Chapter 5. Anger and Frustration

Anger can be helpful or harmful, healthy or destructive for both yourself and others. Anger can give you strength, arousing you to take action to protect yourself and others. It can also be overutilized as a chronic defense against even healthy vulnerability, and thereby destroy your emotional health and relationships. Anger can be a healthy emotional response to real injustice, or it can become a thick character armor which eventually separates you from yourself and others. Thus, we can distinguish between anger as a means of healthy protest or outrage regarding true injustice, and characterological anger, in which we consistently resort to blame and anger as a shortsighted means of temporarily protecting ourselves.

Either way, anger is a defensive, secondary emotion, even though it often feels like a primary emotion, and certainly feels offensive to others. Anger always comes after some other, more bothersome emotion. Even if you hit me over the head with a two by four, I feel pain before I respond with anger. Anger is obviously an emotion, but it is often clearly used as a defense as well, against other, more vulnerable underlying feelings. Think of the most macho guy you knew in high school. Did he cry when his girlfriend broke up with him? Certainly not in public. He was more likely to angrily complain, blame and criticize “that bitch” as the unjustified perpetrator in their relationship. Did he react with sheepish embarrassment when a joke was told at his expense? No, he was more likely to try to turn the tables by joking or trash talking at his tormentor’s expense. In other words, he was more likely to turn vulnerable feelings, such as sadness, hurt and embarrassment, into anger. Anger is a means of at least temporary self-protection, as we are genetically programmed to respond with fight or flight maneuvers when our survival is threatened. Even in less threatening circumstances, we often resort to less extreme aggression or avoidance to protect ourselves. Anger is a means of reducing our immediate vulnerability, but like other defenses, it has more negative long term consequences, at least when used chronically as a defense, or when expressed inappropriately.

Anger has both advantages and disadvantages. Listening to our anger alerts us to perceived injustice. In situations involving true (not falsely perceived) injustice, large or small (e.g., childhood incest vs. being stood up on a date), our anger tells us that our rights, needs, or boundaries have been ignored or violated, and it energizes us to take action to correct this injustice. If we suppress such healthy anger, we run the risk of becoming a passive, helpless, repeated victim whose suppressed anger is transformed into
depression. This is not to say that expressing anger is always wise, as a more powerful perpetrator can retaliate and escalate the injustice, and at a given moment, “freezing” can be more self-protective than fighting, when fleeing is impossible. In most cases, however, we must address the injustices in our lives, while being mindful of the potential consequences, as well as the healthiest means of expressing our anger. Otherwise, we ignore the injustices on our doorstep, risking depression, smoldering resentment, and shame regarding our inadequacy.

But anger also has distinct disadvantages, especially in its chronic, characterological form. In his book, When Anger Hurts, Matthew McKay reviews the extensive research regarding the biological and interpersonal costs of anger. Summarizing his compilation of this research, we can start with McKay’s observation that anger increases testosterone (in men), as well as cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine. Chronically elevated testosterone and cortisol produce arteriosclerosis, while cortisol depresses the immune system and its ability to fight infections. Epinephrine and norepinephrine cause the body to divert its blood supply from the skin, liver, and digestive tract to the heart, lungs and skeletal muscles in preparation for action (fight or flight). But when blood is diverted consistently from the increasingly pale liver, it fails to adequately clear cholesterol from the blood stream. High levels of norepinephrine also constrict blood vessels, which increases blood pressure. And as we know, elevations in cholesterol and blood pressure increase the risk of heart attack. By the middle of the 20th century, it was known that suppressed anger was associated with hypertension, and subsequently, high levels of expressed hostility were also found to be associated with high blood pressure. Chronic anger increases blood pressure, whether it is suppressed or expressed. Early research on Type A (competitive, time pressured, ambitious, hostile and aggressive) individuals consistently found an association with heart disease, but more recently, anger and hostility have proved to be the primary coronary risk factor amongst these Type A traits. Anger has also been found to increase secretions of hydrochloric acid in the stomach, which in turn are associated with gastritis and ulcers. On the interpersonal level, anger increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior, which interferes with relationships. Chronically angry people report less trust in close relationships, more marital difficulties, less family support, and more loneliness. And on the work front, hostile, driven Type A persons fail more than they succeed, as they alienate others and burn themselves out. Furthermore, isolated individuals, with few or weak social connections, have been found to be more susceptible to a host of medical ailments besides heart disease. And
the kicker is that angry people feel more helpless than others. While the immediate purpose of anger is to reduce vulnerability and feel stronger, the end result after exporting responsibility for anger, and experiencing social rejection, is a feeling of helplessness, in addition to overall dissatisfaction in life. Thus, the ultimate tradeoff for short term relief via blame and anger is more longstanding physical, emotional, and social difficulty.

This brings us to the controversy surrounding catharsis. Catharsis refers to a purging of feelings, a release of pent up affect resulting in cleansing emotional relief. There is a long history of emphasis upon the value of catharsis within psychoanalytic (Freudian) circles. More recently, there are powerful, empirically based objections to reliance upon catharsis, at least as a standard strategy for unloading anger. We will review each of these viewpoints, and suggest a synthesis of these opposing views, followed by a review of alternatives for reduction or management of anger.

