

ANGER
and
GUILT

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Our Foes
and Friends

CAROL ROGNE



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Our Foes and Friends
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Introduction

Though the feelings of anger and guilt are part of the human experience, these feelings are often misunderstood. We are bombarded with the violence in all parts of the world, so we naturally think of anger as aggressive anger that is used to control and harm others. However, our anger is a legitimate response when we have been emotionally, mentally, physically, or sexually abused, and can be expressed in appropriate and nonviolent ways. Anger is our friend when it alerts us to harmful situations or faulty ways of thinking that need to be changed. Anger is also a stage in the grieving process, which helps us to emotionally heal when we experience loss.

Guilt is our foe when we accept the false guilt that people project to control us, and when we generate guilt for ourselves by our irrational thinking. However, guilt is our friend when it prompts us to change inappropriate behaviors and make amends when our actions have been harmful or destructive to ourselves and others.

Few of us were taught how to deal with anger, guilt, or other difficult emotions. When we understand more about the feelings of anger and guilt and learn strategies to handle these emotions in positive ways, we are taking major steps in enhancing our emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and relationship health. We no longer have to experience anger and guilt as enemies that sabotage our life and relationships. Rather, we can embrace these feelings as friends who prompt us to take purposeful actions.



Part I:

Anger — Our Foe and Friend



Chapter 1

The Powerful Emotion of Anger

Emotional health requires acknowledging our natural emotions, including our anger. However, we typically equate anger with aggression and, therefore, tend to view all expressions of anger as harmful and evil. Aggressive anger is so prevalent and destructive that it overshadows how the feeling of anger can be beneficial to us. Most of us have to revise our thinking before we can believe that anger is a healthy emotion that can be our friend.

Anger is a feeling, and feelings are neither good nor bad. Rather, it is how we express our anger that frequently leads to harmful acts against ourselves and others. Although we need to experience our human emotions because they provide information to us, we are socialized in our society to ignore, repress, deny, minimize, and be dishonest about our feelings. We may have learned and still believe that feelings are unimportant, irrational, and unpredictable. However, if we want a healthy emotional life and healthy relationships, we need to develop a healthy relationship with all of our emotions, including anger.

Common views about anger

- ✓ Anger is evil and should not be experienced.
- ✓ Suppressing anger is more virtuous than expressing anger.

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- ✓ Religious people don't get angry.
- ✓ Women should not express anger.
- ✓ Adults can be angry, but children should not be angry.

Anger is an emotion that has been problematic for human beings for many centuries, as evidenced by Aristotle's Challenge: *Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way—that is not easy.*

The feeling of anger is purposeful, and there are legitimate reasons to be angry. Anger is a signal to stop, acknowledge, respect, listen, and reflect on what our anger is communicating to us.

Legitimate reasons to be angry

- Childhood or current physical, sexual, emotional, or mental abuse
- Anger at an abusing parent and the parent who did not protect us from abuse
- Unfairness, dishonesty, inefficiency, propaganda, prejudice, disrespect, and inequities in work, legal, welfare, mental health, religious, medical, or political systems
- Injustice, discrimination, and violation of basic human rights
- Being controlled, harassed, and stripped of personal power
- Anger from hurtful experiences in past relationships
- Having a person be overly dependent on us because they are under-functioning as adults
- Being held hostage in a relationship or job
- Working with under-functioning coworkers and/or supervisors
- Receiving faulty or unnecessarily complicated instructions so success is not possible

- Having our personal space invaded
- Having progress toward goals blocked by controllers
- Being viewed and treated as inferior and inadequate
- Having the criteria for success raised by a controller, just when success is within reach
- Being angry because we are over-extended and doing too many things for too many people
- Feeling angry when people are rude, unfriendly, uncooperative, and negative
- Being punished for our strengths or when speaking out for needed changes

Our healthy anger might prompt us to speak up and confront abuse that we are experiencing. Societal reforms start with the anger that is generated when people experience injustice and oppression. When we use our anger for motivation to create healthy change in ourselves, our relationships, in our communities, and in our world, we are honoring this emotion and working with it in productive ways.

What we learned about anger in our childhood is likely to be the way we express anger in adulthood. Our parents may have carried anger internally and the anger was not expressed, or we may have experienced our parents frequently fighting and yelling at each other or being physically violent. Some of us saw nitpicking, bickering, or cold silence. None of these ways of dealing with anger are emotionally healthy.

