

Chapter 1

Understanding Anger

In This Chapter

- ▶ Identifying anger and where it comes from
- ▶ Examining the myths about anger
- ▶ Understanding how emotions work
- ▶ Finding help when you need it

What do children from Bogota, Columbia, college students in Oxford, England, corporate executives in New York City, mothers from India, and preliterate tribesmen in Borneo and New Guinea have in common? They all recognize an angry face when they see it. Anger, as well as joy, fear, sadness, disgust, contempt, and surprise are universal emotions. All cultures around the globe experience these emotions as an integral part of day-to-day life — and these emotions can lead to both blessings and curses.



Anger forms part of the survival mechanism of human beings. When faced with a threat — not unlike other animals — humans either run away, freeze, or attack. Anger fuels attacks. Angry people experience a surge of energy that helps them repel adversaries.

But anger can also have the opposite effect and lead to an untimely demise. Too much anger can cause heart attacks, precipitate disabling work injuries, ruin relationships, and lead to a variety of unintended negative consequences. Anger truly is a double-edged sword.

Defining Anger

If you're like most people, you know what anger is, or at least you think you do. For example, maybe your gut tells you that a friend of yours feels angry. So you ask him if indeed he feels angry, and he responds, "No, not at all." Of course, your gut could be wrong, and your friend really isn't angry. But usually your intuition will serve you well in such instances. You can tell by your friend's tone of voice, posture, and body language.

Finding the key to anger management

As the reader, we know you'd like a simple answer to the question "Why am I so angry, and what's the single, most effective thing I can do about it?" You're hoping that one chapter in this book will provide that answer. But, alas, that's not the way it works.

Anger is a complex human emotion. By reading this book, you can come to understand where your anger comes from — that is, which and how many of those factors that are unique to you are at work here. It may be that you need

better coping skills, to cut down on drinking, to increase your social outlets, to increase your sense of purpose and meaning in life, or to look for a new job. A few of these items, all of them, one of them, or perhaps more, may cause problems that result in your anger. The important thing at this point is to find the right recipe for your anger management and to use the information and resources in this book to bring your emotional life to a better place.

Anger is an emotion that involves certain types of thoughts that focus on other people's intent to hurt you, unfairness, threats to your self-esteem, and frustrations. Anger expresses itself in the body (for example, muscle tension, loud voice, and restlessness) and behaviors (such as threatening actions, pacing, and clenching). Anger is a strong emotion that attempts to express displeasure and disapproval.

Anger Really Is About Choices and Perceptions

Humans are the only animals we know of that have a choice about how they view the world. Cats, dogs, squirrels, hamsters, goldfish — they're all creatures of instinct, which means they respond in predictable ways that are prewired into their nervous systems. Instincts are universal — scratch a Golden Doodle's tummy and he'll instantly begin shaking his hind leg. All Golden Doodles do it, and they don't have a choice in the matter.



The miraculous thing about being human is that you're not ruled by instinct. Not only do you have *choices* about how you respond to the world around you (for example, when someone mistreats you), but even before that, you also have a choice about how you *perceive* or think about that person's actions.

Do you think she did that on purpose? Was it an accident, or did he do it deliberately? Is the mistreatment specifically directed at you alone? Do you view this as a catastrophe — a life-altering event? Is this something that you think shouldn't have happened? These questions are all ones your mind considers, albeit unconsciously, before you have a chance to react — or, better yet, *respond* to provocation. Consider the following:

You might say that **Mike** is a born pessimist, but actually that's not true. Human beings aren't *born* with attitudes — those attitudes come from life experience. What *is* true is that Mike is the product of an alcoholic home, where things could be going well one minute and fall into complete chaos the next. He found out as a child not to expect the good times to last and that he and the rest of his family were always just one beer away from a family crisis.

So for all his adult life, Mike has expected that most things will eventually turn out badly, given enough time. No matter how loving his wife is or how cooperative his children are, in the back of his mind he harbors this expectation that any minute things will change for the worse — and he's ready to react in anger when that moment comes. Why will he get angry? It's Mike's way of defending himself against chaos, a way of feeling in control — unlike when he was a child hiding under the bed while his alcoholic father ranted and raved well into the night.

Mike is unaware of how his early childhood influenced his view of the world. Like most children of alcoholics, he figures that because he survived those unpleasant years (physically at least), he's okay. He also has no clue why he loses his temper so easily.



Many people with anger problems have troubled childhoods. Their anger during childhood usually made sense at the time as a way of coping with the difficulties they faced. However, they bring their anger into the present when it usually doesn't work very well. You can acquire new, more effective ways of coping, but it takes patience and work.

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 abound. Here are some of the myths we want to dispel right from the get-go:

- ✓ **If you don't express anger, you just might explode.** The truth is, the more often you express anger, the more likely you will feel angry in the future. On the other hand, appropriately, carefully expressed anger can help you. So keep reading!

- ✓ **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 about as frequently as men. Men and women may express anger a little differently, but research has been inconsistent on that issue.
- ✓ **Anger is bad.** Anger serves a variety of positive purposes when it comes to coping with stress. When *controlled*, it can energize you, improve your communication with other people, and defend you against fear and insecurity.
- ✓ **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.** Many angry people 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 (see Chapter 3 for more information about the costs of anger).
- ✓ **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.** When you get mad, that emotion instantly manifests itself 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 fully 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.
- ✓ **If you don't express anger, you'll be seen as weak.** Not so. In fact, a calm, measured, assertive response (see Chapter 8 for more information about assertiveness) not only works better but also is quite powerful.
- ✓ **People with anger problems have low self-esteem.** In fact, sometimes they do. However, a much more common companion of anger is excessively *inflated* self-esteem (see Chapter 7 for more information about the role of self-esteem and anger).

