

Chapter 1

Anger: The Universal Emotion

In This Chapter

- ▶ Examining the myths about anger
- ▶ Understanding what emotions are
- ▶ Getting help when you need it

What do college students, corporate executives, housewives, and preliterate tribesmen in Borneo and New Guinea have in common? They all recognize an angry face when they see it. Anger — along with joy, fear, sadness, and surprise — is a universal emotion. All cultures around the globe have anger in their peoples as an integral part of day-to-day life.



Anger is part of the survival mechanism of human beings. When faced with a threat — not unlike other animals — humans either run away or attack. Anger is the fuel behind that attack. But anger can also have the opposite effect and lead to our untimely demise. As Chapter 3 explains, too much anger can cause heart attacks, precipitate disabling work injuries, and facilitate risky sexual behavior. Anger truly is a double-edged sword.

Dispelling Common Anger Myths

Before you can manage your own anger, you need to be aware of what anger is and isn't. Unfortunately, myths about anger seem to abound. Here are some of the myths I want to dispel right from the get-go:

- ✓ **Males are angrier than females.** If by angrier you mean how often people experience anger, it's simply not true that men are angrier than women. Surveys show that women get mad just as frequently as men — about once or twice a week on average. On the other hand, men tend to report more *intense* anger, while women tend to hang on to anger *longer*.

- ✓ **Anger is bad.** Anger serves a variety of positive purposes when it comes to coping with stress. It energizes you, improves your communication with other people, promotes your self-esteem, and defends you against fear and insecurity. (Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., were all angry men — but they turned that anger into social reform that made the world a better place.)
- ✓ **Anger is good.** When it leads to domestic violence, property damage, sexual abuse, drug addiction, ulcers, and self-mutilation, anger is definitely not good.
- ✓ **Anger is only a problem when you openly express it.** As few as 10 percent of people act out their feelings when they get angry. The other 90 percent either suppress their anger (“I don’t want to talk about it!”) or repress their anger (“I’m not angry at all — really!”). People who express their anger are the squeaky wheels who get everyone’s attention; people who repress or suppress their anger need anger management just as much.
- ✓ **The older you get, the more irritable you are.** It’s the other way around — as people age, they report fewer negative emotions and greater emotional control. People — like wine and cheese — do tend to improve with age.
- ✓ **Anger is all in the mind.** Nothing could be farther from the truth. Emotions are primarily physical in nature. If anger were only a state of mind, why would someone say, “I feel like I have a big fist in my chest when I get that angry”? Believe me, when you get mad, that emotion is instantly manifested in muscles throughout your entire body, the hairs on the back of your neck, your blood pressure, your blood sugar levels, your heart rate, your respiration rate, your gut, even your finger temperature (it warms up!) — long before you’re aware of what’s happening.
- ✓ **Anger is all about getting even.** The most common motive behind anger has been shown to be a desire to assert authority or independence, or to improve one’s image — not necessarily to cause harm. Revenge is a secondary motive. A third motive involves letting off steam over accumulated frustrations — again with no apparent intent to harm anyone else.
- ✓ **Only certain types of people have a problem with anger.** Actually, over the years I’ve spent helping people with anger management, I’ve worked with all types of people — truck drivers, college professors, physicians, housewives, grandmothers, lawyers, policemen, career criminals, poor people, millionaires, children, the elderly, people of various colors, nationalities, and religions. Anger is a universal emotion!
- ✓ **Anger results from human conflict.** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. One of the leading experts on anger has found that people can get angry by being exposed to foul odors, aches and pains, and hot temperatures — none of which involve (or can be blamed on) the actions of others.

Understanding the Role of Emotions in Your Life

Emotion is a compound word. The *e* stands for “energy” and the *motion* means exactly what it says — “movement.” Emotions *move* you to act in ways that defend you from threat, lead to social attachments and procreation, cause you to engage in pleasurable pursuits, lead to reattachment after some type of meaningful loss, and lead you to explore your environment. Without emotion, life would be at a standstill.



Psychiatrists have a term for people who lack appear to lack emotions — including anger: It's *alexithymia*. Alexithymics tend to:

- ✓ Have difficulty identifying different types of feelings
- ✓ Appear stiff and wooden in relating to others
- ✓ Lack emotional awareness
- ✓ Lack enjoyment
- ✓ Have trouble distinguishing between emotions and bodily feelings
- ✓ Appear overly logical when it comes to decision making

Putting the focus where it needs to be

For most of my early academic career, like many other psychologists, I was caught up in the debate about whether anger was best kept in or let out. The emphasis of my research at the time was on how people express their anger and its impact on health. I was one of the anger-out proponents (and proud of it!), who was firmly convinced that venting anger was the right way to go — better to protest aloud than suffer high blood pressure or so I thought.

In hindsight, I now see that my colleagues and I were wrong in our appraisal of what the focus of anger management should be. What I have since discovered — more from practice than science — is that the real culprit when it comes to anger is *how much* of it a person experiences. The logic here is simple: If you rarely get

angry; if, when you do, it's not too intense; and if it's over in a minute, it really doesn't matter whether you keep it in or let it out. You don't have enough of it to cause you, or anyone else, a problem.

