminding ourselves that we cannot change someone else, as much as we would like to, and that we are better served by using our energy in more productive ways: taking care of our own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

When we do that, we use our energy much more wisely and effectively, and then maybe, just maybe, we will also be able to have some positive influence on some aspects of our environment and the people in it through the modeling of our own behaviors.

## Blaming

Many of us grew up in households where blaming was a common method for offsetting anger and feelings of resentment. It has become so natural for many of us to engage in blaming that we see it as a natural and necessary part of human interaction. Reflect on this: when something doesn't go your way, do you tend to immediately blame it on someone or something or on yourself? Does it take the sting out a little bit to have something or someone to place the blame on for your own pain, inconvenience, or unhappiness?

Challenge yourself right now as you are reading this section to recognize that blaming is actually an anger-perpetuating thought and not a productive or even necessary part of any situation. Blaming only causes us to focus our anger on someone or something. With that laser focus, we project all of our unhealthy and ineffective anger responses on those blamed offenders. This scene has played out so many times in our lives and has rarely brought about a satisfying outcome.

What is the antidote to blaming? Is there another way of relating to situations that cause us pain or suffering? Absolutely! First, we can challenge ourselves to recognize that the action of blaming stifles any real pathway towards thoughtful, effective solutions.

No one likes to be blamed. Whoever you are blaming is going to be much less likely to work with you to resolve the issue; they will be much too busy defending themselves and feeling attacked. Next, notice if you have been engaging in minimizing your role in the situation and maximizing the role of the other party. Then, work collaboratively to resolve the issue, making sure to take accountability for your role in the conflict and taking the lead in ensuring that no one person or thing is falsely shouldering the blame entirely on themselves.

### Fallacy of Fairness

This anger-perpetuating thought has us convinced that the world is, wait for it... FAIR! Ha! Wherever did we pick up that idea!? When we use our rational, thinking adult mind, we are likely to admit that, based on years of living on this earth, we have learned that this world is just not fair. It just isn't. Furthermore, even if things were fair, what would that mean?



Our idea of fairness surely is different than other people's? Whose ideas of fairness is actually the "real" fairness? We can quickly see how this line of thinking is ripe for causing major conflict. Have you experienced this anger-perpetuating thought that things should always be fair? Did it make the situation or conflict easier or harder to work with?

The fallacy of fairness increases our anger because it tells us that whatever happened to us that we didn't like was not supposed to happen, that it isn't fair for it to have happened, and that therefore we need to fight tooth and nail to avenge it. That's a lot of work without much payoff.

What is the antidote to the fallacy of fairness? Remind yourself that the world is not fair, things are not fair. Why do this? There is actually a lovely peacefulness that can come over us when we accept that things are not fair and we can stop trying to make them fair in this moment of anger (this is not about choosing to work over the course of our lives to try to make the world a better place, we are talking specifically here about the moment of anger).

Once we can recognize this in a moment of anger, we are left to simply take the time we need to lick our wounds when something unpleasant comes our way. That's it. There's nothing else we need to do, what a relief?! We don't NEED to attack, avenge, belittle, or harm anyone else. Wouldn't that be a load off?

### Always Being Right

The last anger-perpetuating thought on this list is also one of the most pernicious. Ooh, being right, it feels so good, doesn't it? It seems so overwhelmingly important doesn't it? When we prioritize being right over everything else, especially over our loved one's feelings, their wellbeing, their safety, and especially when we disregard any actual evidence to the contrary, we are engaging in this anger-perpetuating thought.

It is difficult and tricky to move away from this one. It requires you to reflect deeply within yourself to recognize if the compulsion to be right at all costs is motivating you. Challenge yourself to put your ego aside for the moment and tap into other motivations that have nothing to do with being right such as resolving the conflict, soothing your own pain and hurt as well as that of your loved one, and finding doable solutions to address challenges in your relationships.

With practice, these can become viable and formidable motivations edging out the desire to be right as your only motivating force. Being right always, is first of all, unrealistic (would it be realistic that you are right literally every time all the time?), and secondly, the futile pursuit itself of this unrealistic perception is very lonely.

When was the last time you acknowledged and validated your loved ones for being right? If it was so long ago that you can't remember, maybe it's time to recognize someone else as being right for once no matter how hard it might feel in the moment.

# CHAPTER SEVEN:

## *De-Escalating Conflict*



One of the biggest reasons that we want to be able to manage our anger better is so that we can experience more peace and less conflict in our relationships with others. In the previous chapter, we talked about the anger-perpetuating path and the self-calming path. How can we use these same concepts to help de-escalate conflict or at the very least avoid escalating conflict in the home?

### Issue-focused VS. name calling and labeling

Now that we have looked at some of the potential anger-perpetuating thoughts that we may experience when an anger triggers occurs as well as explored their antidotes, we are armed and ready to traverse the self-calming path! When someone in our family does something we don't like or that angers us, we have a perfect opportunity to practice walking this path (as opposed to allowing ourselves to get carried along on the anger-perpetuating path). Using the skills in this guide, we can work towards resolving the issue without further escalating the conflict and/or de-escalating the conflict if it does get out from under us.

As imperfect humans parading around on this planet, we are going to do things that will annoy, bother, irritate, and upset the people around us. It is virtually impossible to completely avoid this reality. Knowing that at some point or another I will do something to bother you and you will do something to bother me, we can commit to finding a healthy approach to addressing these situations as they occur.

The most effective approach to resolving any conflict begins first and foremost with sticking to the issue itself, and more specifically to the observable behavior or action that we find displeasing. *You didn't do the dishes; you made a scowling face at me; you forgot to pay the phone bill; you left Legos on the floor*, etc. All of these grievances refer to an observable action performed or not performed by someone.

Contrast the above observable actions with the following personality traits: *you are lazy; you're a jerk, you are stupid; you are messy*. These labels that we tend to hurl at others when we are angry lead us far away from being able to resolve any conflict. They cause the other person to get defensive and they either become aggressive or shut down.

These labels are so vague as to be nearly impossible to address with any kind of meaningful solutions - how do I not be stupid? And they bring any real progress towards resolution to a complete halt.

When we stick to observable actions, we have a great shot at resolving the issue or conflict. Why is this? Because for the most part, observable behaviors are not intrinsic aspects of a person. Not only is it easier to figure out how to change an observable behavior than a personality trait, more importantly, our observable actions are not *perceived* as intrinsic qualities by the person doing them and so discussing them is less likely to lead to defensiveness, attack, and shutting down. It is quite easy to make the leap from someone's behavior to a global reflection of their entire personality, however, doing so is a surefire way to escalate any conflict.

Let's take a look at what might happen if we do not stick to an observable action. *You didn't do the dishes -- you are lazy -- you suck -- I can't stand you -- this is not going to work.* It may look funny written out in print, but very often this type of sequence is what plays out in our mind during and after an argument when we do not stick to an observable action. *Being lazy* and *all over sucking* are not things that can be easily addressed, solved, or fixed.

Once I label you as *lazy* and *sucking* in my mind, even if I do not say it out loud, not being able to stand you is a hop, skip, and a jump away. I mean, how could I stand a lazy person who sucks so bad? It's no wonder this relationship just isn't going to work at all.

How do we fix you "sucking"? The answers are vague at best. When we stick to the issue level, however, all we have to figure out is how do we fix this particular observable behavior: *you not having done the dishes*? Simple answer is you do the dishes. If we need a more in-depth solution because maybe this is the umpteenth time you didn't do them, then maybe we can come up with a better plan that will help you keep up with the dishes going forward. Maybe there are some observable behaviors or actions that I am doing that I can change in order to better support your effort to change (remember that we are rarely 0% accountable for any conflict or issue). Since you are not labeling me but rather focusing solely on my own observable actions, I am able to remain invested in this joint effort with you without getting defensive and shutting down.



