

Introduction



Marilyn was clearly angry when she arrived at my office, and she wanted me to know in no uncertain terms that counseling was likely to be a waste of her time. “I can’t count on anybody to do what they agree to do,” she said about her job. “It’s always more on my plate—and now I have to see you, putting me further behind.”

I knew Marilyn had been referred to me by her employer because she “needed to get a grip on her temper” with coworkers. What I learned a little later was that this bright, dedicated employee would lose her job if she couldn’t learn to manage her anger and intensity. As valuable as she was to her firm, others could not tolerate her blowups and constant expressions of dissatisfaction.

I’m happy to report that Marilyn is still employed today. With a little time and dedicated effort, she has learned to calm herself at the first signs of rising temper and can now defuse troublesome situations before her anger escalates beyond control. Perhaps even more important, she has also learned to identify and alter a lot of unrealistic expectations that, when unmet—as they were bound to be—infuriated her over and over throughout the day.

Austin’s fiancée “made” him come to see me. When I clarified that he had made the appointment and had come of his own volition, he allowed that he wanted to save this relationship but questioned his ability to change. “I just can’t take any more conflict with Laura. She is constantly trying to discuss her feelings about this and that, and it usually ends in an argument, with me walking out. She says that I’m ‘passive-aggressive’ and take my anger out on her by refusing to talk and ‘for-

getting' to do things she asks me to do. Now she won't go through with the wedding until I get help in being direct and honest with my anger. This is how I am. How can she expect me to change my personality?"

Austin felt he was just doing what came naturally in his interactions with Laura. But he too learned a different way to act on his feelings of anger and indignation, and today the couple is married and happily getting to know each other—over paths rocky and smooth.

Marilyn and Austin are clearly two very different people in how they express intense feelings, but they have one thing in common. The ways that they were expressing their anger were impacting others so negatively that both were in danger of losing what they valued most.

They are not alone. You have only to pick up a newspaper or magazine or listen to the news to learn about the many ways that poorly handled anger damages lives—in public settings, at the workplace, in schools and universities, and in our most human relationships. While these big explosions are always in the headlines, there are also many smaller, daily blowups and smolderings that cause less visible damage but greatly affect people's lives. Marilyn and Austin are prime examples. They may never make the six o'clock news, but the quality of their lives and relationships is being eroded by the wear and tear of poorly expressed anger.

Every week in my practice I see good and caring individuals who tell me they "can't" control their anger. While it is hard for them to admit this, perhaps because being angry feels like a flaw or losing control seems "weak," their lives are being affected in significant ways. I often meet men and women like Marilyn and Austin who have acted out their anger in ways that hurt the people they care about the most. Many experience health problems and physical discomfort, and their ability to work effectively is compromised by troubling anger-evoking thoughts and intense feelings that distract and disrupt. Some hold long-term resentments that create rifts in important relationships and find their ability to communicate disrupted by conflict unwittingly created by the ways they express anger.

I could see, early in my career, that helping my clients manage their anger would have a huge impact on their lives and pay extra dividends. Research shows, for example, that children are much less likely to become aggressive when their parents and the other adults around them effectively handle conflict with civility.

On a more personal level, I became interested in studying and treating anger because of my own journey with this powerful emotion.

Early in my marriage I found myself losing my temper to the extent that my wife and I became concerned and she suggested counseling for both of us. At first, I resisted. After all, I was an expert, right? I didn't need help from others, or so I thought. Once I was able to put aside my false pride, we met with a delightful and competent therapist who helped us see the real issues in our relationship and helped me focus on managing my anger. To this day, I am thankful for the lessons learned. I can also appreciate how hard it is for my clients to overcome their own reservations in seeking outside help.

In 2004 the first edition of *Taking Charge of Anger* was published, and I was very pleased with its reception by readers like you and by counselors who recommended it to their clients, as well as how helpful it has seemed to be to my own clients. This six-step program of anger management was developed over the past 25 years based on three resources. First, each separate step of this program has been well researched, or a clear foundation exists in the human learning literature in psychology. Most programs of anger management include one or more of the strategies I will present to you. Second, the sequence of steps, the examples, and the ideas for applying them are my own, based on the hundreds of people who have been willing to work with me to understand and alter their approach to anger in their lives. Since the first edition eight years ago I am even more convinced that anger and sometimes aggression are a part of the lives of all of us. Some of us cope with the stresses of too little time, too many things to do, and the impact of stressors like the economic downturn since 2008 better than others. Sometimes good people say and do "bad" things when their temper gets the best of them, and this book has been written for them. Third, I have trained more than 4,000 mental health, medical, social work, substance abuse, and school counselors from around the country in this program over the past 10 years. The dialogues we've had, the written feedback I've received on the program, and our discussions of real-world problems in implementing anger management have helped me further revise the six-step program you will read about in this book.