Similarly, if you're repeatedly angry throughout the day, your anger is extremely intense, and you stay that way for the rest of the day or longer, it doesn't matter whether you're an anger-in or anger-out type — either way you have a problem. If you keep that much anger in, you'll pay a price — in the form of depression, heart attack, resentment, and so on. If you let that much anger out, you'll pay a different price — in the form of legal fees, divorce, job loss, and so on. The mode of expression simply determines the type of consequences you pay.

Habituation: It can be a bitch

The worst thing about bad things — including a bad temper — is that you get used to them, and that makes it difficult for you to change. Overweight people know they need to lose weight, but they continue eating too much (and exercising too little) nevertheless. Smokers know that they're killing themselves with every drag on those cigarettes, but very few quit. The same goes for alcoholics and drug addicts and people who are addicted to gambling. People even get accustomed to poverty and illiteracy. Call it complaisance, inertia, a lack of will power, or not wanting to leave your comfort zone — it all amounts to the same thing: a built-in resistance to change.

I believe in being honest with my angry clients, so I tell them from the outset that it's far easier to stay the same than it is to change. So, if you're looking for the easy way out, stay like you are and live with the consequences. Not changing requires absolutely no energy, motivation, or commitment on your part — but change does. If you think you're up to it, this book is for you — and the rewards will be amazing. As a friend of mine who struggled for years with a bad temper said, "Since I took control of my anger, I have a peaceful mind. I don't have to go to bed every night wondering what I have to do to get even with someone." What a wonderful testimony to the power of anger management.

- ✓ Lack sympathy for others
- ✓ Appear perplexed by other people's emotions
- ✓ Be unmoved by art, literature, and music
- ✓ Have few, if any, emotional memories (for example, memories of childhood)

You want to have emotions but you want to be in control of those emotions. You want to let anger move you to write a letter to the editor in your local newspaper about some social injustice. You want your anger to move you to stand up for yourself when your talents are being exploited in the workplace. Anger that says to your spouse, "Hey, something is not working here" is good for a marriage. But if your anger only moves you to hurt others — or yourself — then you definitely have a problem. Think of anger as a tool that can help you throughout life if you know how to use it — and think of *Anger Management For Dummies* as a reference on how best to use that tool.

Getting the Help You Need



Everybody needs support — nobody can go through life completely alone. When you're embarking on a major change in your life, the help of other people is especially important. And believe me, managing your anger is a major life change.

Support comes in many forms. To manage your anger effectively, you need all the following kinds of support:

- ✓ **Emotional support:** You need people who are behind you 100 percent, people who know about your problems with anger and are cheering you on as you figure out how to manage it.
- ✓ **Informational support:** You can have the best of intentions, but if you don't have the information you need about anger and how to manage it, you won't get far. Lucky for you, you hold in your hands all the information you need to get a handle on your anger.
- ✓ **Tangible support:** Sometimes you need some hands-on support. An angry mother who is on the verge of losing her temper and abusing her child can sure use a neighbor who can step in and become a surrogate parent while mom goes somewhere and cools off.
- ✓ **Appraisal support:** You need people who are willing to give you honest feedback about your anger, as well as how much improvement you've made — no matter how small.



Here's how you can garner all the support you need in order to succeed at anger management:

- ✓ **Keep in mind that most people want to be supportive — they're just waiting on you to give them an opportunity.** Take the initiative and ask your closest friends and family members for their support. Support that goes unrecognized or unused does you no good. Most people have far more support than they take advantage of. This is no time to think, "I don't want to be a burden on anyone." Believe me, you're more of a burden when you're angry than when you're not!
- ✓ **Be willing to give support to your friends and family in turn.** Support must be reciprocal. In order to receive it, you must give it.
- ✓ **Keep in mind that no one person can satisfy all your support needs.** One person may be able to offer emotional support, while another may help out in a more tangible way.



Don't be too surprised if, at first, you have trouble getting support for your efforts at anger management. **Remember:** You've probably hurt a lot of people with your anger over the years — and they may have some lingering resentment, fear, and uncertainty. That's natural. But if you're truly committed to managing your anger, chances are they'll eventually rally to your cause.

You'll Know When You're There

Often, people who have been successful at anger management have a hard time appreciating just how far they've come in their emotional life. I've made great strides in managing my own anger over the past several years — something my wife and kids appreciate very much! — but I really didn't understand how healthy I was until I recently had a moment of full-blown rage at a social event. I found myself so angry I couldn't speak for fear of what awful things would come out of my mouth and, as if that wasn't enough, I experienced mild chest pain that took an hour or so to go away.

Believe me, it took all the skills I outline in this book to calm down and regain some semblance of emotional equilibrium. I had forgotten what that level of anger felt like and it scared me. But after it subsided and I thought about it, I realized that the reason it got my attention and felt so awful was because this was the first time in years that I'd experienced what, earlier in my life was, regrettably, an all-too-usual part of my day.

One way you know you're succeeding in managing your anger is when you begin to realize that things that used to set you off no longer do. Another way you know you've changed is when people who know you well begin to give you unsolicited positive feedback about your improved temperament. And you know you've succeeded when that angry “fist” you feel in your chest day after day is no longer there — replaced by an abiding sense of inner peace.

In many respects, the work of anger management is never done — you're always a work in progress. Every day is an opportunity to exercise your anger-management muscles.