

CHAPTER 1

One of the Most Important Changes You Will Ever Make

Laurie doesn't know why she explodes in anger so often. She'll be feeling perfectly fine when all of a sudden something or someone will trigger intense feelings of rage in her. Before she knows it, she's created havoc in her environment, upsetting everyone around her. The episode often lasts only minutes and her anger usually subsides for no apparent reason.

Rebecca never seems to get angry. Her family and friends marvel at how calm she remains, even when her husband, Carl, yells at her. But Rebecca has her own private ways of getting back at Carl for his abusiveness. She accidentally spills bleach on his favorite shirt, forgets to pick up his suit at the cleaners the afternoon of an important dinner party hosted by his boss, and often forgets to tell him when his mother calls.

Max often loses it with his children. He screams at them and shakes them really hard whenever they make a mistake, like spilling juice all over the new carpet. Max feels badly afterward, but he can't seem to control himself.

Rocky is supersensitive to criticism. If his wife says something to him that seems the slightest bit critical, he becomes enraged. How dare she insult him in this way! She needs to be punished! And that is what Rocky does. He sometimes rants and raves for hours, trying to make his wife feel as bad about herself as she made him feel with her comment. To anyone else it is clearly a case of overkill, but to Rocky his wife deserves to be brought to her knees.

Marcie is afraid of her own anger and she is always afraid others are going to get angry with her. Many of her conversations are prefaced with: "Don't get angry." "Don't get mad, but I'm going to be a few minutes late." "Please don't get angry, but I can't go with you like I said I would."

Tara doesn't know when she's angry. She's used food to avoid her feelings for so long that she's almost completely out of touch with what she is feeling at any given time.

Steven uses his anger to control others. Whenever things aren't going his way, he explodes and suddenly everyone gives in to him.

Janine is sweetness personified. She prides herself on the fact that she never gets angry and she seems to get along with everyone. But behind her constant smile and sweet words there is often a hint of sarcasm or contempt. Janine is angrier than she realizes.

Whenever something goes wrong in Roger's life, he immediately finds someone or something to blame. Instead of taking responsibility, he excuses his actions by saying that someone else "made him do it." Even when it is abundantly clear to everyone around him that he is responsible for the negative things in his life, Roger always feels like a victim.

Kate is a self-blamer. When someone gets angry with her, she tends to take on the blame instead of fighting back. She gets angry with her-

self for upsetting the other person and will often chastise herself mercilessly with negative self-talk.

Lily often assumes others are angry when they aren't, and her fear of others' anger sometimes creates the very situation she's trying to avoid. "Are you angry with me?" she'll ask if a friend or family member seems the least bit preoccupied or distant. Not trusting the answer, she'll sometimes press people again and again until they do get angry.

All of these people have unhealthy anger styles that are negatively affecting their life and the lives of those around them. While anger is a normal, healthy emotion, when you act out your anger in destructive or underhanded ways, or when you withhold anger and take in criticism or verbal abuse from others, then turn it against yourself, it can become a very negative emotion indeed.

When many people think of having a problem with their anger or having an unhealthy anger style, they think of having a bad temper or being unable to control their anger. But as you've seen from the examples above, there are many other unhealthy styles of anger. Some people express their anger too often or use their anger to control or manipulate those around them. Others don't express their anger often enough. Instead they harbor their anger, feeding it until it becomes a monster that contaminates their relationships. In this book, you'll learn that any extreme when it comes to anger can be problematic.

It is apparent that the misuse and abuse of anger has become a problem for people all over the world. The rate of child abuse continues to rise, there is an increase in cases of road rage, and sports violence is becoming more of a problem than ever, involving not only the fans of hockey and soccer games but now baseball as well. Clearly, many people need help when it comes to learning how to contain and control anger. But there are others who need help in learning how to express their anger—to let it out instead of allowing it to damage their health and their relationships or to distort their perceptions of others.