There may be a million ideas we can come up with to help resolve this issue. We have so much time, energy, and clear thinking to spend on coming up with a plan because we are not wasting all of our energy attacking and defending one another about larger personality issues that are very hard to fix and often are attacked out of our own catastrophizing and fortune telling.

Here's another example: *You didn't hand your homework in today -- you are so forgetful -- you are irresponsible.* When our kids make mistakes or do something on purpose that negatively impacts themselves or others, this is another great opportunity to practice. Here, we begin with sticking to the issue level. The above thought process may not be something we ever utter out loud to our child, but it's a good idea to check our own mind and see if these are the kinds of thoughts we are having. Am I turning my child's current behavior into a global assessment of their personality and future potential? If so, it is up to me to first dial back this mental escalation and stick to the issue --*you did not hand in your homework today.* Without labeling my child or their future potential, how can we work together to address this particular behavior?

By sticking to the issue and not name-calling or labeling, my child will be less likely to get defensive and shut down and less likely to internalize my judgment as a negative view of themselves. With the energy we are saving attacking, defending, and shutting down, we can now take the time to figure out together how we can support them in handing in their homework with more consistency going forward.

It's not always easy to stick to the demonstrable behavior because we are so habituated to turn behaviors into global people-assessments. But it is also not really very complicated either. Just stick to the behavior!

If you can describe the person's offense using an active verb, such as "do," as in "you did/didn't do\_\_\_," you're good to go. You are ready to problem solve! If it can only be described passively and needs the word "are" such as "you *are*\_\_\_" you have gotten off track. Backtrack and start again until you can describe the offense with an active verb.

If you are still itching to place some labels on your family members, there is actually a great way to do that: place positive labels on them. This is especially important and effective in helping our kids build a positive and healthy self image.

Actually, using positive global labels, especially with kids, but even with the adults in our lives, helps to mitigate the negative effects of conflict and smoothe the gears of conflict resolution.

How does it do that? Well, if I know that you think I am a caring, loving, responsible, good-hearted, and hard-working person, then when you also point out the observable behavior that I didn't do the dishes or hand in my homework today, I can address that issue with you without feeling like a lazy, irresponsible, selfish, unloving loser. I will be able to handle discussing mistakes in my behavior because overall I feel more secure in my positive qualities both because you have told me that you see me in that positive view but also because your positive overall assessment of me helps me see myself in that way as well.

It's important to note here that we don't have to lie or fake the positive labels we put on our loved ones. In fact, we should strive to be as genuine as possible because when we are faking it, people can tell! I may not see you as responsible with your homework right now because you have not been handing it in consistently, so calling you responsible may not feel genuine to me right now. However, what other positive labels can I attribute to you that I do genuinely see? Perhaps I can point out that you are resilient, smart, or a quick learner.

Sometimes, if a global positive label seems out of reach in that moment, we can come back to focusing on a specific positive observable behavior: “yesterday you handed in your homework and that was great!”

Now that we are practicing sticking to observable behaviors and not name calling or labeling (unless it’s a positive, genuine label), we are giving ourselves a good chance at conflict resolution. So what is the next step? What awesome, amazing, enlightening, problem-solving thing do I get to say or do next?

Well, actually the next step is, drum roll please... listening! And not just any old listening, active listening. This step is so much harder than almost anything else described in this guide, yet it is so very powerful in helping not only resolve issues in the home but also in managing our anger. What is active listening?

Active listening involves wholeheartedly, with interest and curiosity, bringing our full attention to try to understand what someone else is thinking and feeling, from their own point of view as much as possible. That is a tall order and one that we rarely even attempt to engage in during an argument or conflict. This is where you are going to have to get really real with yourself because only you will truly know if you are actively listening to someone else.

We get pretty good at pretending to listen - we look at the person in front of us, nod and shake our head, throw in a couple of “yeahs” and “uh huhs,” but really all we are doing in our mind is figuring out how to discount the other person’s experience, how to deny and defend our role in their discomfort, how to prove our complete innocence with regard to their pain, often how to minimize their pain in general, and even more often deny them a voice at all. We want to be right, righteous, and completely devoid of culpability. We are busy doing all of these things, but we are not really listening.

What is the first step to active listening? It starts with an earnest desire to know, understand, and care about my child’s, partner’s, or other family member’s internal experience. I need to get to a point where I honestly and genuinely care about what they feel, think, and experience.

I’m not talking right now about my own expectations for or of them and not about what I would like them to be like, to feel, or to think. I am talking about looking at what it is like for them right now or during the incident in question. What does/did it really feel like for them to be them?

Take a few moments right now to reflect on that desire in yourself. Do you care about what your family member thinks, feels, and experiences? Does it matter to you? Is it important to you? Forget about right and wrong right now and think purely about what it is like in your family member's internal experience in their body and mind, to be in their shoes?

If you realize that you generally do not take the time to think about that or even care about it, then take the time now to do the self-reflection that you need to do in order to get to a point where you begin to deeply care about your loved one's emotional, mental, and physiological experiences as much as you do your own, especially during times of conflict.

This is the largest part of what is required for active listening. Your genuine desire to come to understand and know someone else's experience is all you need to motivate you to actively listen to them because if you don't actively listen to them, you will not know what their internal experiences are, and therefore you will not be getting what you now realize you want.

Think about the last time you watched your favorite movie or listened to your favorite song. You didn't need to take a class or learn some specialized techniques to be able to watch the movie or listen to the music intently. All active listening requires of us is to *want* to see and understand our loved one and their experiences as much as we want to see and understand the best movie ever or to listen to the best song ever. Once we have that desire, we'll know exactly what to do to get it.

The trick is in maintaining that desire throughout an argument and not defaulting back to our usual habits of thinking only about personal vindication. We have to stop ourselves every few minutes and check in with ourselves about whether we are paying attention to the other person and actively listening to what they are saying with the intention of truly understanding what they are going through. Successful active listening leads to a greater understanding of one another, of ourselves, of the issue at hand, of possible solutions to a conflict, as well as to much shorter arguments!

Ok, we are sticking to the issue, we are actively listening, what's next? This next step is crucial for the long term health of our relationships and unfortunately is something most of us have difficulty doing, and that is: directly stating our needs.

Whether we realize it or not, we are regularly, throughout each day, communicating our needs to others. We communicate our needs verbally through what we say and non-verbally by what we do, don't do, and even by what we don't say. However, even when we are verbally communicating our needs, we are rarely doing so directly.

When I say "ugh, it's always so cold in here!" what I am really saying is that I would like it to be warmer in here. But I didn't say what my need or desire is directly, I communicated it through passive speech. When you forget to give your child her mid-morning snack and she is irritable and picking fights with her brother, what she is really saying is that she needs to eat. She may not say to you, "I would like to eat now.", nevertheless, that is what she is communicating to you through her behaviors.

How much easier would it be for you, and for your children if they just said, "I'm hungry, can you give me a snack?" It would save you all a lot of aggravation and frustration. When she didn't ask directly for what she wanted or needed, the want/need made itself known to you anyway, but in a much more frustrating manner. Knowing that our needs and wants are going to get communicated to our family members one way or another, we would be making the process so much smoother by just going ahead and asking for what we want directly.



When directly stating our needs, we need to make sure we are doing so in an effective way. Two important aspects of asking for our needs effectively are 1. to make sure we are asking for observable actions and 2. We are being flexible.