McKay describes a series of myths regarding anger, including the myth that it's healthy to ventilate anger. He notes the basis of this myth, in the Freudian hydraulic model, which essentially maintains that when psychic energy is blocked and damned up, it can leak out in the form of unhealthy symptoms, or accumulate and explode in the form of more extreme symptoms. This intuitively seems to make sense, as accumulating sadness can lead to crying jags, escalating anxiety can result in panic attacks, and growing frustration and anger can result in temper outbursts. Likewise, on the behavioral level, unresolved abuse by a parent can result in angry rebellion toward all authority, and ungrieved losses can lead to enduring depression. Does it not make sense to allow your tears to flow regarding the death of your mother at age 9, as a means of resolving your loss, reducing your depression, and moving on with life? Few would question the wisdom of such catharsis, at least as a partial or initial approach to managing such depression. But when we apply the catharsis principle to anger, problems arise. Carol Tavris, in Anger - The Misunderstood Emotion, reviews the research on anger and concludes that those who vent their anger the most become angrier. In the immediate present, dumping anger on someone does not invite warmth and understanding, and often begets a defensive, angry response, which in turn invites an escalation of anger into more dangerous territory. On a long term basis, practicing anger as a consistent defense results in the biological, emotional, and interpersonal costs described above. Anger aggravates yourself, alienates others, and is self-perpetuating. This is not to say that in some cases of massive injustice, a silent victim cannot justifiably accumulate pronounced anger or rage, or that they will not benefit from a healthy release of such rage. The hydraulic model may work in more
extreme circumstances. But it is not a good working model for anger in general, because people are quite adept at manufacturing their own anger while in the process of dumping this supposedly justified anger.

Does this mean that all anger is bad? Definitely not. As we noted earlier, anger motivates and empowers us to deal with injustice. But how we express our anger will have a huge impact on the results of any confrontation. In some instances, when used selectively rather than habitually, catharsis of anger may be quite helpful. Imagine the survivor of childhood incest and betrayal in a therapy session, confronting her perpetrator in an empty chair. Expressing suppressed rage regarding this gross injustice may prove to be very therapeutic, not just cathartic, but also empowering. I would add, however, that the sadness regarding one’s lost childhood will also need to be grieved, and is likely to tumble out soon after the rage which blocks it is removed. As we will note shortly, the management of anger requires us to address the vulnerable feelings beneath our anger. Despite, or perhaps because of these occasional benefits of angry catharsis, we must make a distinction between the occasional, selective use of catharsis in the expression of moral outrage regarding gross injustice, and the chronic, characterological reliance upon anger as a means of emotional release. Consistently dumping anger, as a means of transferring and depositing our vulnerability into an adversary, is likely to entrench an adversarial relationship, even if it feels good at the moment to take a dump. The short and long term consequences of unrestrained angry dumping are likely to be quite opposite: immediate relief, followed by conflict, alienation, and increased distress soon thereafter, and for years to come if such angry catharsis is practiced habitually. Thus, from my own vantage point, I would conclude that catharsis can be quite healthy when expressing vulnerable feelings with a safe person, and that even angry catharsis can occasionally be beneficial. But chronic reliance upon anger as a means of managing your emotional economy is likely to bankrupt you.

So what are we to do with anger? If research shows that it is unhealthy to suppress anger, but also unhealthy to express it, where does this leave us? Well, first of all we can prevent it in the first place. This may sound ludicrous at first, but only if you believe that others cause your anger. I intend to convince you that in most circumstances, you create your own anger, and therefore, you are in the power position to prevent it in the first place. But even the most serene among us experience some anger, and what do they do when they are angry? We shall see near the end of this chapter that forgiveness can be an effective but often rejected option. Otherwise, we can learn how to decrease our arousal and calm ourselves when angry. We
can also learn healthy assertiveness skills in order to increase the likelihood that our confrontations regarding injustice are successful, particularly with loved ones. And we can learn how to experience and effectively express the underlying vulnerable feelings which we often convert into anger. Let’s start by expanding on this last concept.

Most people with chronic anger problems display two cognitive distortions regarding anger. First of all, they equate frustration and anger, failing to distinguish between these two different emotions. Secondly, they attribute their anger to external causes, rather than recognizing the quite active role that they themselves play in the generation of their own anger. You'll often hear them say "He pissed me off," or "She made me mad." Let's look first at the difference between frustration and anger. Frustration is a state of tension that results when our needs, desires, or expectations are unmet by external events. It is a vulnerable feeling which is unpleasant, and which we thereby seek to neutralize. One way of neutralizing frustration is to blame someone or something for causing it, thereby converting it into anger, which allows us to feel stronger and less vulnerable. Blame and anger are like twins, as they always appear together, and are both externalizing defenses, i.e., they direct emotional energy outside of one's self. Anger requires blame. Just as worry is a thought process which produces a feeling of anxiety, blame is the thought process which powers anger. Blaming attributes responsibility to someone for an offense. As with other thoughts and attributions, it can be accurate or inaccurate. Anger seems to be the macho person's primary emotion when feeling distressed, as it allows him or her to feel and give the appearance of strength, thereby suppressing vulnerable feelings such as sadness, hurt, fear, guilt, shame, embarrassment, and frustration. The irony is that while anger is designed to allow oneself to feel stronger, it is often met with external resistance by others who object to being the target of such anger, which results in counterattacks, leading to even more vulnerable feelings on the part of the angry person. And because you are blaming another person for your anger, you must wait for them to stop pissing you off, the irony again being that in the attempt to feel stronger, you render yourself helpless. Despite the fact that the ultimate consequences of anger are typically negative, like all defenses, the immediate consequence is positive, in that it allows you to feel stronger, more protected, and less vulnerable. Thus, anger is designed to neutralize vulnerability, and export it via blame. This provides us with a short term but shortsighted benefit, as it prevents us from resolving our vulnerable feelings, and accumulates more of the same when others retaliate.
Of the many vulnerable feelings which can be converted into anger, frustration is the most common.