Anger can be a very complicated emotion. Those who appear to not have a problem with anger can actually be the ones who are in

the most need of help. Essentially, you have a problem with your anger if

- You hurt others with your anger
- You hurt yourself with your anger
- You allow others to hurt you with their anger
- You are afraid to express your anger
- You never get angry
- You hold onto your anger and are unable to either forgive or forget
- You find sneaky ways of getting back at people instead of expressing your anger directly
- You are angry a great deal of the time
- You are out of control when it comes to your anger
- Your tendency to be negative, critical, or blaming is adversely affecting you, your family, your friends, or your coworkers
- Your way of expressing your anger leaves you feeling helpless and powerless
- Your way of expressing (or not expressing) your anger has jeopardized your job or damaged your career
- You don't know why you suddenly become angry
- You misdirect your anger (take your anger out on innocent people)
- Your anger is eating you up inside
- You continually get involved with angry, controlling, or abusive people
- You allow yourself to be emotionally or physically abused by someone else's anger
- You allow others to emotionally or physically abuse your children

If you are having any of these problems, this book will help you resolve them. You'll learn healthier ways of dealing with your anger and with the anger of others. You will learn how to create an anger style that is not only healthy but life-transforming. You will be encouraged to take on and practice an entirely different way of dealing with your anger than what is normal and automatic for you. This will initially feel like you are taking on an uncomfortable role. But we often need to step outside our comfort zone if we are to make real and lasting changes. The premise is that inside every critical, judgmental person is someone who is painfully afraid of being criticized or judged. Inside every passive, fearful person is someone who is incredibly angry. And inside every person who avoids anger is someone who is seething with anger inside.

How Your Anger Style Affects Your Life

Your anger style is the habitual way in which you handle your anger. While you may tend to manage your anger in different ways depending on the circumstances, most people develop certain patterns. From the way you express your anger toward your partner and children to the way you react to being cut off in traffic, your anger style affects literally every aspect of your life. The way you cope with and express your anger is one of the most telling things about you. It defines your personality, characterizes your relationships, affects your health, and can even influence your value system. Unfortunately, most people do not realize how much their lives are influenced and even shaped by their anger, nor do they realize just how powerful a force anger can be. Anger can motivate you to make needed changes in your life and the lives of others, or it can make you physically and emotionally ill. It can empower you and add vitality to your life, or it can sap your energy and poison your relationships. The way you handle your anger affects your physical and emotional health, self-esteem, motivation, and ability to defend yourself. Your anger style can affect your life in surprising yet profound ways. It not only determines how you react to stressful, painful, or anger-provoking situations but can influence

your choice of partners, your interactions with loved ones, the way you raise your children, what you are willing to put up with in a relationship, and even how you express yourself sexually. Your anger style also affects your work performance and work relationships.

If you tend to act out your anger by blaming others, exploding in a rage, or venting your anger at those weaker than yourself, you may choose partners who deny their own anger or who tend to buy into the accusations of others and blame themselves. Conversely, if you deny your own anger or are afraid of your anger, you may be attracted to those who openly express theirs—even when that expression is abusive. It is as if your partners were acting out your repressed or suppressed anger for you.

Your anger style dictates how you react when your children disappoint you, make a mistake, or refuse to mind. Those with a controlling style of anger may punish their children in extremely harsh and insensitive ways, while those who have a more passive-aggressive style may turn a cold shoulder to their children, punishing them with silence or withdrawing love. Those who are afraid to express their anger in adult relationships may end up taking their anger out on their children either because they are less threatening or because a child's love tends to be unconditional.

Those who are controlling or explosive with their anger often create problems not only in their home life but in the work environment as well. They are often fired from jobs, passed over for promotions, or feared and hated by their employees. Those who are passive and fearful of anger often allow their coworkers or bosses to walk all over them. They become so afraid of making a mistake and angering others that they cannot perform at their peak. Others see them as inadequate or passive and don't trust them with important jobs. They are often made to be the scapegoats of coworkers who want to pass the buck and avoid taking responsibility for their own mistakes. And repressed and suppressed anger can thwart creativity and motivation.

Those who are aggressive or controlling with their anger can be insensitive to their mate's emotional needs. Some bulldoze their way in, insisting their partner have sex with them even if he or she is not in

the mood or berating her if she doesn't give in. Some will even physically force a partner to have sex. Partners who deny their anger will often put up with such abusive behavior for years but begin to shut down sexually in the process. Few women, for example, feel like having sex after their partner has berated them for hours. Women tend to need to feel vulnerable and trusting in order to be ready for sex and few can feel that way after they have been verbally or physically attacked.