- ✓ **Only certain types of people have a problem with anger.** You can easily find angry truck drivers, college professors, physicians, grandmothers, lawyers, policemen, career criminals, poor people, millionaires, children, the elderly, and people of various ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. Anger is a universal emotion.
- ✓ **Anger results from human conflict.** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. People get angry by being exposed to foul odors, negotiating traffic jams, aches and pains, computer problems, and hot temperatures — none of which involve (or can be blamed on) the direct, intentional actions of others.

Understanding the Role of Emotions in Your Life

Emotion can be thought of as 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, encourage you to reattach after some type of meaningful loss, and push you to explore your environment. Without emotion, life would stand still.



Emotions are, by their very nature, meant to be brief, transient experiences. Typically, they come and go throughout the day — moving you in various directions, as evidenced by changes in your behavior. Not acting on an emotion like anger is unnatural and, in some instances, can be unhealthy. Emotions reflect changes in physiology — elevations in blood pressure, heart rate, blood sugar, and muscle tension — that are usually harmless because they’re short-lived (that is, if you express them in a reasonable way). Emotions that aren’t expressed remain trapped within your body, causing a sustained state of physiological tension — and that can be deadly.

Suggesting that anger is either expressed or unexpressed is actually untrue. All anger is expressed — the question is how. You probably think that you’re expressing your anger when you do so in a way that other people can see, hear, or feel. Otherwise, you figure, you’re not expressing it. But the reality is that *all* anger is expressed — some of it in ways that aren’t observable right away. For example, you may not *look* or *sound* angry, but your anger may be expressing itself in your cardiovascular system (through high blood pressure or migraine headaches), your gastrointestinal system (through irritable bowel syndrome [IBS] or a spastic colon), or your musculoskeletal system (through TMJ or tension headaches).

Or anger may express itself in negative attitudes — pessimism, cynicism, hopelessness, bitterness, and stubbornness — or some form of avoidance behavior (giving people the silent treatment), oppositional behavior (“I don’t *think* so!”), or passive-aggressive behavior (“I’m sorry — did you want something?”). Anger may also sour your mood and leave you feeling down or depressed. You suddenly lose the enthusiasm you had previously.

Dr. Paul Ekman developed a list of seven primary emotions seen in all cultures around the world. Table 1-1 lists these emotions and some of the ways they express themselves.

Table 1-1 The Seven Primary Emotions	
<i>Emotion</i>	<i>How It’s Expressed</i>
Sad	The eyelids droop; corners of mouth turn down; people withdraw from others; thoughts focus on negative, pessimistic issues, losses, and inferior self-views; body temperature rises; and heart rate increases.
Joy	Corners of the eyes wrinkle; smiles and corners of the mouth turn up; thoughts dwell on positive enjoyment; laughter.
Surprise	Eyes widen and become rounder; the mouth opens; expression occurs and recedes rapidly in response to an unexpected event; thoughts focus on the unexpected aspects of what occurred and why.
Disgust	The nose wrinkles; the upper lip curls; also a rapid response to something that looks, smells, or tastes unpleasant; thoughts focus on avoiding or removing oneself from the disgusting object.
Contempt	The muscles in the cheek pull back, which results in a “half” smile or sneer; the head often tilts a bit back; thoughts focus on the inferiority of others.
Fear	The eyes open wide; lips stretch out; heart rate increases; body temperature drops; thoughts dwell on how to deal with danger — whether to fight, flee, or freeze; posture slumps.
Anger	The eyes glare and narrow; lips press together; body temperature and heart rate increase; posture puffs up; thoughts focus on issues such as unfairness, revenge, injustice, attacking, and getting even.

Alexithymics — People without feelings

Alexithymia is a word used to describe people who appear to lack emotions — including anger. Alexithymia is thought to be a fairly stable personality trait but isn't a formal, psychological diagnosis in and of itself. 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
- ✔ 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)

We don't suggest disconnecting from your feelings to manage your anger. 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 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 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:

- ✔ **Carefully selected family and friends:** 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.



Don't be too surprised if, at first, you have trouble getting support for your efforts at anger management. Realize that 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.

- ✓ **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're holding all the information you need to get a handle on your anger in your hands.
- ✓ **Self-help:** Most communities have anger-management self-help groups and classes — these are usually published in the newspaper and on the Internet. Some religious organizations also sponsor such self-help groups.
- ✓ **Professional help:** People with anger-management problems generally don't think of themselves as needing psychotherapy. However, a trained, licensed therapist, counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist usually has important skills that can help you turn away from anger. Therapy can help you identify your personal anger triggers, teach coping skills, and support you through the process. And therapists would gladly work with you on getting the most out of this book as well.



We suggest that you refrain from exploring medications for your anger-management problems *unless* your difficulties are *extreme* and you haven't gotten very far with self-help and professional assistance. Most of the medications for anger issues are quite powerful and have serious side effects. If you do choose this option, make sure you go to an expert at prescribing medications for mental health issues.