For example, stating “I want you to be more affectionate” is an ineffective way of stating my need because it is not an observable action. Notice the word “be” in the sentence - it is not an active verb. How will my partner know if they are being more affectionate? How will I know if my partner is being more affectionate? If I feel my partner is not affectionate with me, they may not be sure of how to do so in the first place. I am much more likely to get what I want if I can offer specific solutions, specific actions. I can transform this vague request into a request for an observable action and it would look something like this: “I would like you to hold my hand when we go for our evening walks.” Now that is an observable action. When my partner holds my hand on our next walk, he will know it and I will know it. If that goes well, I can ask for something else, “I would like us to cuddle on the couch after dinner.”

Being flexible, I understand that I may not be able to get exactly what I need as I would like to have it in an ideal world.

With this understanding, I am ready to work out solutions that meet both mine and my partner's needs.

My partner may say to me, *I don't want to cuddle on the couch*. Was it a mistake for me to ask? Absolutely not! Now my need is out there on the table. Though it doesn't mean that the other person is able to or wants to meet my need, we now have a jumping off point. I can have an honest conversation with my partner about why they don't want to cuddle. With active listening, I can get a deeper understanding of the reasons why from their point of view, they don't want to cuddle. I can maybe recognize some the minimizing I have done with relation to how my own behaviors have impacted their desire for cuddling and make a change on my end. Maybe we can come to a resolution about this and my partner may decide they are willing to try cuddling for one or two minutes at first. Or maybe there is an alternative to cuddling that would work for both of us. Sticking to the issue of cuddling - refraining from calling my partner cold and unaffectionate, actively listening to my partner's experience and trying to get a deeper understanding of it, and continuing to directly state my needs (and being flexible about them as well), gives us a much better shot at resolving this issue without further escalating the conflict.

What does this have to do with anger management? Well, what usually happens when our needs are not met is that we become frustrated and resentful. The more time passes in our relationships with our needs going unmet, the more frustrated and resentful we become.

Out of our frustration and resentment, we tend to anger much more easily. We are more likely to maximize the effects of others' behaviors on us because we already feel uncared for. Our anger tends to bubble up more quickly and with more force. At the same time, we may do more observable behaviors that bother, irritate, or otherwise hurt those around us as a way to hand off and avenge the discomfort we are feeling. As you can imagine, this is a recipe for disaster. And yet this is going on in the background in many of our relationships.

Back to our example above, what happens when I don't state my need directly? Well, remember that we are regularly communicating our needs, whether we realize it or not. If I am feeling a lack of physical affection from my partner, you can bet that this unmet need will get communicated to my partner and maybe even others in my life, some way somehow.

I may engage in attention seeking behaviors meant to get a reaction from my partner. I may shut down completely and avoid all healthy direct communication with my partner and others. I may spiral into depression. I may become irritable and lash out angrily at small offenses.

What do you think are some ways your unmet needs are getting communicated to your family?

One of the most dangerous paths to travel on in our relationships is to assume or want the people in our lives to know exactly what we want and need from them without us telling them. I can tell you both from my personal and professional experiences that this way of thinking, though extremely common, is one of the worst things we can do for all of the relationships in our lives.

There is a romantic notion, often reinforced by movies and other media, that we shouldn't have to ask for what we want, that it should be obvious to others. Unfortunately, this romanticized but ineffective approach contributes to relationship dysfunction rather than promoting relationship health and satisfaction.

I ask for what I want all the time, but usually I do it in passive, unhealthy, toxic, and truly ineffective ways through blaming, complaining, and passive speech and actions. So it's not like I'm not already asking for what I want, I'm just doing it really really badly.

I am much better off taking control of that asking and doing it in a way where I may actually stand a chance of getting what I want or at least something close to what I want. And by doing so in this healthy and mature manner, I am also going to be modeling this behavior to the people in my life so that they might also start asking me directly for what they need and want instead of doing hurtful behaviors to me that stem from their unmet needs.

I've had clients say to me that they have asked repeatedly for what they want from their partners and that their partners have not honored their requests. If this is going on in your relationships, remember that all of these strategies take time and practice. First, reflect on whether you actually asked for what you need directly, or if you used passive and indirect communication. Secondly, reflect on whether you have implemented the above conflict escalation strategies first - are you sticking to observable behaviors and are you actively listening to your partner so that you can honestly assess the ways in which you may or may not be meeting their needs.

If you answer yes to these questions then try to identify specifically what roadblocks or obstacles are preventing wanted change from happening. Have realistic expectations about shifts and changes. Small baby steps forward over time are more doable than radical changes overnight. However, if you are seeing no changes at all, you may consider asking for help with these processes from an experienced professional in the field, such as a therapist or a family and marriage counselor who can help you and your family to implement these and other strategies and to identify some of the roadblocks to their success.

# Anger-Perpetuating Path



# Self-Calming Path



Naming the emotions under my anger

Challenging anger-perpetuating thoughts

Aware of sensations in my body

Staying curious & focused on my internal experience

Slow, long exhales



START HERE

It's ok for me to FEEL angry right now!





# CHAPTER EIGHT:

Curiosity and Observation



The last chapter focused heavily on our interactions with or our relation to others. We are now going to return our focus back to ourselves and continue to dig even deeper into our own internal experiences.

As we saw earlier, emotions have enormous fake power. They are extremely strong as long as we allow them to take us on a ride. But something we can do to take their power away is to stand back and watch them.

Imagine a high speed train. When the train pulls up to the station and you step inside, in just a few minutes the immense power and speed of this train will take you miles away from where you now stand. Once you get on the train, you have no say so at all about where the train is going and you are completely at the mercy of that train. However, if you choose not to get on the train in the first place and remain standing at the station, the train can't take you anywhere at all, regardless of how strong or how fast it is. It cannot take you anywhere if you don't get on. Similarly with our anger and other negative emotions, they have incredible power. If we let them take us, they will pick us up and take us from 0 to 120 very quickly. But we don't have to let them.

We CAN choose not to get on, to stay standing at the station, and just watch them go on ahead without us. Wouldn't that feel good? Wouldn't it feel good and gratifying to see the anger train pulling into the station, to begin to get on the train as we typically do, but this time, we decide not to get on the train. It feels like freedom!

How do we let the anger train go on without us getting on it? The answer is observation. The power of observation as a tool has been mentioned throughout this guide thus far, but now we are going to get into some super turbo-charged observation action. We are going to be getting into the [insert your favorite fancy expensive car here] of observation. The power of observation is truly our biggest ally in working with our anger. Think about it, when we observe something, we necessarily are not that something. We automatically have to step back from something in order to observe it well.

To work successfully with our anger, we must get really good at observing it. For one, as just mentioned, observing our anger forces us to step back from our anger in order to actually be able to observe it. When we step back from our anger, we have a much better chance of letting it go.

Additionally, when we observe our anger, we get a much better understanding of it. Anytime we understand something better, we have a better chance of working with it successfully. Part of this understanding we must try to cultivate is that the potential for anger is already within us. It was not given to us by someone else. This understanding is crucial for us to stop chasing ghosts out there who can never take away from us something that they never gave to us in the first place. The other part of this understanding is our continued recognition that our anger, while in us, is not us and that how we express our anger - yelling, name calling, shutting down, etc - is also not an intrinsic part of who we are.

How can we get to that understanding? By observing our anger and our behaviors when we are angry. If I can observe it, I am not it. If I am not it, I can change it and still be me. I've had so many people say to me, "well that's just me, that's how I am." It's true that we have picked up a bunch of toxic habits over the course of our lives, but these habits are not intrinsic parts of who we ARE.

You are awesome, you are amazing, you are powerful. Observing your thinking and behaviors is an important aspect of the practice of ditching acquired habits and discovering who you are without them.

With super close and deep observation of our anger, we are in position to see how truly powerless it really is and we can move forward without its influence on us.

The process of observing our anger is simple yet so incredibly profound. Reading about and talking about this type of uber-observation is not enough. The only way to get the benefits of it is by doing it.