Frustration results when our needs, desires, or expectations become blocked by external events or the actions of others. It is a state of tension, experienced internally, at least until it is exported via anger. As we noted, most angry people do not understand the difference between frustration and anger, largely because they convert frustration into anger so quickly and consistently that they equate the two. On the surface, this would seem to conflict with another of McKay's four myths regarding anger, that frustration leads to aggression. While acknowledging the usefulness of the frustration–aggression hypothesis, McKay rightfully questions the proposition that aggression is always a consequence of frustration, or the notion that frustration invariably precedes aggression. I agree with each of these qualifications. Frustration need not be converted into anger, and a variety of other vulnerable feelings, such as sadness, fear, and embarrassment can also be readily converted into anger. But I believe that it is also true that frustration is the emotion which is most frequently turned into anger on our planet. Our tolerance for frustration is limited, and we quite simply do not like it when others block our needs and desires, of fail to meet our expectations.

The extent of our frustration can be defined as the ratio between our expectations, and the satisfaction of these expectations by the reality around us, i.e., $F = E/R$. If, like narcissists, we expect the world to meet our needs, our “shoulds” or expectations will be expansive, and difficult to meet, resulting in a large numerator in this equation. And to the extent that events and people around us disappoint us, the denominator of the equation will be quite small. The combination of the two, limited external satisfaction of our expectations, combined with voluminous expectations to begin with, will result in a quite large fraction, reflecting massive frustration. On the other hand, a Buddhist like minimization of expectations will leave little to be frustrated about, and effective management of our environment can result in maximal satisfaction of our needs. This combination, in which our expectations and reality closely match each other, yields the least frustration. Thus, the more expectations we have regarding others behavior in the world around us, the more we set ourselves up for potential frustration. Likewise, the more that we fail to effectively act upon our environment in order to meet our needs, the more we will be frustrated.

We have a variety of options for dealing with frustration. One option is to blame other people for not meeting our needs, and to complain about the world, thereby converting frustration into anger. This allows us to feel
less responsible for our fate, and momentarily less vulnerable emotionally, as we export our frustration onto others via anger. From the chronically angry person's point of view, the anger equation is as follows: Y > M (“You piss me off”). From our perspective, the anger equation is quite different: E/R = F+B = A (the failure of Reality to meet Expectations results in Frustration, which is converted into Anger by Blaming others). Sometimes other vulnerable feelings besides frustration are converted into anger, such as feelings of hurt when rejected, feeling fearful or anxious, or feeling embarrassed. In these cases, the more general anger equation becomes: VF+B = A (when Vulnerable Feelings are Blamed on others, Anger results). As noted above, however, frustration is the most common vulnerable feeling converted into anger. So how is one to manage frustration without resorting to anger and its associated negative consequences?

The successful management of frustration requires appropriate control of its component parts, i.e., expectations and reality. The Serenity Prayer provides an excellent summary of the three behaviors required to minimize and neutralize frustration. It is no coincidence that the Serenity Prayer is one of the core resources utilized in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs. The beauty of this prayer is that it directs us to regain our emotional control via wisdom, by accurately determining whether our expectations or the reality around us can be more easily controlled. In situations where we cannot control the behavior of others or the events around us, it makes sense to reduce our expectations to the point where we expect and accept the actual behavior of others, rather than maintaining our lofty and idealized expectations of how others SHOULD behave. On the other hand, in situations where we do have potential control over the events around us, or the ability to persuade others to change their behavior, it makes sense to engage in this effort and thereby satisfy our needs without having to reduce our expectations. The crucial task is to develop the wisdom to know the difference between situations that can be controlled/changed, and those that cannot be altered. Once this determination is made, we can then move toward serenity and acceptance, or the courage to change the reality around us. Failure to follow this path results in one or both of two frustrating consequences, specifically excessive passivity in accepting situations which could be changed, or beating one's head against the wall of reality while attempting to change unalterable situations. The former consequence, if repeated frequently enough, is a recipe for depression and suppressed resentment, while the latter is a blueprint for chronic frustration, anger, and conflict with others. More often than not, we end up having to reduce our expectations, or in AA parlance, having to stop SHOULDING all over
ourselves! The apparent paradox is that we have to give up control in order to get control. But we are actually talking about different types of control. By giving up illusionary control over things we don’t have control over anyways (others’ behavior), we gain control over something we actually have potential control over, that is, our own emotions. To do so, however, requires us to tolerate vulnerability. We must explore and identify the vulnerable feelings underneath our anger, and tolerate such emotional vulnerability long enough to explore it and develop a strategy for dealing with whichever primary emotion lies beneath our anger. We may also have to consider strategies for discussing these emotions with others, which risks interpersonal vulnerability. We will discuss the latter during our later chapter on couples work. The other chapters in this section detail strategies for dealing with a handful of vulnerable feelings other than frustration, specifically confusion, sadness, anxiety, guilt, and shame.