Men and women who are passive-aggressive often use sex as pay-back for real or imagined slights from their partner. Some feign a headache or other physical discomfort that keeps them from feeling sexual, and some develop various forms of sexual dysfunction, such as impotence or premature ejaculation in men and painful intercourse or an inability to have an orgasm in women.

EXERCISE: *How Is Your Anger Style Affecting Your Life?*

1. Even though you may not be clear at this point on what your specific anger style is, spend some time thinking about how the way you deal with your anger has affected your life.
2. Make a list of the negative physical, emotional, and behavioral consequences of the way you currently handle your anger.

Why We Need to Honor Our Anger

Like all our emotions, anger is a biological and psychological safeguard to ensure our survival. Biologically, anger is defined as a stress response to internal or external demands, threats, and pressures. Anger warns us that there is a problem or a potential threat. At the same time, it energizes us to face the problem or meet the threat and provides us with the power to overcome the obstacle. So, it is both a warning system and a survival mechanism.

Our first reaction to a perceived threat is fear. When we are faced with a threat to our survival, our nervous system prepares us to meet

that threat by raising our defenses. This built-in defense mechanism is found in the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system and is triggered by the release of the hormone adrenaline. Adrenaline helps by giving us an energetic boost, which in turn provides us with added strength and endurance to fight off our enemy or added speed in which to run from the enemy. This pattern of biological arousal is known as the *fight-or-flight response*, an involuntary mechanism shared with all other species.

Although it may not actually be a life or death struggle, we often feel threatened by the behavior or remarks of others; we experience a threat to our emotional well-being. When someone hurts or insults us (or someone we care about) by saying something inappropriate, disrespectful, or vicious, we become righteously angry.

Anger also helps us to defend our rights and therefore it often has a moral or ethical aspect to it. According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition*, anger is "a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by real or supposed wrong." Those who are angry often have a strong sense of injustice, injury, and/or invasion.

Anger gets a bad rap because it is often erroneously associated with violence. But in reality, anger seems to be followed by aggression only about 10 percent of the time, according to Howard Kassinove, Ph.D., co-author of *Anger Management: The Complete Treatment Guide for Practice*. Used constructively, anger can help us restore our lost esteem, prestige, and sense of power and control over our life. It can help us to recover emotionally and restore our well-being.

The concept of constructive anger is gaining empirical support including evidence that it may have health benefits. Experts say that constructive anger can aid intimate relationships and improve work interactions and political expressions, including the public's response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. A study in *Psychological Science* by social psychologists Jennifer Lerner, Ph.D., Roxana Gonzalez, Deborah Small, and Baruch Fischhoff, Ph.D., of Carnegie Mellon University, found that anger served an empowering function

following the events of 9/11. The first part of the study, conducted nine days after the attacks, gathered baseline data on a representative sample of 1,786 people concerning their feelings about the attacks and their levels of anxiety, stress, and desire for vengeance. The second part, conducted two months later, randomized 973 people from the original sample into a condition that primed fear and anger. People in the anger condition, for instance, elaborated on their feelings of anger following the attacks and viewed photos and listened to audio clips designed to provoke anger. Participants primed for anger gave more optimistic—and, as it turns out, realistic—risk assessments on twenty-five possible terrorist-related risks than those primed for fear. Anger is probably beneficial in this sort of context because it increases one's sense of control.

Your anger may signal that you are not addressing an important emotional issue in your life or in a relationship. It may be a message that your wants or needs are not being met, or it may warn you that you are giving too much or compromising too much of your values or beliefs in a relationship.

How We Turn Anger into a Negative Emotion

Anger is neither a positive nor a negative emotion. It is the way we handle our anger that makes it negative or positive. For example, when we use our anger to motivate us to make life changes or to make changes to dysfunctional systems, it becomes a very positive emotion. But when we express anger through aggressive or passive-aggressive ways (such as getting even or gossiping), it becomes a negative emotion. The following methods of dealing with anger cause the most problems both for the giver and the receiver.