Take the analogy of a house. When you first look at your apartment or house, you will probably notice or observe the superficial elements - wall colors, furniture, some of the stuff in it, artwork, etc. But if you go through the process of deeply observing your house, you will begin to notice other things - cracks, stains, broken window panes, etc. If you continue to look even deeper, you will start to learn more about the structural elements of your home - the studs in the walls, the floor joists, the wood, metal, frames, and other structural pieces and systems that actually hold your house or building up but are completely unseen to the casual observer.

Through deep consistent observation, you will begin to get a deeper understanding of how your house functions, how it stays up, what its weaknesses are, what you would have to do if you want to change it, etc.

If you hire an engineer, they may be able to explain it to you in words, but unless you physically go through each part and see it directly for yourself, you will not have a profound direct understanding of it.

The wild thing is that most of us live in our homes (aka our body and mind), our entire lives and never get that deep an understanding of the very shelter that we spend all of our time in. You may not realize the power and joy of having a deeper understanding and appreciation of yourself because it's likely not something you've spent much time on in the past. The only way to appreciate the value of it is to make the effort to look closely and begin to experience for yourself the benefits of deep observation.

One necessary aspect of observation is curiosity. One reason young kids observe the world around them so much is that they are curious. They have a desire to know and understand things better. Without that sense of curiosity they wouldn't make the effort to observe. Anyone who has spent time around kids knows their favorite question: Why? You may have been on the receiving end of a seemingly endless trail of WHYs. In order to observe our anger, we need to access that childlike curiosity we once had. We have to tap into that curiosity that leads us to keep looking at and asking ourselves questions about our anger and other emotions.

Without that sense of curiosity, we will not keep looking at our anger and at our mind. We will fall into the trap of getting carried away with our anger. In order to maintain the vigilance necessary to continue to observe our anger rather than being carried away with it, we need to maintain our curiosity.

Curiosity is also important as an antidote to judgment and blame. When we are observing our anger, it's extremely important that we do so without judging or blaming. When we maintain true curiosity, we are open to whatever it is we are observing simply because we want to know about it and not because we are looking to punish or chastise. Remember that whatever feelings of anger, disappointment, sadness, etc. you are feeling are normal and natural part of human life. We all feel them.

To follow this approach of using curious observation of your anger, continue to remind yourself that this approach is about deep and close observation. That is all. We are not attempting to DO anything other than looking, looking, and more looking. We are not punishing, blaming, or berating ourselves. We are simply looking at our anger and at our mind.

Often, we are so used to finding someone to blame and then punishing them (remember the chapter on anger-perpetuating thoughts?) - whether that person is someone else or ourselves, that it is nearly impossible to operate with pure curiosity because the habit of judgment and blame are so strong in us. This is another reason why continued practice is so important. We have to continue reminding ourselves and practicing non-judgmental curiosity about our own mind and our own anger.

We're going to look at some practical tools to help us do this in the next chapter. But first, the hardest part:

Switching the focus away from our kids, partner, parents, siblings, supervisor, neighbor, etc., who wronged us (which is what we usually focus on when we are angry).

This is much harder said than done. When someone bothers, irritates, wrongs, or hurts us, ooh boy, do we not want to stop thinking about it! In fact, in such situations, it may well be all we CAN think about. Thinking about what that person did or is doing to us or that impacted us in some way becomes the main event in our mind.



Pause now and bring to mind a hurt or a wrong that was done to you or that impacted you and that you still think about.

How much time have you spent running it over and over again in your mind? How many minutes and hours have you used up stewing and simmering and circling?

Is this truly how we want to spend the precious moments of our lives which we can never get back?

Has rehashing all the terrible things others have done to us, reviewing the perfect things we would say, and justifying to ourselves how unfair and horrible it is that we should have suffered such a fate - has doing all these things endless times ever brought us the satisfaction, resolution, and peacefulness that we craved?

Speaking for myself, I'm going to say that for me the answer is ultimately **NO**.

Thankfully, there are other approaches. Are you willing to try something new?

We can commit instead to making the effort to keep the focus on our own mind and on the thoughts and feelings it experiences. To be genuinely curious and focused on what I AM FEELING right now and not WHAT YOU DID TO ME.

This distinction is so important. Challenge yourself to be curious about:

**WHAT I AM FEELING RIGHT NOW**

**AND NOT**

**WHAT \_\_\_\_\_ IS DOING/DID**

The more you are able to continue to keep the focus on what your mind is thinking and experiencing during periods of anger and other strong emotions, the less and less energy your anger will have to fuel and sustain itself. With all your internal resources focused on observing your own mind and your own internal experience in this moment, the anger will have little energy or fuel left to power up with and it will much more quickly extinguish itself. You will have gained a powerful victory over it and it will feel sooo good.

Ok, so how do we do this?

CHAPTER

NINE:

Slowing Everything  
Down



Now that we have explored the value of observing our internal landscape non-judgmentally and with curiosity, let's look more practically at how we can apply this approach to our anger process. Observation and curiosity are all well and good, but it's pretty hard to observe something in detail that is moving at lightning-fast speed. Looking at the anger process, most of us would likely say that in our experience of feeling angry and responding out of that anger, things tend to move very very quickly - before we know it, there we go responding in that same old way that we truly don't want to be responding in, but our anger ripped off so quickly, we didn't have a choice.

In general, most things are more difficult to observe, maneuver and engage with when they move quickly. A car going at high speeds is more difficult to maneuver safely than one going slowly; when someone speaks quickly, it may be harder to understand them or to interject; when you are trying to learn something and the teacher goes quickly without pausing, it's more difficult to understand.

It's the same with our anger. Typically, when an anger trigger occurs, things start moving so quickly that we have little time, space, or opportunity to engage with the situation the way we would like to.

Instead, we tend to react in automatic ways that we may later regret (remember the analogy of the pot of boiling water?)

One reason for this is that we do not typically have time to notice the changes that are happening inside of us. We do not notice that: our body experiences a variety of physiological changes when anger arises; that we are flooded with a variety of underlying feelings; and that our thoughts start to twist and distort our perception of the situation around us. Without recognizing all of these changes happening within us, we find it extremely difficult to maintain our clarity and control.

So what do we do about that? We are going to practice to slow the anger process down - from the initial anger trigger all the way to our response to that anger trigger. Once the process is slowed down, it will be much easier to observe and notice what is happening in our internal experience. With all this extra data we can collect, it will then be so much easier for us to make active choices about how to express our anger instead of impulsively or compulsively reacting without any agency or control.

What would it be like for you if you could slow down the process of getting angry so that you could have time to respond the way you WANT to?

## Triggers

The first step in this slowing-down process is identifying your triggers.

If you were to make a list of all the things that make you mad day to day, would it be a short list or a long list? For some of us, when making a list of our anger triggers, we might notice that it is pretty short - the same few things tend to trigger our anger over and over again. For some of us, the list might be long - lots of different things that trigger our anger. Identifying these triggers can help us prepare to implement all the tools that we are learning. It's a lot easier to implement the strategies we have acquired when we can predict ahead of time when we will need to put them into action.

Reflect on this past week and make a list of the things that angered, frustrated, annoyed, or irritated you. Try to be as specific as you can. Look over this list and try to keep it in mind as you go through your days. Notice if having a heads up about what might trigger your anger helps you to be able to put into practice the tools you are learning.

# My Anger Triggers

1

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2

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3

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4

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5

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6

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7

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8

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9

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10

---

## Red Flags

Next we identify our red flags. To do this, we must first begin to pay attention to what is starting to happen in our body and mind once one of our anger triggers has occurred. We go back to our curiosity and our non-judgmental self-observation. What can you notice about what starts to happen in your body and mind right after one of the anger triggers in your above list occurs?