Before moving on, however, let’s look at a common example of anger manufactured by frustration: road rage, or for most of us, its universal form, road irritation. You are serenely enjoying a favored song on the radio, going with the flow of traffic in the right lane on your way to work, when you notice a car in your rearview mirror. The blue Thunderbird (no offense intended; my grandmother had a mouth watering turquoise model) is obviously in a hurry, weaving in and out of traffic behind you. Sure enough, it passes you and takes advantage of the small opening between you and the driver in the left lane ahead of you, cutting you off to get ahead. Who among us is not at least mildly irritated by such a driver? Most of us are well equipped to turn such common frustrations into at least mild irritation, and some of us can experience more extreme anger. But did you notice the frustration which preceeded your irritation or anger? Most of us convert frustration into anger so quickly that we don’t even notice the initial frustration. The jerk cut us off! He pissed us off! The idiot! But a more thoughtful analysis reveals the initial frustration. We expect other drivers to be considerate. We expect them to respect our boundaries, giving us a few car lengths of space for safety. When they fail to do what they SHOULD, and invade our space, threatening our safety, our need for safety and expectation of fair play are violated, and we experience at least momentary frustration. If we knew that a husband in the Thunderbird was racing his pregnant wife to the hospital after her water broke at home, we might expect such behavior (though we would also expect him to have his warning lights flashing). But we’re not inside his head, and don’t know the reason for his behavior, so we assume he’s just a jerk who doesn’t care about others’ needs or the accepted rules for fair play on the road. Our expectations have been
violated, and the resulting frustration immediately morphs into irritation, or worse.

But are these expectations reasonable? You might insist that of course they’re reasonable, you can’t have a peaceful society without people following the damned rules! This makes sense, but if you find yourself becoming angry too frequently, on the highway and elsewhere, you might want to consider an alternative perspective. In our civilized and predominantly Christian traditions, we have a moral code, which at its basic level, is centered on the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. This works pretty well when everyone adheres to it. But everyone doesn’t adhere to it. All of us violate it some of the time, and some of us violate it most of the time. Our moral outrage over the most egregious of these violations is understandable in light of our shared morals and expectations of each other. But what if our fellow humans are imperfect? Should we expect them to perfectly follow the rules all of the time? And if we do, aren’t we raising our expectations so high that we are setting ourselves up for frustration? And what about the sizeable minority of humans who are morally challenged and do not share our expectations and rules, or feel that these rules apply to us but not to them? Yes, maybe they SHOULD change their outlook and behavior. But this viewpoint entrenches your susceptibility to frustration, because you are not accepting reality. The reality is that many around us still resemble the apes we evolved from. If this is so, should we expect them to act like angels? When we hold onto such lofty expectations, reality and expectations clash, and frustration results. If we then blame our frustration on the reality of their behavior, we become angry, as well as helpless, because we ignore the only remaining part of the frustration equation that we still have control over, our expectations.

If we can’t control others’ behavior, i.e., reality, in a given situation, then we have two remaining choices, change our expectations, or remain frustrated. If we have the wisdom to know the difference, between what we can and cannot control, we are likely to quickly decide that we cannot control the behavior of other drivers. The issue then becomes a matter of how we can adjust our expectations of other drivers. Personally, I find a 20/30% (substitute your own numbers) rule of thumb useful. 20 or 30% of life sucks, though the remaining 70 or 80% is beautiful and makes life worthwhile. 20 or 30% of life involves jumping through hoops in order to get what you want, doing homework, cleaning toilets, delaying gratification, and tolerating the yuck factor. All of us act like jerks some of the time, but 20 or 30% of us act like jerks most of the time, and sometimes we cannot
avoid them. Should we expect all humans to be saints who carry the golden rule under one arm and the 10 Commandments under the other? Or should we expect reality, that perhaps only 70 or 80% of people will follow our shared rules most the time (70 or 80% of the time)? Your get that flight I get that Thus, we have the option, or choice, to expect 20 or 30% of people to ignore the rules most of the time, and to expect the rest of our fellow humans to skirt the rules 20 or 30% of the time. The ability to activate the 20/30% rule (again, substitute your own numbers) on the fly, when frustrated or disappointed in others behavior, is an effective means of reducing frustration by managing expectations. If you are quick to notice your frustration, activate your wisdom, and ask yourself if the situation is under your control. If so, determine what you can do to change your situation in order to meet your expectations. If not, try implementing the 20/30% rule, counting your blessings that 70 or 80% of life is positive, while accepting that we just happen to be in the midst of the remaining 20 or 30%, and that's okay. As they say in basketball, no harm no foul. If the Thunderbird didn't trade paint with your car or send you into the ditch, then no foul, and no big deal. Maybe he's one of the 20 or 30% who prove our link to our ancestors, and he'll get to his destination one minute early, while you get to yours fifteen seconds later. Or maybe he's one of the 70 or 80% of us who generally abide by the rules, but is having a bad day, or has a very good reason for hurrying. Either way, it's okay. The fabric of your life has not been torn, just temporarily smudged by an encounter with the 20 or 30% factor. By adjusting our expectations, both overall, and on the fly, we can learn to expect reality and thereby reduce our susceptibility to frustration, or quickly reduce it while we are in motion. We can apply our moral guidelines and expectations, or “shoulds,” to ourselves, but not to others, expecting reality rather than ideal behavior from others, and thereby manage our frustration. Likewise, if instead of frustration, we identify other vulnerable feelings underneath her anger, we can develop a strategy for managing each of those feelings.