Misplacing Anger

While anger can be a signal that something is wrong, often we do not take the time to discover exactly what the problem is. Instead we simply go with the anger and let it out on whoever is around us. Misplacing

anger is when we take anger that is meant for one person out on another. We all misplace or misdirect our anger from time to time, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. Your boss bawls you out for being late again and you end up snapping at your coworkers; your husband criticizes the way you are managing money and you blow up at your teenage daughter for talking on the phone too long. We all need to curb our tendency to misdirect our anger in such ways and apologize to those we have hurt in the process. But when we misplace our anger on a regular basis, when we consistently avoid dealing with the people with whom we are really angry by discharging it on innocent people, it becomes a real problem.

Holding in Anger

It is also unhealthy when you take the anger that should be directed at someone else and turn it against yourself. Let's say someone criticizes you or falsely accuses you of something. What do you do? Do you remain quiet, believe what he or she is saying about you, and begin to feel bad about yourself? Or do you get angry and tell this person that you don't appreciate his criticism? If what he is saying isn't true, do you confront him with the truth or do you begin to doubt your own perceptions and believe his lies? In this case, anger held in can be very negative.

Becoming Abusive with Your Anger

Abusive anger is anger that is directed at someone else in an aggressive, hostile, or inappropriate way. For example, yelling at someone, name calling, throwing objects, and shoving or hitting someone are abusive ways of releasing anger. Verbal and emotional abuse (yelling, name calling, making demeaning or belittling comments, using sarcasm or making fun of someone) can be as damaging as physical abuse and often lead to physical abuse.

Many people don't know how to express their anger without attacking or belittling the other person. There is a big difference between verbal aggression ("You bastard," or "I'm going to knock the shit out of you!") and reporting your anger ("I'm so angry with you that I don't know what to do with myself").

Other forms of abusive anger include the "silent treatment"; dismissive, contemptuous looks; and threats of abandonment.

Holding on to Your Anger

Anger should be a temporary emotion that is relinquished once an issue has been addressed and resolved. Unfortunately, many people either choose to hold on to their anger, building up resentment or even hate toward the other person, or to continue to punish the other person for offending them in the first place. While a healthy person will communicate his or her anger in a way that others can understand, learning to let go and to forgive is also a sign of emotional health.

Using Anger to Avoid Other Feelings

In addition to anger being a signal that there is a problem, sometimes we become angry as a way of avoiding another feeling such as fear, sadness, guilt, or shame. Instead of allowing yourself to feel your sadness and grief over the loss of a relationship, you may choose to remain angry at the person who dumped you. Instead of feeling guilty for getting in a car accident while driving your friend's car, you may blame him for distracting you. Many people use anger as a defense against feeling afraid. They act tough so that they don't have to acknowledge their fear or so that others won't see just how vulnerable they really are.

Using Anger to Avoid Intimacy

Some people become angry or start a fight in order to create distance between themselves and another person. Let's say you and your partner have been spending a great deal of time together. You're beginning to feel a bit smothered. Instead of admitting this to yourself and explaining to your partner that you need a little space, you start a fight or get angry with him for some small thing he's done. That way you feel justified in walking out. When he calls later, you tell him you think it is better if you take a few days off from seeing each other since you aren't getting along. In reality, you wanted the space all along.

Getting Stuck in an Unhealthy Anger Style or Defense Strategy

While we all resort to some of the unhealthy ways of dealing with anger from time to time, many people get stuck in these anger styles to the point that they prevent the normal use of anger on a daily basis. Avoiders, for example, ignore the signal that something is wrong. Blamers can't let go of their resentments and aren't able to move on. Abusers won't or can't use their anger in moderation.

When you get stuck in an unhealthy anger style, you are unable to adapt to situations. Your rigidity forces you to respond the same way over and over again, even when your way of reacting gives negative results. Adaptive anger, on the other hand, enhances your ability not only to survive physically but to do so in a way that is harmonious with those around you.

Changing your anger style can be one of the most important changes you'll make in your life. In fact, it can literally change your life. This may sound like a rather grandiose claim, but I know it to be true in the lives of many of my clients throughout the years, as well as in my own life. Clients whose lives and the lives of their families were once nearly ruined by their inability to control their anger found ways to contain and control it and stop being abusive to their loved ones. And clients whose inability to express their anger assertively caused them to stay in abusive relationships were finally able to stand up for themselves and refuse to be abused again.