When we were children and were angry, we may have been shamed, even though our anger may have been legitimate, and told, “You shouldn’t be angry.” Young girls are taught in our culture to be nice, passive, and that being angry is unacceptable. Boys are socialized to be competitive, strong, and are often told to physically fight back when challenged. One of the reasons why our adult

relationships become dysfunctional is because we learned unhealthy ways of expressing anger in our childhood.

We may have been told to stop feeling angry, or stop feeling any emotion. Few children are invited to share their anger by a parent saying, “You seem angry. Let’s talk about why you are angry. Maybe I can help you.” Nor were we taught how to embrace and express other feelings in appropriate ways. We may have learned to suppress not only our anger, but our fears, insecurities, and worries. To please our parents and avoid reprimands, we may have never talked about our feelings, least of all anger. Now, as adults, our feelings are ignored and seldom expressed, especially our anger.

- Meghan shares:

When I was a young child, I was told, “Shame on you!” when I talked about my anger, so I didn’t talk about my feelings when I was angry. When I was young, I was lucky, because there weren’t too many things that made me angry. But when I was an adult, I experienced anger in my marriage and sometimes at work. I suppressed the anger, thinking something was wrong with me. I tried to keep a lid on my anger. When I had reached my limit, my anger usually came out in tears, but then I would be so upset that I couldn’t express what I needed to say and I wasn’t taken seriously.

It is not uncommon to behave in ways that are similar to a dysfunctional parent’s behavior, but we seldom recognize this and become defensive when someone points out, “Your behaviors are just like your father’s...or just like your mother’s.” Despite our intentions of being totally opposite of a dysfunctional parent, we frequently end up displaying the same behaviors, which is seldom in our awareness, but evident to others.

We can revise our understanding of anger and realize that anger is not the same as aggression and that it is how we express anger that often causes harm to ourselves or others. We can identify the cause of our anger, develop a plan, and take action to correct the situation and express our anger appropriately.

Ways of dealing with anger

Our anger is often fueled by fear, loss, unmet needs, or hurt. When we are angry, we may suppress our anger, be passive, passive-aggressive, assertive, or aggressive. We also deal with our anger differently in different situations. Below is a comparison of the different ways people suppress or express their anger. The healthy expression of anger is the assertive, honest position.

Suppressing anger	Expressing anger passively or passive-aggressively	Expressing anger assertively	Expressing anger aggressively
Anger is suppressed and not acknowledged.	Anger is expressed in ways that are indirect and manipulative.	Anger is communicated in direct, honest, and respectful ways.	Anger is directed outwardly in aggressive ways that harm others verbally or physically.

Suppressing anger

Some of us are forced to suppress our anger because if our anger is expressed, there might be serious consequences, including risking physical safety. But even in less serious situations, we routinely suppress, ignore, or try to escape from our anger by over-working or being involved with addictions or addictive activities. We may be carrying anger from childhood or other relationships in the past which generated emotional pain, but keep our anger within ourselves. Suppressed anger consumes emotional energy and remains in our consciousness. If we check our thoughts, we often brew about recent or past angry-making situations that caused emotional pain. Although we may believe that our suppressed anger does not affect our lives, our anger can lead to resentments, thoughts of revenge, depression, or physical illness.

There are several reasons why we suppress our anger. If we believe that all anger is evil, we hesitate to admit that we are angry. We may not communicate our anger because we do not want to hurt or offend anyone. We suppress, rather than express our anger because we have a fear of being rejected or disliked. People-pleasers often carry suppressed anger because they feel like people are taking advantage of them, despite the fact that pleasers frequently offer their services and others simply accept. Women often suppress their anger because they have been taught that expressing anger is not feminine, that men distance themselves from women who express anger, and that anger, even though it might be expressed appropriately, leads to increased conflict. The message that is often given to women is that “Nice women don’t get angry,” so they often withdraw and are silent. If women suppress their anger, they are viewed as being cooperative, kind, and virtuous, but they are risking their emotional and physical health.

When we withdraw, ignore, avoid controversial and unpleasant

communication, or are almost always compliant when others make demands, we are more than likely suppressing our anger. Suppressing anger is being disrespectful of ourselves. The anger festers within us because we do not stand up for ourselves and confront abusive or negative behaviors directed toward us or our children. If we routinely suppress our anger, we might be setting ourselves up to explode with aggressive anger, or do the opposite and break down and cry. When we do this, our credibility is questioned and the other person often concludes or makes accusations that we are out of control or exaggerating the problem. As a result, there is no resolution of the conflict, and chronic anger bleeds into our emotional life each and every day.