Before we can manage our anger, however, we must identify it. In his book, Taking Charge of Anger, Robert Nay describes the various “faces” of anger. He also provides a Self-Assessment of Anger Questionnaire (SAQ) in order to better identify your primary methods of expressing anger. These include passive aggression, sarcasm, cold anger (withdrawing), hostility, and aggression. Sometimes anger is expressed indirectly in the form of passive aggression. When you are angry at a more powerful adversary, or if you tend to be a passive, dependent, conflict avoidant, or people pleasing type of person, you are likely to find yourself suppressing your anger in order to
avoid immediate negative consequences. You may succeed in keeping the waters calm at the moment, but your anger does not disappear, it only submerges. If you keep suppressing anger repeatedly, you may become depressed, while carrying smoldering resentment. Alternatively, you may accumulate enough anger to explode, only to feel guilty, and then vow to control your anger better, thereby beginning the suppression/accumulation/explosion cycle anew. The solution, of course, is to constructively address your anger as it appears, rather than saving it up for an explosion. In the absence of explosion or resolution, your suppressed anger may leak out indirectly via passive aggressive behavior. Passive aggression is the preferred form of anger expression amongst victims and others in a one down power situation. It is unsafe for a slave to tell his master to stick his cotton where the sun don't shine, but it may be safe as well as gratifying to pick the cotton slowly, thereby subtly sabotaging the plantation production. Similarly, teenagers often find themselves feeling angry in a one down power situation relative to their parents. While some may assert themselves or angrily defy parents directly, others feel too intimidated and may find it's safer to express their anger indirectly. Passive aggression is often displayed via withholding behaviors. Whatever the person you are angry at wants, you withhold. Thus, if your parents want to communicate with you, you can indirectly express your anger by giving one word answers, or by saying "I don't know." Or if they want you to take care of your chores without being reminded, you can "forget."

The beauty of such passive aggressive behavior is that it is deniable, that is, you can express your anger indirectly, and if confronted, the behavior is subtle enough that you can deny that you are angry and exclaim, "Dad, I can’t remember everything!" You get to express your anger, but deny responsibility for it, and thereby minimize the consequences that would follow if you were openly defiant. The problem with this behavior is that it doesn't solve the issues that you are angry about, and it keeps you in your one down power position. To solve a problem you need to address the problem directly, which in the case of teenagers, requires development of assertiveness, and emotionally honest discussion of anger (as well as a willingness to examine whether one's anger and expectations are justified). The term passive aggression is also used to describe more active forms of indirect aggression. While withholding behaviors are the more passive version of passive aggression, some people are quite adept at intentionally provoking and irritating others, either subtly enough that they can deny responsibility, or secretly enough that their provocation or sabotage is unknown by the targeted person. Thus, you might express your anger by
consistently finding an exception to, or something wrong with everything said by the person you are angry at, thereby intentionally frustrating them while appearing to simply participate in a conversation. Or, you may manipulate behind-the-scenes, damaging their reputation via criticism behind their back, hiding something important to them, etc. This is a more active form of aggression, but still indirect and secretive like the more passive forms of passive aggression. The danger of such behaviors is that they tend to eventually harm the perpetrator more than the recipient. Specifically, the repeated practice of manipulation and indirect expressions of emotion prevent the development of the direct communication and emotional honesty required for both effective social problem solving and emotional intimacy in close relationships. If you want to become more powerful in resolving conflicts, you need to learn to be more assertive and persuasive on top of the table, rather than manipulative underneath the table. And if you want to learn to be close others, you need to allow yourself to be vulnerable and emotionally honest, rather than closed, guarded, manipulative and indirect in your management of bothersome feelings and conflicts. Thus, while anger represents a defensive camouflage of underlying vulnerable feelings, passive aggression involves an additional layer of defense designed to camouflage one's anger while expressing it. Healthy communication with healthy partners requires us to work through both layers, getting beneath the passive aggression to examine and appropriately voice the anger itself, as well as getting beneath the anger to address the vulnerable feelings and needs, and the appropriateness of expectations which lie beneath the anger. This all presupposes that your partner, parent, or other temporary adversary is healthy enough to process such emotions with reciprocal vulnerability. Dealing with unhealthy adversaries is an entirely different issue, which requires far more caution as we consider our emotional safety before allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. We will address this issue in our chapter on couples work.