As I have shared in previous books and in the Introduction, I was emotionally and sexually abused as a child, so I grew up full of shame. This shame was so overwhelming that whenever I felt criticized, insulted, or rejected as an adult, I lashed out in a rage at those who triggered these feelings in me. I raved and ranted, sometimes for hours, trying to make the person who had hurt me feel as much shame as I was feeling. By learning that I could interrupt my rages by physically creating space between myself and the person with whom I was angry, I was able to stop this destructive behavior. I learned to take a time-out and walk off my anger, using the time and space away from the other person to connect with my feelings and discover what had

triggered my anger. I could then return to the person and calmly discuss what had happened. Instead of carrying around more shame because of my inappropriate actions and experiencing one breakup after another, I eventually learned to talk about my shame with my partners, thus avoiding continual confrontations and outbursts. This is but one way that changing my anger style changed my life.

Instead of losing control and hurting those around you, you can learn to identify what triggers your anger and find appropriate ways of handling it. Instead of allowing others to dominate or abuse you with their anger, you can face your fear of anger and learn to defend yourself. You can learn to acknowledge your own anger and find assertive ways of speaking up for yourself—as opposed to pretending you aren't angry while quietly planning ways to get back at those who have hurt you, or taking too much criticism from others until you finally explode. Instead of controlling others with your anger you can find healthy ways of asking for what you need. Instead of taking your anger out on your spouse or children, you can begin to focus your anger where it belongs—whether it be on your boss, your parents, or a past relationship. You can learn to differentiate between the things you are responsible for and the things you are not and to push away the false accusations of others.

Changing your anger style can help you deal with the anger of your partner, your children, or your parents. Couples who read this book together will discover healthier ways of resolving conflicts and ways of expressing their anger that do not alienate them from one another. Parents will learn how to express anger and set limits without being controlling or abusive with their children and will be better equipped to handle both appropriate and inappropriate anger directed at them by their children. Those who have unresolved issues with their parents will learn how to stand up to controlling or abusive parents and to communicate their feelings and needs in such a way that their parents will be more inclined to hear them.

Once you are no longer a slave to your anger style, you'll find that you are free to express all your emotions in a healthier, more open way—including your feelings of love and joy. You'll feel better about

yourself and your self-esteem will be higher. You'll find yourself less willing to put up with unacceptable behavior—whether it is from someone else or yourself. You'll also feel more energized and more creative. All the energy you once wasted by exploding against others and creating drama in your life can now be used in more positive ways. Those who once took in the anger of others and turned it into guilt and self-loathing will find themselves suddenly feeling lighter and far less depressed. And those who once denied their own anger may now find exciting outlets for it, including creative outlets such as painting, writing, or acting. Some may turn their righteous anger into political action. Those who have grown old prematurely by the heavy weight of their own unexpressed anger will feel younger and more vibrant as they rid themselves of anger from the past. And those who were locked in destructive or abusive relationships for years will be able to free themselves of this pattern and will find they are now attracted to healthier partners.

Changing your unhealthy anger styles into healthy ones can affect your physical health. For example, it has been well documented that there is a link between unhealthy anger expression (the use of obscenity, rudeness, or condescension) and cardiovascular disease in men, but recent research now indicates that the same holds true for women. Women who do not acknowledge anger or who are prone to high levels of anger are also vulnerable to headaches, stomachaches, asthma, arthritis, elevated blood pressure, insomnia, back pain, and obesity. Rates of diagnosed breast cancer are found to be higher in women who have openly expressed their anger only once or twice in their lives and in those who display frequent temper outbursts as compared to women who display less extreme expressions of their anger.

You would think that most of us would be aware of our negative anger styles and how they adversely affect us, but this is not the case. Anger styles are often habitual and unconscious, often taking root in early childhood experiences. What others may clearly see as a problem with your anger style may be invisible to you. And although we may be able to identify unhealthy anger styles in our partners, our parents, our children, and our friends, we often remain blind to our

own. Throughout this book you will be provided with various questionnaires and exercises to help you determine your specific anger style. With this valuable information you will be better able to determine what changes you need to make to your anger style, which in turn will help you take charge of your anger and your life.