Passive and passive-aggressive expressions of anger

Passive-aggressive expressions of anger are often difficult to identify because they are “under the radar,” subtle, and manipulative. Called “sideways” anger, passive-aggressive behavior is intentionally behaving in ways that indirectly communicate disapproval or being upset. Behaviors are designed to get attention or agitate the other person involved. People who are passive-aggressive often feel like they are innocent victims who are treated unfairly and misunderstood. They often cause stress by their indirect and convoluted ways of communicating, which involves distorting and twisting what is being said by the other person.

Typical passive or passive-aggressive expressions of anger:

- Sulking, being testy, moody, impatient, or silent
- Being under-responsible so that others will pick up the slack
- Withdrawing in a way that is meant to be noticed by others
- Letting the other person make the decisions, and then complaining about the outcome

- Acting inert, apathetic, and uncaring
- Manipulating by making others feel guilty
- Procrastinating to get attention or irritate others
- Interrupting others' schedules to get attention
- Being argumentative and aggravating
- Complaining about and criticizing other people but not speaking directly to them
- Deceptively hiding anger by laughing, joking, and saying that "everything is just fine!"
- Teasing and badgering others and claiming that they are just being humorous

These dysfunctional ways of expressing anger sabotage healthy communication and create more anger and emotional distance in significant relationships.

Aggressive expressions of anger

Expressing anger aggressively is often a successful way of getting what we want from others. The behaviors are similar to the temper tantrums of young children wanting their way immediately and are an abusive way of saying, "Pay attention to me!" or "I want my way!" or "You are not meeting my expectations!" If we are aggressive with our anger, there is a danger that our rational mind might be taken over by angry emotions, and we act out of blind rage that is seemingly out of our control.

Aggressive anger may escalate conflicts and result in physical aggression and violence. Or, the other person may cave in and comply. Anger that is routinely expressed aggressively is similar to an addiction. We may experience a temporary "high," but we are repeatedly sabotaging ourselves and the relationships that are often the most important to us. Though aggressive anger is destructive, many

people continue to have angry outbursts and overlook the harm they are creating within themselves and within their relationships.

Typical aggressive expressions of anger:

- Being hostile and verbally abusive
- Yelling, screaming, demanding, name-calling, and using profanity
- Bullying and badgering a person who is weaker
- Being disrespectful, dishonest, and defensive
- Being sarcastic and manipulating by claiming that the sarcasm is being humorous
- Dominating, threatening, or intimidating in efforts to control
- Believing that power and force are ways to get things done
- Attempting to win, often at the expense of others
- Taking a superior position by putting the other person down
- Aggressively blaming others to make them feel guilty

Anger that is expressed aggressively demonstrates a lack of emotional maturity. We are angry more frequently and have overly strong reactions to challenging and disappointing situations. One reason for a lack of self-control and emotional immaturity is that using mood-altering substances arrests emotional development. If we started using alcohol or drugs in our adolescent years, we continue to act like many adolescents, who tend to be preoccupied with the self, want their own way immediately, and lack self-control.

There are common gender differences regarding the expression of anger. If women speak aggressively and in a controlling manner, they are often criticized, and their aggressive communication may discredit them as well as their message. In contrast, men who speak in an aggressive way are likely to be attentively listened to, and people are more likely to comply with their demands.

Assertive expressions of anger

Emotional health requires that we express our anger assertively. If we are angry because of what is happening in a relationship, our anger is expressed in honest and respectful ways, using normal voice tones when speaking directly to the person about the specific issue. Because we are in control of ourselves, we do not become defensive, withdraw, or overpower others. We confront with confidence, kindness, and consideration for ourselves and for the other person.

Being assertive starts with acknowledging angry feelings, listening to the information our anger brings to us, and activating anger skills such as:

- Cooling down before engaging in a conflict
- Setting a time and place to meet
- Respecting self and others
- Listening as well as speaking
- Being specific as to the real issue
- Using “I” messages saying, “I think..., I feel..., I fear..., I want...” An “I” statement is speaking about ourselves rather than criticizing, blaming, or making the other person responsible for our feelings or reactions. Defensiveness on the part of the other person is less likely to happen with “I” statements.
- Being open, direct, honest, firm, and kind
- Being committed to working toward a win-win solution
- Taking a time-out if the internal anger or the conversation is escalating
- Refraining from placing guilt on others in order to get compliance
- Being confident and calm

When we are assertive, we are creating the highest probability that positive change will occur. If we have spoken assertively and skillfully, and change does not occur, it forces us to determine whether we can remain in a relationship where true and effective negotiation continually proves to be impossible.