Returning to Nay’s faces of anger, sarcasm involves supposedly humorous putdowns, or “biting” wit. Criticism, disgust, or even contempt can be artfully disguised and delivered as a poisoned pill coated with humor. If confronted, you can dismiss the objections as oversensitivity, since sarcasm is less direct than a frontal attack, and therefore has some of the same dubious benefit as passive aggression, namely, deniability. Used sparingly, sarcasm can be humorous, but as a primary form of anger expression, it bites and alienates others while being too indirect to address the sources of any complaints. And it may simply reflect your character if you enjoy adversarial relatedness at arms length safety. “Cold anger” is the
term which Nay uses to describe an angry refusal to discuss issues. This may be just another form of passive aggression, the silent treatment, involving the intent to frustrate someone who is hoping to resolve a conflict via communication. Or as Gottman points out in his The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, overwhelmed partners can resort to “stonewalling” in order to stem the momentary tide of verbal relentlessness, or consistently unproductive communication, with their partners. In a related vein, when someone is “pouting,” they are either unable to productively communicate at the moment, or they are passive aggressively refusing to communicate. Perhaps they are hoping that you will give in and apologize, because you find their pouting to be intolerable. It is best not to reward this unhealthy behavior, or to retaliate with silent treatment of your own. You might periodically explore their willingness to resume communication, or let them know that you are ready to talk when they are. If they sustain their pout, it is sometimes best to let them stew in it, because it is uncomfortable for them as well as yourself. You must be able to tolerate it until they cannot. Eventually, they are likely to emerge from it, either because their anger has dissipated enough to communicate, or because their manipulative ploy is not working. Nay goes on to distinguish between hostility and aggression. By hostility he refers to angry commentary and nonverbal maneuvers, while aggression refers to attempts to verbally or even physically intimidate. If you are not clear regarding your own angry tactics, his SAQ can be a good starting point.

Even if you are aware of your most typical angry tactics, you may not be aware of the anger itself at a given moment, particularly if it is not pronounced. Applying the habit model to anger management, we want to pursue two goals. First, we want to develop a Plan B for dealing with anger when we recognize it. This might involve decreasing arousal, identifying and expressing vulnerable feelings beneath anger, assertiveness, forgiveness, or other alternatives to our more habitual, ineffective Plan A (anger). Secondly, as with any cognitive or behavioral habit that we want change, we need to monitor ourselves for early manifestations of the problematic habit. If we cannot catch our anger early, we cannot substitute plan B, and we are rather like Woody Allen's movie character, insightful but consistently neurotic. In the case of anger, we are even better off if we can monitor and identify our vulnerable feelings before we turn them into anger, for we can then deal with these underlying feelings directly, and thereby prevent the development of anger. Other times, we will have already engaged in this process, but still need to catch our anger early, before we express it, lest we regret our behavior afterwards.
Identifying your anger early can be pursued on a number of levels. Not only can we identify frustration and other vulnerable feelings before we convert them into anger, but we can identify the expectations contributing to the frustrations which fuel much of our anger. Early feelings of annoyance or irritation may typically go unnoticed until they escalate into outright anger, but can be the target of your radar. Likewise, thoughts which tend to precede, accompany, or maintain anger can be monitored, as can the physical sensations associated with anger. Each of these early warning signals can be monitored and identified well before the appearance of the behaviors which express our anger. On the physical level, you may find yourself feeling hot in the face and neck, sweaty, particularly in your palms, or tensing your muscles, perhaps clenching your fists or grinding your teeth. You may find your heart rate increased, or the presence of a headache or stomach distress. We are all similar but different, so you will need to pay attention to your own physical signs of anger if you are to catch them early. Your thoughts will also reflect your anger. You may find yourself thinking of striking out verbally or physically, or merely judging another person negatively, or perhaps obsessing on their objectionable behavior. Nay provides an excellent chapter focusing on recognition of the thoughts which fuel your anger, and a companion chapter identifying more adaptive thought patterns. On a behavioral level, you may find yourself pacing, rubbing your head, or clutching your clenched fist with your other hand. Emotionally, in addition to the early signs of irritation or annoyance, you may find that you lost your sense of humor, or craving a smoke or a drink. Monitoring your behavior on the physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels will allow you to catch your anger early, while you can still deal with it constructively.