So, how did this book come about? First of all, the handouts I was giving therapists who attended my workshops were getting thicker and thicker: a great compendium of ideas from which a practitioner could choose, but a little unwieldy. Second, other therapists and I wished more and more that we had something to pass on to the individuals we were counseling. But nothing in print seemed to reflect the approach

I was taking. Most of the published books and training materials on “anger management” continue to focus on the intense, outward expressions of temper, like arguing, shouting, or physical aggression. Yet I’ve found that anger is often expressed in other, indirect ways, that it has “faces” that, while less extreme, can be equally problematic. I’m talking about cold anger, refusing to talk or withdrawing from others when angry; passive-aggression, withholding something others want as a way of punishing them; and sarcasm, putting others down with innuendo, hostile joking, and a caustic tone. Many of us express anger in one or more of these ways, and even though it seems less radical and “in your face,” it can be just as destructive to lives and relationships. Therefore this book, unlike most others, focuses on the full range of anger expression, each of five “faces” of anger that you will learn to identify in yourself and others and to manage in yourself. In the following chapters, I’m confident that you’ll find case stories that you can identify with. Each case I present is a composite of the many different and challenging clients I have worked with, disguised to protect confidentiality.

When I reviewed the books on anger management available to laypeople, I also found that they generally fit into two categories, neither of which was wholly effective in the way that my program seemed to be. Most offering practical help were workbooks, lacking depth and conceptual discussion, while those concentrating on theory gave abstract presentations that were hard to transfer to real life. In this book, therefore, I’ve attempted to offer an in-depth presentation of anger and its “anatomy” while also giving many step-by-step suggestions for practice and application of anger management skills in the real world. It’s difficult to practice a skill without comprehending why it works, and it’s impossible to develop a practical skill when all you have are abstract ideas.

The program in this book is based on my conviction that you need to fully understand and address each component part of an anger episode for a truly successful anger management outcome. Giving you techniques without a complete explanation of why and how they address each component of your developing anger is like trying to build a house without plans. You may have the lumber and bricks, but without a set of plans you don’t see the big picture of what you’re trying to accomplish. Therefore, this book will address each major component of your anger as you learn to:

1. Spot the unrealistic expectations you have for yourself, other people, and things that, when unmet, trigger your anger. You will understand the nature of expectations, how you learned them, and how and why it is so important to examine and alter some of them.
2. Dampen your rising anger before its flame becomes too intense to control. You will learn about the physiology of anger: how your body reacts and how you can learn to read each of these physical changes, early on, so you can exert control before the surge of your anger washes you along with it.
3. Identify how the thoughts that pop into your head once your anger is triggered can direct you toward or away from an unwanted face of anger. Using the ideas and techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), you will gain a conceptual understanding of the kinds of thinking that directly affect anger and how to alter your own unhelpful thinking.
4. Communicate your thoughts and feelings clearly, using a powerful face of anger I call “assertive problem solving.” You will learn common pitfalls that disrupt your efforts to be understood by another person, often eliciting anger in response. You’ll learn to defuse conflict and to derail others whose anger and tactics may have triggered your own anger in the past.

As you gain an understanding of the anatomy of your own anger, you will learn the most important key to transforming your current approach to anger: *self-awareness*. You’ll learn to be fully aware as your anger is triggered, as anger-producing thoughts arise, as your body begins to react emotionally. You’ll also see clearly how you express your anger to others. This self-awareness will allow you to replace your old automatic responses at any point in an anger episode: how to dampen physical arousal before it reaches the point of no return, how to catch and challenge automatic thoughts that fuel anger, how to look unflinchingly at how you’re really feeling and behaving once you get angry so that you have the option of changing anything that isn’t serving you well. You’ll also see how entrenched resentments of others, anger that was never resolved and continues to “fester” just beneath the surface of everyday life, can give you a hair-trigger temper

and how various elements of your lifestyle can counter your efforts to stay in control, whether it's the amount and quality of sleep you get or how much coffee or alcohol you consume. You will learn how to alter those stressors and to identify and confront your resentments in a new way that may lead to a final resolution of this hidden ire. You will also read about the benefits and issues of deciding to forgive someone who is important to you, but for whom you harbor resentment that does not seem to be lessening with time and may be affecting not only you but other loved ones who bear the brunt of it.