The way we deal with anger affects all aspects of our lives

- **Mental health.** Any emotion that is extreme and expressed in ways that are harmful to ourselves or others becomes problematic. Whether the anger is suppressed or expressed passively, passive-aggressively, or aggressively, it affects our ability to think clearly and rationally and make good decisions. When our mind is constantly thinking angry thoughts, we get trapped in a negative mind-set which sabotages mental health. Anger directed inward toward the self is one of the many causes of depression.
- **Emotional health.** Emotional health is adversely affected when anger is expressed inappropriately:
 - ✓ When we suppress anger, we have less awareness of other feelings.
 - ✓ When we are passive or passive-aggressive in our anger expressions, we are harmful to both ourselves and others.
 - ✓ When we use aggressive anger to control others and make demands, we harm others and create distance in relationships.
 - ✓ When we lash out at others with aggressive anger, we feel guilt and remorse, although these feelings are often suppressed.
 - ✓ Chronically angry people are critical of others because they are critical of themselves, which compromises emotional health.

- ✓ Angry people often believe that they are a victim and that other people, who are believed to be incompetent or insensitive, make their life miserable. Their anger is often excessive and disproportionate to the situation. This negatively affects their emotional health.

- **Physical health.** Suppressing anger is storing the anger within our bodies, and may compromise our physical health. Being aggressively angry is physically distressing to our bodies, creating physical sensations including a racing heartbeat, faster breathing, tense muscles, shaky hands, sweating, a flushed face, heavy energy in the chest and abdominal area, a burning sensation in the stomach, or a lightning bolt piercing the head or chest. Adrenaline and other stress hormones are released. Anger outbursts are stressful to our nervous and cardiovascular systems and can create or exacerbate existing health problems. Suppressed and aggressive anger have been linked to heart disease, elevated blood pressure, high cholesterol, headaches, stomach and intestinal diseases; hormone, respiratory, and skin disorders; cancer and arthritis.

- **Spiritual health.** When anger is suppressed, we are harming ourselves. When anger is aggressively directed outward, our anger is abusive to others. Harming either ourselves or others is contrary to spiritual principles.

- **Relationships.** When we suppress and are silent regarding situations that cause anger, relationships suffer because the anger builds up and serves as a barrier to emotional intimacy. When we express our anger aggressively, others become fearful and often feel like they are forced into compliance, which generates resentments and a desire to escape from the angry, controlling person.

- **Parenting.** Aggressive expressions of anger, combined with the physical size of an adult, are frightening to children. The way that we express our anger is often the way children will express their anger, unless there are other causes, such as mental health issues. Not only does teaching children healthy ways to deal with anger enhance their lives, but when they are adults, they will teach their anger knowledge and skills to the next generation.
- **Work performance and work relationships.** If we have angry outbursts in our work setting, we are likely to be viewed as out of control and unstable. Our inability to handle our anger will sabotage our success as employers or employees.

Reflecting on my anger:

The main anger situation I have in my life is:

I do not allow myself to get angry because:

If I ever got angry, I would:

I have anger from the past because:

I frighten others with my anger when:

My anger challenge:

Anger and religion

Organized religion frequently implies that anger is un-Christian, immoral, and evil, most likely because anger is viewed as aggressive and harmful to others. However, Jesus was angry because merchants had set up a marketplace in the holy temple. He expressed his anger by overturning tables and his words were, “My temple is a place of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves.” He followed the most important rule of anger, that of not hurting oneself

or others. He demonstrated that anger can be used as motivation to confront wrong actions. This must be an important lesson for us because the story is covered in all of the gospels (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18, Luke 19:45-56, John 2: 13-17). Other King James Version scripture passages regarding anger are:

- Ephesians 4:26. “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” This is directing us to express anger, but not in ways that are sinful because of harming others or ourselves. This is also a directive to not harbor our anger within ourselves.
- Colossians 3:21. “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” This is directing parents to not agitate children with anger because it is emotionally harmful. Children may become discouraged because they are powerless to change the behaviors of parents who express their anger aggressively.