Various strategies can help you decrease your emotional and physical arousal at the moment. While they do not directly or immediately address the sources of your anger, they can help you calm down enough to consider your situation and your options in a more levelheaded manner. As Nay notes, breathing is the foundation of relaxation and meditation techniques designed to dampen arousal. While breathing is controlled automatically by your brainstem, so you do not have to remind yourself to breathe every moment, it is also partially subject to your voluntary control. Nay recommends what he calls “signal breathing,” which you begin by taking a full diaphragmatic breath, allowing your stomach not just your chest to expand. Hold this breath momentarily, then exhale very slowly through your slightly pursed lips, exhaling gradually for a minimum of 15 seconds. Even a single such breath can immediately decrease your emotional and physical
arousal, while reminding yourself that it is often helpful to take a brief “timeout” before pursuing your anger further. More extensive breathing-based relaxation and meditation skills, as well as muscle relaxation skills, are covered in our other chapters and elsewhere, and can be useful in managing anger as well as anxiety, since both involve a good deal of physiological tension. As Nay notes, the use of imagery can be useful as well, particularly if you have already developed some soothing images, such as a seaside sunset, a babbling brook in a leaf strewn autumn forest, or a late spring meadow filled with wildflowers. As we discuss in a later chapter focusing upon self nurturance and self soothing for trauma survivors, take full the advantage of all five of your senses by vividly imagining the details of such a scene through sight, sound, smell, touch, and perhaps even taste. Likewise a variety of additional stress reduction strategies can be used instead of anger, or to short-circuit the early manifestations of anger. They include listening to music, exercising, finding a humorous angle on your issue, or distracting yourself. Again, these strategies do not address the source of your anger, but they may help you reduce your stress and arousal long enough to activate your wisdom, thereby delaying any regrettable, impulsive acting out of your anger, while opening up other options.

One such option is assertiveness. Some of us confuse assertiveness with aggression. We can view assertiveness on a spectrum, ranging from submission through assertiveness to aggression. Consider a 0-100 scale in which 0 represents wholesale submission, while 100 indicates unbridled aggression, with various degrees of assertiveness occupying the middle of the spectrum. As with most other psychological dimensions, it helps to have a full range of skills in order to cope effectively with the variety of situations and dilemmas which face us in life. Possessing skills at only one end of a given dimension leaves us with a one size fits all rigidity in our behavior. If we are pulled over while driving 50 mph in a 30 mph traffic zone, aggression is obviously counterproductive. If we are trapped in a dark alley by an aggressor, submission may work under some circumstances, though aggression may be required for our survival. In most situations in life, some degree of assertiveness it is likely to be preferable, whether it be a milder, compassionate assertiveness at perhaps level 35 on our scale, or a much firmer, stern level 65 aggressive assertiveness. The ability to gradually escalate, from level 35 to 50 to 65 or beyond, as dictated by the response of our adversary, is adaptive as well. We need the full range of such skills in order to optimally adapt our behavior to our circumstances. The difference between assertiveness and aggression, as well as the nature of submission, can be illustrated in a chart which identifies the purposes of such behaviors.
In most conflictual interpersonal situations, we have two goals. First, we want to voice our need, desire, or expectation to someone, in the hope of getting what we want. Secondly, we may want to respect the feelings and needs of our temporary adversary, particularly a loved one, a friend, or someone we will be dealing with frequently in the future, in order to preserve our relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Submission</th>
<th>Assertiveness</th>
<th>Aggression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice/Meet Your Need:</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes/Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preserve Relationship:</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we choose to submit, we are attempting to avoid conflict in order to preserve a relationship, sacrificing our need by not voicing it, or by backing down quickly in the face of opposition. In aggression, we are focused single-mindedly on meeting our need or expectation, without regard to the impact of our behavior on our adversary or our relationship. We aggressively voice our need, and may meet this need via intimidation, though our aggressive tactic will sometimes turn out to be counterproductive in getting this need met. The difficult part of assertiveness is that we are attempting to meet both goals at the same time, that is, we are trying to maintain a relationship while voicing, and hopefully meeting our immediate need, desire, or expectation. This is an art which requires a good deal of practice and experimentation.

In The Anger Solution, John Lee details some essential components of assertive communication. His explanations of “compassionate assertiveness,” and “emotional intelligence” are well worth reading. In compassionate assertiveness, we are pursuing both goals noted above, speaking up regarding our feelings and needs, while doing so from a win-win philosophy in which each party’s feelings and needs are respected. Emotional intelligence it is often more valuable than traditional intelligence, in that it involves a robust emotional awareness, well developed skills for expressing one’s full range of emotions, and due regard for the impact of these communications. Lee also references the traditional distinction between “I…” and “You,” statements, stating that “… when it comes to language, healthy anger is about ‘me’ and destructive anger is about ‘you’.” This is a distinction deserving closer scrutiny, as we often unwittingly
communicate our feelings in a manner which invites a defensive response, when we are instead seeking active listening and consideration of our feelings and needs. “I” statements typically start with the words “I feel…” and express a vulnerable feeling which arises within oneself in a given situation, without overemphasizing the other person's behavior. “You” statements, on the other hand, start with “You…” and proceed to an accounting of the other person’s problematic behavior. It's not that their behavior should not or cannot be discussed, but rather, an issue of how to disarm their defenses so they are more willing to listen to your feelings and needs, and the impact of their behavior. Starting with “I feel…” followed by a description of one's own vulnerable feelings is no guarantee, but at least invites listening and compassion, whereas criticisms beginning with “You…” are almost guaranteed to produce a defensive response. Given its importance as a life skill designed to simultaneously improve our satisfaction and relationships, assertiveness is the sole topic of many books worthy of your review. Nay devotes a chapter to assertive problem-solving, reviewing typical roadblocks to effective communication ("you-toeing," "historicizing," "labeling"/name calling, and "all or none remarks"), in addition to the components of active listening, details of "I" messages, and other facets of assertive communication. In our chapter on couples work, we will visit various facets of healthy communication and relatedness, including the “win–win” philosophy, a viewpoint which promotes compassionate assertiveness rather than self-centeredness and aggression.