If this all sounds like a lot to learn and a lot to do, rest assured that that's the point of the six steps. I've broken it all down into skills that are eminently manageable for learning but also readily accessible once they're acquired, so you can grab a single simple skill when needed to head off a surge of anger. One of the biggest difficulties with controlling anger, after all, is that it seems to take hold so quickly. You've blown up before you were ever conscious that the fuse had been lit. With a collection of skills that can be put into play at various points in a single incidence of anger, you can halt the juggernaut and react to any stimulus with calm, assertive problem solving.

So even if you're not sure you want to work through this whole program, you might want to read through the book to get a sense of how manageable the six steps can be. And if you're not convinced that your anger is such a big problem in the first place, take an open-minded look at the following list and see if any of these descriptions rings true for you.

- You always have an indignant “Who, me?” response, but others in your life are starting to complain that your anger is a problem.
- Your wife (or husband, or children, or partner, or boss . . .) has told you several times that your blowup was the last straw. You have to do something about “your problem—or else.”
- You've been feeling exhausted and irritable a lot lately and often snap at others, then regret it.
- When you get angry, you find yourself holding it inside, punishing the object of your anger by not doing what he or she asks or by responding minimally when asked if something is wrong: “No—nothing. I'm fine.”

- ▶ You sometimes minimally respond or avoid speaking entirely with your spouse (or best friend, or colleague at work . . .) for days at a time when angry. You kind of enjoy others working hard to find out what's wrong with some version of "Why are you not talking? Is it something I did? Please talk to me."
- ▶ You can be downright sarcastic when someone irritates you. For example, you tell a personal and embarrassing story on the person or kind of make fun at her expense. When she reacts, you make her feel like she is overreacting: "What do you mean? . . . I was just having some fun with you. Why are you so sensitive?" The real issue is you're angry and don't come out and say it.
- ▶ You have frequent aches and pains (e.g., a throbbing headache or backache) when your work gets too aggravating. You often feel exhausted and out of sorts by the time you get home and sometimes take it out on your family.
- ▶ You've just "had it" lately and sometimes blow up at anyone who annoys you. You often lose it with "rude" drivers, clerks in stores, and anybody else who fails to meet your high standards for how people should act (e.g., competent, courteous, and mannerly).
- ▶ If you see yourself in the mirror I just held up, you can change things without making a major sacrifice in altering your personality or disrupting your life. It is not your worth or personality that is the problem. It is what you do when angry that must be changed, and the anger management steps beginning in Chapter 1 will provide you with all you need to get on this new track. Read this book to evaluate further (in Step One) exactly which faces of anger are negatively impacting your life and then read on to do something to change it.

How to Use This Book

I recommend that you read the book from beginning to end without skipping around, because each chapter provides a foundation for the next. Once you've finished, you can go back for a refresher to the chapters that best meet your needs. Be sure to do the "Just for Practice" exercises suggested at the end of certain chapters since they will greatly

help you make these new “habits” automatic when you’re in the middle of an aggravating situation.

If someone you care about is often involved when your unhelpful faces of anger show up, I suggest that you refer this person to my book *Overcoming Anger in Your Relationship: How to Break the Cycle of Arguments, Put-Downs, and Stony Silences*, also published by The Guilford Press (see Suggested Resources). Also, you might try reading and discussing the chapters of *Taking Charge of Anger* together. For example, couples often attend anger management workshops together so both can learn to identify and alter triggers that might inflame a discussion. The calmer party can also learn how to be most helpful when the other’s anger emerges, to avoid inflaming it further and to set the stage for assertive problem solving, the face of anger recommended in this book. It often feels good and motivates the “angrier” partner to know the other is willing to take responsibility for helping in the solution, not just blame and point a finger. Seek the help of a therapist if your anger is getting out of control too often or in ways that are potentially damaging to another person or to a relationship (more on when to get professional help in Chapter 2).

Here is the way the book is organized around the six steps I’ve been referring to.

► *Is anger a problem for you?* Step One, Chapters 1 and 2, will help you decide whether your expression of anger is a problem. Maybe someone has suggested you need some help with your anger and you’re not sure. Guidelines for diagnosing whether you have an anger problem will be followed by a brief questionnaire that helps you decide once and for all if you need to address your anger and which faces of anger are the culprits. You will also learn the components of an anger episode: why certain events trigger your anger, how your anger is escalated by how you think, and ideas for what you can do to resolve problems.