Intensity levels of anger vary

People experience anger with different levels of intensity and express their anger in different ways. Some people have “hot” responses, some “warm,” and some “cool” responses to the same situation. We all know of people who become extremely angry, while others stay calm. Reasons for different experiences and expressions of anger include: the level of emotional maturity and self-control, the amount of internal anger within the person, whether old anger is being triggered by a current situation, whether the person has a need to feel superior, right, and control others; and what we learned as children regarding anger. Another factor is that some people have a wide range of emotions, while others are guarded and seldom express their feelings.

Anger is our foe:

- When our anger is emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually destructive to ourselves and others
- When the intensity of our anger is not appropriate to the situation, which indicates that we have unresolved past anger
- When we express anger in abusive ways
- When we are in a constant state of anger at ourselves or others
- When we are defensive when given feedback, rather than hearing and acting on valid and truthful information
- When our anger interferes with our rational thinking
- When our angry outbursts expose our lack of self-control
- When our anger sabotages emotional intimacy because it creates fear in others
- When our anger gives us a sense of power over others
- When we feel better by hurting others with our aggressive expressions of anger
- When we are so angry that we make impulsive and negative choices
- When we express our anger aggressively, and situations escalate into physical violence
- When we express anger to get attention, which reveals our lack of maturity
- When we are angry to test the limits in a relationship to see how far we can go without being rejected or abandoned
- When we pattern our angry behaviors after the violence in video games or the media and not only accept, but are entertained by violence

Anger is our friend:

Anger, rather than being an enemy that sabotages our life, can be a beneficial, life-fostering friend. Anger stands ready to provide the motivation to start what we need to start, finish what we need to finish, stop what we need to stop, release what we need to release, confront what we need to confront, clean what we need to clean, repair what we need to repair, move ourselves out of “park” and go forward with our life that we, alone, design.

Our anger can help us change behaviors when we are angry at ourselves for:

- Eating too much
- Not exercising
- Being lazy
- Spending too much money
- Drinking too much alcohol and having another miserable hangover
- Getting a DUI or speeding ticket
- Smoking
- Receiving late fees and/or overdraft charges
- Wasting time
- Caving in to the manipulations of controllers
- Facing consequences that we could have prevented if we were responsible
- Agreeing to do things we don't want to do
- Not starting a recovery process for an addiction
- Not making difficult decisions about our life and moving forward toward our goals

In these and other types of situations, we can listen to anger as a friend, hear the message, and act on it, rather than continually

reprimanding ourselves for not taking action. When we listen to our anger regarding these types of behaviors, it is usually obvious what we need to do. If there is a reason that we are unable to act on what our anger is communicating to us, we can access help, such as therapy or a recovery program, a life coach, or support for anxiety or depression.

Other important ways that anger is our friend:

- Anger asks us to stop, listen, pay attention, and speak up about something that needs to change in our lives, such as being emotionally abused in a relationship.
- Anger provides energy and strength to defend ourselves or escape when we are in physical danger.
- Anger provides motivation and energy to escape from an abusive relationship.
- Anger is a stage in the *grieving* process that helps us emotionally recover from loss.
- Anger reminds us that our irrational thinking may be generating unnecessary anger.
- Anger challenges us to identify our controlling and self-serving behaviors.
- Anger alerts us when we create our own anger by having unrealistic expectations of others.
- Anger provides energy that can be directed into creating healthy change.
- When being proactive rather than reactive with our anger, we can use our anger for motivation to make good decisions for ourselves and take positive action.
- Most societal reforms start with the anger energy that is generated when people experience injustice and oppression.
- Anger might send an alarm to us that we have an accumulation

of anger from our childhood because we lived in a dysfunctional home.

- Anger alerts us to problematic issues in our family relationships.
- Anger provides motivation to confront and work for changes or to take an unpopular, but morally right position, despite opposition.

These and possibly other reasons lend support to the belief that anger can truly be a supportive friend who has our best interests in mind. Learning anger skills and dealing with conflict peacefully within our families is an important contribution to achieving peace in our world.

Key Points:

1. Anger is commonly viewed as aggression. However, aggression is only one way of expressing the feeling of anger.
2. Anger is appropriate and valid for many reasons, including childhood or current abuse, and is a stage in the emotional healing process of grieving.
3. Anger is often suppressed, expressed passively, passive-aggressively, or aggressively. However, being assertive is the most effective and respectful way of expressing anger.
4. Anger is our *foe* when we emotionally, mentally, physically, and sexually abuse others.
5. Anger is our *friend* when recognized as a source of information and motivation to make changes in our way of thinking, our behaviors, in our relationships, and in our world.