*Look at the below three categories for potential red flags and write down five from each category that you experience when one of your anger triggers occurs:*

**1. Physiological (what's happening in my body when I feel angry?)** Look for *sensations* in your physical body such as racing heart, muscle tension, constricted breathing, sweating, twitching, stomach upset, flushing of the face or head. List yours here:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_



**2. Emotional (what feelings/emotions am I having underneath the anger?)** Some common emotions you might be feeling right after an anger trigger occurs may be: feeling afraid, feeling ignored, feeling rejected, feeling insecure, feeling ashamed, feeling guilty. These are just a few of the many possible emotions you might be feeling when one of your anger triggers occur. List some of yours here:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Cognitive (what is happening with my thoughts when I feel angry)?** Some common cognitive distortions that you may experience when an anger trigger occurs is catastrophizing, should statements, fallacy of control, fallacy of change, blaming, and others from Chapter 6.

Another common red flag in this category is *perseveration* - experiencing what feels like an inability to “let go” of thoughts about the triggering event - the thoughts continue to circle and circle around in your mind without letting up. You may also experience racing thoughts or what feels like a “blank” mind with no thoughts. These are just a few of the cognitive experiences that you may be having when an anger trigger occurs. List yours here:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

Now, pulling out items from the above three categories, choose the FIVE most common things that happen in your body OR mind when an anger trigger occurs. What tends to happen in your body and mind that lets you know that you are definitely feeling angry:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

**These are your red flags! Look for these occurrences in your body and/or mind. When you notice one of the above is happening, that means anger is here! Time to increase vigilance - not of the person who has angered you, this should be clear by now! But rather, vigilance of your anger.**

Ok, you're doing great! You are slowing down the process of getting angry. Now on to the next step... applying some antidotes.

## Antidotes

Now that we have recognized and acknowledged what occurrences tend to trigger our anger, and we have identified some red flags that let us know anger is here, we are slowing the process down so that now we can do something productive to regulate and express our anger in a more productive and effective way.

The next step, then, is to apply antidotes. It's important to note that simply becoming more aware of and identifying your triggers and red flags in the moment is already an antidote! In fact, it is one of your most powerful antidotes. Good job! So even if you have just made it to this step, you are already putting yourself in position to be able to make some different choices about how you respond to an angering stimulus.

Now, we continue going step by step. Remember, we are slowing down this process, no need to rush. Again, the MAIN TOOL we have is our mindful attention and our ability to choose to direct our focus or mental awareness on OUR OWN EXPERIENCE and not on the offending party.

Continue to use your mindful awareness and with curiosity, proceed with your non-judgmental self-observation through the following three steps.

## 1. Antidotes to my physiological red flags:

Always begin with initiating your slow, drawn-out breath, nice slow long exhales. Stay present and aware of what is going on in your body. Make A CHOICE to direct your mental awareness to YOUR OWN PHYSIOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE. Soothe the physiological symptoms first because they are usually the easiest to become aware of. Here are some possible actions that can soothe what your body is going through:

- drink a glass of water
  - splash some cold water on your face
  - step away from the situation
  - go for a walk or run
  - place your hand on your heart to calm your heart rate
  - stretch muscles that have become tense
  - spend time with a pet
  - listen to music
  - take a cold shower or a hot bath depending on preference/situation
  - get in touch with someone and tell them about how you're feeling
  - do something you like to do
  - what else would help you soothe the physiological response your body is having in this moment:
-

The number one most important thing is that you continue to direct your mental awareness to your body and attend to whatever is going on within it! When you notice your anger is pulling you back to the situation in front of you, make a choice over and over again to ask yourself “what am I feeling in my body right now?” and continue to attend to it.

## **2. Antidotes to my emotional red flags:**

Next we look at the emotions under the anger. Ask yourself “do these emotions fit into a repeating pattern of emotions that I tend to feel often when this particular anger trigger occurs?” If so, notice how these emotions and especially this pattern of emotions are already within you, they have simply been triggered. Remind yourself that you are ultimately THE ONLY ONE who can facilitate the process of dissipation of these emotions.

Whenever your mind wanders back to the offending party, to what you’re going to say to them, to what you or they are going to do next, MAKE A CHOICE to redirect your mental awareness back to “what emotions am I feeling right now?” Challenge yourself to maintain and return awareness back to what emotions you are feeling and make space for them to be there.

Pulling from information in chapters 3 and 4 on characteristic of emotions and how to work with them, here is a powerful and simple 4-step process to attend to triggers in this category:

1. **Name the emotion:**

*I am feeling \_\_\_\_\_ right now*

2. **Affirm:**

*It's OK to feel \_\_\_\_\_ right now*

3. **Acknowledge:**

*It's really hard to feel \_\_\_\_\_ right now*

4. **Remind:**

*These feelings are temporary and I will not be  
feeling \_\_\_\_\_ for long*

Practice this 4-step process next time you feel any difficult emotion, especially ones that are underneath anger. Go back to chapters 3 and 4 for a review on emotions.

### **3. Antidotes to my cognitive red flags:**

Thirdly, we look at the self-angering thoughts that are being spun up in our mind by our emotions and bodily sensations. It's time to challenge the distorted thinking that is amping up our anger rather than helping us to tune down our anger and self-calm. Do some evidence checking. Is there any evidence for what your distorted thoughts are having you believe about the other person, yourself, or the situation? They may SEEM hard and true, but is there a different way to look at things? Do your best to challenge the distorted, self-angering thoughts you are experiencing! Go back to chapter 6 for specific strategies for addressing the various types of distortions.



# CHEAT SHEET

139

*Trigger*

(What made you mad?)

My child is not doing what I asked them to do

*Red Flags*

(body sensations,  
emotions, and cognitive  
distortions)

- 1 shoulders tense, heart racing
- 2 I feel ignored, invisible, out of control
- 3 Cognitive distortion: catastrophizing -my child is going to become an out-of-control monster

*Antidotes*

(what can you do to soothe body sensations, address the feelings under the anger, and challenge cognitive distortions?)

- 1 Slow exhales, step away for a min, water on face
- 2 Attend to feelings: it's really hard to be feeling out of control right now
- 3 Challenge distortion: Some moments are hard. This doesn't mean everything is out of control forever.

# CHEAT SHEET

140

*Trigger*

(What made you mad?)

There is traffic on the way home from work

---

*Red Flags*

(body sensations,  
emotions, and cognitive  
distortions)

1

my chest feels tight

---

2

I feel cheated (of my time)

---

3

cognitive distortion: should statement - I  
own my time, I am entitled to this time

---

*Antidotes*

(what can you do to soothe body  
sensations, address the feelings  
under the anger, and challenge  
cognitive distortions?)

1

Slow exhales and put hand on heart area

---

2

Name feelings: cheated, sad,  
uncomfortable

---

3

challenge distortion: am I entitled  
to this time, is it mine to own?

---

# CHEAT SHEET

*Trigger*

(What made you mad?)

---

*Red Flags*

(body sensations,  
emotions, and cognitive  
distortions)

1

---

2

---

3

---

*Antidotes*

(what can you do to soothe body  
sensations, address the feelings  
under the anger, and challenge  
cognitive distortions?)

1

---

2

---

3

---

# CHAPTER TEN:

*Putting it All Together*



Now we're going to take everything we've learned so far and put it all together.

Ok, so you find yourself in a situation when someone has done/not done or said/not said something to make you mad. What do you do now?

