Chapter 6. Anger and Frustration

Anger is a defensive, secondary emotion. It always comes after some other, less desirable emotion. It is obviously an emotion, but it is often clearly used as a defense 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 and blame or criticize her 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 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.

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 often appear together, and are both externalizing defenses, i.e., they direct emotional energy outside of one's self. Anger seems to be the macho person's primary emotion when feeling distressed, as it allows him/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 vulnerable targets 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 oneself to feel stronger, more protected, and less vulnerable. Anger also energizes us and prepares us for battle, whether this be in realistically dangerous situations, or in situations where more rational discussion would be more effective. Unfortunately, when we blame and attack others, they feel threatened and vulnerable, and often resort to their own anger and blaming defenses, resulting in a vicious circle of conflict. Other times, they may defend themselves by submitting to our intimidating onslaught, thereby reinforcing us for our angry blaming. But in such cases, resentment is the price of submission, and our targets are likely to become progressively alienated from us if our anger becomes chronic. Our immediate needs may be met, but only at the price of a damaged relationship, particularly if this process is repeated. In the long run, it is more effective to share our feelings on a vulnerable level, as long as our partner in conflict is willing to do the same. This approach is more likely to result in conflict resolution, and in closer relationships, with improved emotional intimacy (i.e., shared vulnerability) as well.

Frustration is the vulnerable feeling which is most frequently converted into anger. As we noted, this results when our needs, desires, or expectations become blocked by external events or the actions of others. 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., $F=E/R$. 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 other people and events around us fail to meet our expectations, the more we will be frustrated. We have a variety of options for dealing with frustration. One option is to blame other people and complain about the world, thereby converting frustration into anger, which allows us to feel less responsible for our fate, and less vulnerable emotionally, at least momentarily. 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 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. The beauty of this prayer is that it directs us to regain our emotional control by accurately determining whether our expectations or the reality around us can more easily be controlled. In situations where we cannot control of the behavior or 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! By giving up illusionary control over things we don't have control over anyways, we gain control over something we actually have potential control over, that is, control over our emotions.

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 to 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 are likely to eventually 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 express and work through your anger as it appears, rather than saving it up for an explosion. Alternatively, your suppressed anger may leak out indirectly via passive aggressive behavior. Passive aggression is a favorite form of anger expression amongst victims and others in a one down power situation. Thus, 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 expression 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 emotions prevents the development of the direct communication and emotional honesty required for both effective social problem solving and emotional intimacy in closer 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 express the anger itself, and getting beneath the anger to address the vulnerable feelings and needs which lie beneath the anger. Dealing with unhealthy adversaries is an entirely different issue, to be addressed later. And finally, it is important to remember that forgiveness usually benefits the forgiver more than the forgivee, since chronically suppressed anger and grudges are poisonous to mental health.