Last but certainly not least, there is forgiveness. Many of us find ourselves believing that forgiveness is for saints, for the select few who are well above our moral pay grade. Sure, we may be able to forgive minor offenses, particularly those committed by loved ones if they are genuinely apologetic. But when we are the victim of major crimes perpetrated by unrepentant jerks, we recoil from the very thought of forgiveness. They just don’t deserve our forgiveness. And this is true. Those who commit crimes against their fellow humans, without remorse or amends, simply do not deserve forgiveness. They deserve justice. Forgiveness is not a requirement or an obligation. It is a choice. And it is sometimes a wise choice, as it often benefits the forgiver far more than the forgivee.

Forgiveness is the often neglected stepchild in the family of anger management techniques. In his excellent book, Forgiveness is a Choice, Robert Enright (www.Forgiveness Institute.org) notes that many people are willing to forgive only if they can reasonably expect their tormentor to change their behavior. Likewise, forgiveness is easier if one can expect a true apology. As I note in my chapter on couples work, forgiveness for an
affair or another major transgression is much easier when one's partner is willing to perform three tasks: a genuine, heartfelt apology, a commitment to change whatever behaviors led to the crime, and a willingness to actively listen to and validate the feelings of the victimized party. Under these conditions, trust is substantially redeveloped, and forgiveness, though still difficult, is easier. But what about situations in which the perpetrator is unrepentant and unconcerned regarding the impact of his or her behavior upon you, and situations in which the reestablishment of trust is impossible and unthinkable? Enright has conducted various studies of forgiveness, including studies of female incest survivors, and of men who were distressed by the abortion decision of their partners. He demonstrated that following forgiveness therapy, these individuals were less depressed, less anxious, less angry, and more hopeful. Such findings underscore the potential benefits of forgiveness to the forgiver.

Forgiveness does not require trust, or reestablishment of a relationship with an abusive individual. One can choose to forgive without ever trusting the forgivee, or exposing oneself to the risk of revictimization. Forgiveness can be delivered in absentia, privately, without any consideration of reconciliation, without even communicating with the forgivee, if you deem that person untrustworthy. In these situations, we acknowledge that the perpetrator is too morally bankrupt to acknowledge his offense, empathize, apologize, or make amends. But even so, forgiveness allows us to change our relationship with the offender, because we are then no longer controlled by, or obsessed with our anger toward them. Such offenders do not deserve forgiveness, but we deserve the benefits derived from forgiving our offender. In other relationships, you may seek reconciliation, which may or may not be forthcoming, depending on the response of the offender. As Enright notes, “One may forgive and not reconcile, but one never truly reconciles without some form of forgiving taking place. If the offender remains unrepentant and unchanged, then reconciliation is impossible,” while adding that “The gift (of forgiveness) may be scorned, but the gift retains its inherent value.”

Enright goes on to note that forgiveness is more of a gradual process than an instant decision, even though a commitment to this process is a starting point. His research indicates that success in the forgiveness process reduces or eliminates negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward the offender, while developing positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward that person. In addition to a commitment to forgive, forgiveness involves giving a gift to the offender. Again, this may sound ludicrous, because the offender deserves justice rather than a gift. Again, keep in mind that the
benefits of forgiveness flow more to you than to the offender, and that the gift is not a new Porsche. It helps to start small, often without any contact with the offender, perhaps by refraining from disparaging remarks about the offender to others, or by benevolently offering a prayer for the offender. Enright likewise focuses upon the advantages of journaling during the forgiveness process, with one such empathic journaling exercise focusing upon the nature of the offender’s life while growing up, and at the time of the offense. Another approach involves separating the offense from the offender, allowing yourself to see him or her as a person who committed, but is not necessarily defined by the offense. Later in the process, you might consider more substantial gifts to the offender, such as putting flowers on their grave, or giving the gift of your time via a hospital visit to an ailing parent who treated you so poorly. You may eventually choose to directly express your forgiveness in person, or in a letter, or not at all. Through these and other exercises, Enright guides us through the process of forgiveness, through achievable goals which gradually reduce our angry preoccupation. In the course of this process, we are released from the prison of our own anger, free to pursue healthier relationships. Forgiveness is not a requirement, but it is an option. As such, it has its place amongst our arsenal of anger management resources.

Just one last note before we finish. While all this resort to our own fair share of anger, there is a significant gender difference in the way our society approaches anger. By and large, men are taught to be strong, i.e., less vulnerable, and anger is a significant resource if one wants to achieve at least momentary invulnerability. Women, on the other hand, typically receive better training in socialization and preservation of relationships, and less encouragement to utilize anger. Men who find themselves trapped in the anger cycle may find another recommended book to be quite useful. Take a look at Beyond Anger - A Guide for Men, by Thomas Harbin, in addition to the resources noted above.