## BREATHE

144

Start your long, drawn-out exhales  
(chapter 5: BREATHING)

## GENUINE CURIOSITY

Ask yourself “what is happening inside of me?”  
(chapter 8: CURIOSITY)

## RECOGNIZE TRIGGERS

Identify what has triggered your anger  
(your TRIGGERS list from pg 129)

## IDENTIFY RED FLAGS

Body - what sensations am I feeling in my body?  
Emotions - what emotions am I feeling under my anger?  
Thoughts - what self-angering thoughts am I engaging in  
right now? (catastrophizing, blaming, etc)  
(your RED FLAGS list from pg 133)

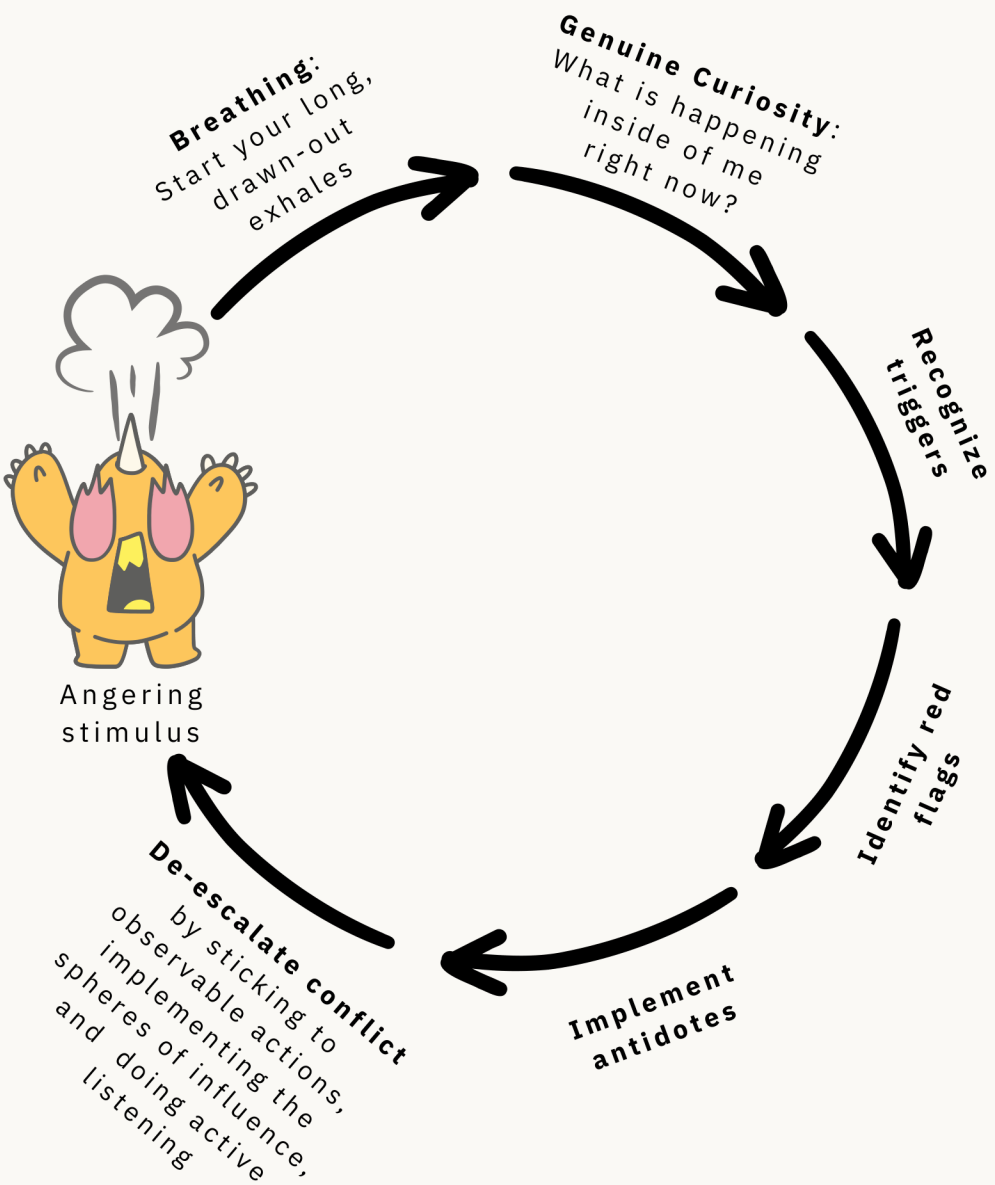
## IMPLEMENT ANTIDOTES

Body - walk away, water on face, stretch, etc.  
Emotions - Name my emotions and remember their  
nature: powerful but temporary and not reflective of an  
objective truth (ANTIDOTES on pgs 135-138)  
Thoughts- challenge my self-angering thoughts with evidence  
and logic (chapter 6: SELF-ANGERING THOUGHTS))

## DE-ESCALATE CONFLICT

Stick to observable behaviors  
Do active listening  
(chapter 7: DE-ESCALATING CONFLICT)  
Implement Spheres of Influence (Pg 51)

We can also visualize it in this way. Find somewhere in the cycle that you can hop into and practice over and over, even within the same conflict, as new angering stimuli pop up:



While you are practicing to implement these strategies, look for changes in these three categories:

### **Frequency**

How often are conflicts/behaviors occurring

### **Duration**

How much time is each conflict/behavior lasting each time it happens

### **Severity**

How intense/strong/severe are conflicts/behaviors when they do happen

Checking for these three measures - ***frequency, duration, and severity*** - can allow you to assess progress in a more accurate and nuanced way. Rather than despairing that you've lashed out in anger yet again - look to see:

**Frequency** - This is the first time I've yelled all week, that's down from daily yelling last month.

**Duration** - I yelled for 5 minutes today, that's down from 20 minutes yesterday.

**Severity** - I shouted at the top of my lungs last week, but today I was at a slightly lower decibel. Today I at least tried to implement some of my new tools so I was more in control of how I spoke. I wasn't doing that last week. Yay!



## Practicing with kids

My hope in writing this guide is that you will be able to use the information in it not only to manage your own anger and difficult emotions more effectively but that you will be able to teach the kids in your life how to do so as well. When we can help children understand, express, and manage the inevitable difficult emotions that they are going to feel throughout their lives, we help them be more successful at avoiding the pitfalls of toxic anger expression which we ourselves probably know all too well.

How can you pass these concepts and tools on to your kids? It starts with open and honest communication and with genuinely putting the effort into practicing these strategies yourself. I tell my clients all the time that I never ask them to try anything that I do not practice myself. If I don't know how to swim, how can I teach someone else to swim? If I don't know how to read, how can I teach someone else to read? It is imperative to be practicing these tools ourselves in order to show others how to do so.

If you are indeed practicing these and other anger management tools and you commit to having open and honest dialogue with your children, you will be putting yourself and your children in a great position to benefit from these strategies.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN:

## *Anger and Culture*



As humans on this earth, when we are dealing with our family's needs and struggles, we often find ourselves having to do so within the framework of the spoken and unspoken rules of the various cultures and subcultures of which we are a part. At any given time, we are a part of multiple cultures and subcultures both through our conscious choosing and also through no choice of our own, simply because of where, how, and to whom we were born.

As I have gotten older, I have reflected on the wonderful qualities endowed and taught to me within the cultures and subcultures that I belong to and yet I have also recognized the need to reflect critically on some of the messages that I have received about myself and the world within these cultures. In working with people from many cultures, I have realized one thing we all have in common: none of us come from perfect cultures. Culture is handed down from one generation of imperfect humans just trying to do the best they can in a crazy world to the next generation of imperfect humans just trying to do the best they can in a crazy world, and on and on down the line.

In reflecting on the truths we take for granted as absolute facts, it is incumbent upon us, the current generation of adults who are now in the midst of continuing this passing down of our culture to the next generation, to decide if we want to continue to pass down every single thing that was taught to us exactly as is or if we are willing to take our time in reflecting on both the good and the toxic elements of our own culture?