► *What triggers your anger?* Step Two, included in Chapter 3, will help you identify the kinds of situations that trip your anger, called *triggers*. Childhood experiences caused you to expect certain things from yourself, family, friends, and others and to have clear standards for how things should go in the world around you. Your anger is triggered when these expectations are not realized. But sometimes we expect too much or something that is very unlikely to happen. Learning how to

recognize and to alter your unrealistic expectations will be the focus for the remainder of this chapter.

► *How can you manage the intensity of your anger?* Step Three, comprised of Chapters 4 and 5, teaches you to be aware of your anger as it is first developing. At a lower level it is easier to contain and redirect your ire. You will learn to identify the physical changes (e.g., shoulders tight, face hot, breathing shallow) that signal your anger is escalating. Once you learn these anger signals, you will learn to dampen your anger by using one or more relaxation strategies that derail your body's anger response.

► *How can you use your thoughts to get at the root of your anger?* In Chapters 6 and 7, Step Four of anger management, you will learn that your thinking in the form of inner ideas or self-talk and the pictures or images you see on your mind's screen determine how you feel. Hundreds of research studies have attested to the power of your thinking to affect important emotions like depression, anxiety, and anger. You will learn to combat and replace cognitive distortions—self-talk that almost always fuels unhelpful anger—thus curtailing your anger before it can escalate.

► *How can you communicate calmly when conflict arises—staying the course even when provoked?* Step Five, Chapters 8 and 9, helps you identify ways of communicating that inflame conflict and make it difficult to remain calm when a difficult issue arises in your important relationships. Then ideas for communicating effectively will highlight assertive problem solving, the method I recommend for staying calm so you can resolve differences and come up with a mutually agreeable solution. You will then learn to manage difficult people and provocative situations while staying the course, defusing conflict as it arises.

► *How can you make what you've learned automatic?* Finally, in Step Six, you will learn to build up these new anger skills as the habits that guide your everyday behavior quite naturally. How can you change longstanding ways in which you've reacted? In Chapter 10 you will learn to make your new anger skills stick, to have them there when you need them as you let go of your old faces of anger. The new Chapter 11 will help you cope with unresolved resentments of others and to decide when and how to forgive in a way that sets you free of anger that may be affecting your own health and wellness. You've learned how to

express your anger over many years, however, so you just can't expect to change overnight. In Chapter 12 you will learn the common reasons for a setback and how to get back on track.

None of this means, of course, that you will no longer get angry. Anger is a most human and powerful emotion, imbued with passion and conviction that can have positive results as well as the negative ones we've been discussing. Anger can provide the energy for us to right a wrong, fight a righteous battle, and address important issues in our most personal relationships. It's what we *do* when angry that determines whether it is a helpful energy source or merely the fuel to create tension and conflict in our lives. The important question for you is: What is the role of anger in your life? Is it mostly helpful or more often than not a hindrance in realizing your hopes and dreams?

If you answer that your anger is mostly a problem, don't be too hard on yourself. The vast majority of people who act out anger in ways that are uncomfortable or even frightening to others are good and caring individuals who are reading from a lousy script. They've learned these negative faces of anger by trial and error or through the actions of powerful models (parents, aggressive peers, even teachers and coaches), not because they enjoy being mean-spirited, but as a way they've learned to get their immediate needs met. In my experience, once they learn that there are calm and effective alternatives like assertive problem solving, change comes quickly. After all, constant anger and argument, upset and uproar, are not fun and are inherently painful for all parties involved. The six steps of anger management are your new script; and the chapters ahead will help direct your efforts at playing a new role, one with less wear and tear for all concerned.

If you still have doubts, the first two chapters will make very clear just how significantly anger may be impacting the quality of your life, health, work, and most critical relationships. The material in the remaining chapters will arm you to approach any annoying or downright angering situation with new confidence that you can stay the course in controlling your emotions and take leadership in resolving conflicts.

Even if you end up concluding that anger is only a minimal problem for you personally, this book should be of immense value in preparing you to deal with the slings and arrows that others send your way. We live in what Dr. Deborah Tannen, a communication expert, calls an "Argument Culture" and must surmount the aggressive words

and actions of others all too often, even if we try to remain civil in our own demeanor. This book will provide you with new tools to quickly assess the angry expressions of others so you can cut off conflict before it takes root and defuse the most threatening situation or know when to make a graceful exit. Thus anyone who lives or works with others who display unhelpful faces of anger can benefit from this book.

The first step, Chapters 1 and 2, should immediately clarify where you stand and what you may need to focus on as you read the remaining chapters. Beginning that first step requires only turning a page or two. Good luck!

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