I have come to terms with the fact that I can respect my elders, my parents, and the generations before me without having to keep in tact every element that they passed down to me, especially if it's something that is clearly hurting me and will hurt my kids and grandkids. In this regard, we can especially look to the phenomenon of generational trauma that helps us to recognize the various pathways, both biological and psychological, that carry the effects of trauma from one generation to the next. We can recognize and acknowledge that the ways in which our ancestors handed down to their descendants projections of their own lived traumas can become integrated into what we call culture. This recognition presents us with an opportunity for personal and collective healing that will allow us to begin carving out new cultural pathways and norms.

What on earth does this have to do with anger management? Guess what? How you express your anger; the very rules, spoken and unspoken, by which you believe you are allowed to express your anger, are closely tangled with all the various cultures and subcultures that you are a part of, including aspects of your culture that have been mingled with the lingering and cascading impact of generational trauma.

Beyond the larger societal cultures of which we are a part, we must also contend with the family culture within which we spent a majority of our formative years. Each household has its own culture, which overlaps to some degree with the larger culture of which it is a part, but which has its own unique characteristics, traditions, rules, and expectations that are different in some ways than any other family culture in the whole entire world!

Here are some questions you can ask yourself regarding how your societal cultures and your specific family culture view and deal with anger and anger expression. Were you rewarded for expressing your anger in certain ways? Were you punished for expressing your anger in other ways? Were you rewarded or punished for getting angry about certain topics?

What was it ok for you to get angry about and what wasn't it ok for you to get angry about? How did your mother express her anger? How did your father express his anger? How did the other caretakers and adults in your life express their anger?

What were you taught both directly and by observation, about anger? What specifically happened to you when, as a child, teen, and young adult, you expressed your anger in whatever ways you did? What are some of your earliest memories regarding your own or someone else's anger? What are some of the spoken and unspoken rules in your culture(s) regarding expressing anger? Who is allowed to express anger and how? Who is not allowed to express anger and what happens if they do?

Ask yourself, too, what the people around you currently communicate to you about how you are expected to express and not express your anger. What are some of the unspoken expectations put on you with regard to how you are allowed or expected to express your anger at work, in your community, in your city, state, country, and beyond?

Allow yourself the space to reflect on the above questions. Get together with others in your culture and in your immediate and extended family and discuss together your experiences of the above questions. See how much your experiences overlap with theirs and to what extent are your experiences unique to you alone. Get together with people outside of your culture to discuss the above questions and see how much your experiences overlap and differ.

Having a better understanding of how our societal and family cultures address and deal with anger, stress, anxiety, and other difficult emotions as well as acknowledging how those around us expect us to express our anger today can help our current efforts in managing them.

### Intersectionality and Anger

Racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, religious intolerance, and other macro forms of fear and control spin powerful narratives and spit out stinging directives about what is allowed, acceptable, and most importantly *safe* for us in terms of how we express our anger. Expressing anger in certain ways may be allowed and acceptable for some in our society but discouraged and downright unsafe for others.

When we look at ourselves and the world through the lens of intersectionality, a term first coined in 1989 by pioneering legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, we can see that most of us straddle areas of marginalization and privilege and that some of these distinctions are static while some may change over the course of our lives depending on a variety of shifting factors.

With this recognition in mind, it's important to note that the way we allow ourselves to feel anger and how we express that anger is not wholly unique to our own personal experience, nor is it solely attributable to the groups of which we are a part, but importantly, is also greatly impacted by how we are perceived, labeled, and judged by those *outside* of our race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, culture or other grouping.

Based on any number of factors about you that are beyond your control or choosing, you may have received overt or subtle messages throughout your life that vilify you for expressing any sort of anger at all.



Conversely, Based on any number of factors about you that are beyond your control or choosing, you may have received overt or subtle messages throughout your life that teach you that anger is the **only** acceptable emotion for you to feel and express.

Do you recall particular incidents in which you were taught by someone who looks different than you or who lives a different lifestyle than you about what is allowed or not allowed, acceptable or not acceptable, safe or not safe for you in terms of expressing your anger? How did these messages, incidents, and “lessons” make you feel? How did it change the way that you expressed your anger? Did you ever share those experiences with anyone else or have you carried those messages silently within yourself?

Let’s open up the dialogue around intersectionality and anger expression! Let’s talk about the messages we have received about ourselves from others who don’t look, sound, dress, believe, or act like us. Who in your life would understand and relate to the messages you have been taught about what is acceptable and safe for you when it comes to expressing anger? Who in your life may not relate to these experiences but would be open to hearing about your experiences and sharing about theirs?

Can you commit to having this conversation with someone(s) in your life this week? - a parent, a grandparent, a sibling, a cousin, a friend, a neighbor, a member of your religious organization if you belong to one, a classmate, a co-worker, a mentor - talk to them about the experiences they may have had and the messages they received about what was ok for them to do and what was not ok for them to do when they felt angry?

On the other hand, what biases have *you* engaged in when it comes to the anger expression of those who don't look like you or who have different lifestyles than you? Reflecting honestly within yourself, have you sent messages to others about what is acceptable for them and not acceptable for them?

Again, most of us straddle both areas of privilege and areas of marginalization. Ask yourself: "have I judged or blamed others outside of my self-identified groups for how they express their anger based on biases or prejudices that I have held?" Ask yourself: "How can I disentangle myself from these biases?" These are difficult questions to grapple with but important nevertheless as part of our individual and collective journeys with healthy anger regulation and expression.

# CHAPTER TWELVE:

Anger as a Part of  
Clinical Presentations



It's important to note that in and of itself, anger does **not** represent a mental health disorder. As stated many times over the course of this guide, WE ALL feel angry sometimes.

However, for some of us, at some point in our lives, we may notice that we are experiencing irritability and anger *along with* other symptoms and that our anger and other symptoms seem to be related to one another in some ways. When we notice this, it may be helpful to look at the constellation of our symptoms all together, including our irritability and anger, and to see whether there are specific treatments that can help us not just with our anger, but with some of the other symptoms we may be experiencing as well.

Before we take a look at a few common diagnoses that include irritability as part of their diagnostic criteria, I would like to first look at a common mental health stereotype and myth we hear being thrown around when people are witnessed expressing anger and rage:

One of the common misperceptions I have heard many times is that someone who expresses rage or anger is “bi-polar.” So first, I'd like to address this.

Bi-polar disorder is a mood disorder, meaning that people who experience symptoms of bi-polar toggle between two moods: depressed mood in which they have low energy and feel depressed AND manic or hypomanic mood in which they feel an elevated, expansive mood and energy. (Irritability is a potential symptom of depression - one of the two poles of bi-polar disorder, however, rage/anger is not an absolute symptomatic criteria when diagnosing bi-polar disorder.) The toggling between these two poles *IS* a necessary criterion for diagnosing bi-polar disorder and without it, we cannot say that someone has bi-polar disorder. The two poles of bi-polar are often mistaken as being calm one minute and being angry the next minute. Again, this is a misperception of bi-polar disorder in that the two poles refer to a shift from depressed mood TO expansive mood not from calm TO angry.

So then, what are a few mental health diagnoses that commonly include irritability and anger?

**Depression.** Irritability is a potential symptom of depression and is present in the list of symptomatic criteria used to diagnose depression, especially in children and adolescents. Someone who is experiencing depression may experience heightened irritability and therefore be more likely to have moments where they express anger and rage.

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).** Irritability may be a symptom of GAD if irritability is experienced alongside anxiety and worry that feel uncontrollable and/or if there is the presence of other related symptoms such as being easily fatigued, muscle tension, sleep disturbances, feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge, and/or difficulty concentrating.

**PTSD.** Irritability is a potential symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Unhealed trauma and its effects on bodies and minds can result in moments where rage is experienced and difficult to manage. Many of us have not had the opportunity to process and heal from the traumatic experiences we may have experienced in our lives. However, there are various excellent and effective modalities and treatments to assist with healing the impacts of trauma and alleviating the associated symptoms.

**PMDD.** Irritability and anger may be present for people who experience PMDD or premenstrual dysphoric disorder. This diagnosis refers to a constellation of symptoms experienced during the menstrual cycle. PMDD is a diagnosable medical condition. It has some parallels to PMS (premenstrual syndrome), however, there are some key features that are required for diagnosis, including mood disturbance.

If you experience intense bouts of irritability and anger *along with* mood changes and other symptoms in the days leading up to your period, you might consider beginning to monitor your menstrual cycle, noting the prevalence of symptoms you experience. If you believe that you suffer from PMDD, please reach out to a qualified provider to be evaluated and to assess possible treatments. You don't have to continue to suffer! When you meet with a doctor, therapist, nurse practitioner, or psychiatrist they will ask you to track your period for a few months in order to properly evaluate so you might as well begin to do so now so that when you go in to meet with them, you have some good information to share. There are some great free apps available to help with tracking your period.

The tools and strategies in this guide are useful for anyone. However, if you think that your anger is possibly related to depression, GAD, PTSD, PMDD, or perhaps part of another clinical presentation, I encourage you, in addition to implementing the tools in this guide, to also reach out to a professional that can help you evaluate and treat the other symptoms that you may be experiencing. A therapist, a psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse practitioner, or even your primary care doctor are all good candidates that can help you determine if your anger is a part of a larger constellation of symptoms that can be addressed and alleviated with treatment.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN:



*Wrapping Up*





I would like to address a common refrain that I have said many times myself and that I have heard others in my life say to me: “I’m at the end of my rope” or “that was the last straw” or something else to the effect of *I have no patience left, I have no more internal resources to draw from to deal with everything I have to deal with right now.*

There have been particular times over the years when I have realized that I was feeling at the end of my rope A LOT. It didn’t matter if my kids asked a harmless question or made a perfectly reasonable request, I was chewing their heads off for everything, feeling exhausted, depleted, and over it. I would feel like there’s a literal rope inside of me that I had been using to measure how much patience and stamina I had and now I had simply come to the end of that rope, and that meant, *we’re done, from here on out you get Meanie Mama!* Meanie Mama has had about enough of you. Meanie Mama is mean and ruthless. Any little infraction, any untoward question, and you get the full Meanie Mama works and it ain’t pretty.

One time after giving my kids the full Meanie Mama treatment for a while and starting to feel pretty bad about it, I suddenly realized that I was stressing myself out more and making it harder on myself by constantly being at the end of my rope, not to mention the toll it was taking on my kids and on our relationship.

I began to think about whether I have any say so regarding where on my rope I am. Could I get back to the beginning of my rope; to a time when I had some patience, energy, and stamina to deal with the good, the bad, and the ugly of it all? I discovered that I do indeed have say so in that. I now try to practice, when I notice myself feeling like I'm at the end of my rope, that I'm going to be in the middle of my rope instead. That's good enough.

I continue to come back to this idea again and again. Every time I notice that I am impatient with my family or others in my life; when I am reacting angrily too often and without legitimate provocation, I return to this concept. Am I acting out of the belief that I am at the end of my rope? If so, what do I need to do to get back to the beginning or middle of my rope? It may be as simple as recalibrating my perspective in the moment. It IS possible for me to simply decide that I am not actually at the end of my rope; that I have plenty more rope left. Try it! Or it may take a little more than that. I may need to get away for a few hours or even a few minutes and engage in some self care. There's a ton of literature out there about self care. The idea here is to get back to a mindset where I can pull at least a little bit more from my inner resources of patience, strength, and confidence to deal with the challenges in my life in that moment.

## Baby steps

People rarely change in dramatic ways overnight. If we are trying to implement some of these strategies into our daily lives but are not seeing the results we would like to see right away, even and especially if the status quo is quite unpleasant, we tend to despair.

Instead, being realistic, we're better off looking for **small small** changes. Something to let us know that things are **not totally static**. Please remind yourself again and again:

Small steps can eventually lead to big change with time and effort.

Remember our simple way to measure if there is any progress being made in the areas that you and your family are working on. Look for changes in these three categories:

## Frequency

How often are conflicts/behaviors occurring

## Duration

How much time is each conflict/behavior lasting each time it happens

## Severity

How intense/strong/severe are conflicts/behaviors when they do happen

Checking for these three measures - **frequency, duration, and severity** - can allow you to assess small baby steps of change in a more accurate and nuanced way. Check:

**Frequency** - We're fighting once a day now, versus several times every day last month.

**Duration** - Our fight clocked in at an hour and a half today, that's down from 5 hours last week!

**Severity** - My anger was getting up to 10 the last few weeks but today I implemented some of my tools and it only got up to about 7.

Taking baby steps is not as glamorous or dramatic, but it is realistic. If I wake up today ready to take some baby steps towards my goal and to be ok with having today's results be just a touch closer to where I ultimately want to get, I will make steady progress.

Additionally, every day I am giving myself an opportunity to feel good about myself and my accomplishments, having set doable goals with realistic ideas about what I can expect to see as a result of my efforts. Then in some time from now, whether it's a week, a month, a year, twenty years or more, I will have built a strong foundation of positive change, one baby step at a time, and created a future for myself that is sustainable, self-directed, and stable.

When we are working on implementing positive changes into our lives, it feels good. We may experience increased calm and peace. We may pat ourselves on the back and think, man, I've got this thing! But then, something happens, life doesn't stop being imperfect. Family members continue to get caught up in old habits. We react in the same old way again. Arrggg! But wait, baby steps.

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*Yes you reacted in the same old way, but is it exactly the same or can you notice a baby step of change? - because that's what we're looking for!*

## Resilience

Resilience refers to our ability to bounce back after falling down. Resilience is key to sustainably implementing the strategies in this guide. As mentioned multiple times up to now, we are imperfect, we make mistakes. We will not be able to do any of this perfectly. I've experienced many times first hand how discouraging it is to lose it and freak out after being able to effectively manage anger for a while, thinking you're a hot stuff anger management wizard, only to be brought back down to imperfect human status once again. I've seen this kind of disappointment and discouragement too in my clients. The shock of being pulled back into old habits when we feel so good about our shiny new habits can be truly devastating in the moment. The guilt, shame, frustration, and disappointment in ourselves can actually bring us to our knees.

This is where resilience kicks in. We can have our little pity party. We can engage in some feel-good self-flagellation for a while. *Yes yes, I am an awful person, nothing will ever change, it's going to be like this forever, if not worse!* Cry it out. Eat ice cream. Binge watch something. And then it's time to get back up. Fix what can be fixed. Apologize for what you need to apologize for. Go back to the beginning of this guide and go from there. Learn the lesson you need to learn from this stumbling. I promise you that if you use this as a learning opportunity, you will actually be better off having made mistakes than having not made any at all.

## Closing

I want to thank you wholeheartedly for taking the time to read through this guide. If you've made it this far, I will venture to say that some profound changes are beginning to take shape in your life as a result of taking this information in and practicing to implement it. Make sure to monitor the ways in which you are experiencing improvements in your life and absolutely make sure to celebrate the little and big wins you are seeing!

Take care!

*Meanie Mama!*

**I'm Orly**

I am a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor in the state of Maryland. I have been providing individual and group counseling in person and online since 2012.

I created this guide so that I can bring some of the valuable tools and skills that I teach to my clients (and use myself) to anyone who is interested in learning them.