

Honor Your Anger

How Transforming Your Anger Style
Can Change Your Life

Beverly Engel



JOHN WILEY & SONS, INC.

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I dedicate this book to all the clients I've worked with who have struggled to find a way to honor their anger and at the same time to learn to express it in healthy ways.

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I welcome your questions and feedback. You can e-mail me at: beverly@beverlyengel.com or write to: P. O. Box 6412, Los Osos, CA 93402.

Introduction

Everyone has issues and concerns about anger. Some people need help in managing anger that gets out of control; others need help in accessing buried anger. Some take anger that is meant for one person out on innocent people, while others take their anger out on themselves. Instead of confronting the people with whom they are angry, they become self-destructive in some way—by overeating or binge eating, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol or taking drugs, or relentlessly bombarding themselves with self-criticism. Others pretend they aren't angry but then get back at those who hurt or threaten them in indirect, often underhanded ways, such as gossiping, being sarcastic, or distancing themselves.

Unless you find healthy ways of owning and expressing your anger, it will find some outlet that might be inappropriate, unhealthy, or counterproductive. Anger can wreck havoc in your life and the lives of those around you unless you take charge of it.

You cannot avoid anger anymore than you can avoid conflict, yet many people believe that the ultimate indication of emotional health or enlightenment is to be anger-free. You won't hear any such message in this book. In *Honor Your Anger*, I will show you how to embrace anger. You will welcome it into your home and learn as much as you possibly can about it; for only by knowing your anger

intimately can you gain control of it. For most of us, anger doesn't magically disappear just because we ignore it or decide we are not going to give it any credence. Instead, it either festers and grows stronger with each passing day or mutates into a distorted form of emotion that we can barely recognize.

Anger is a necessary and important emotion. It signals that something is wrong in a relationship, in your environment, or in yourself. When you ignore this signal, you cut yourself off from your other emotions. Unfortunately, even though we live in an age when we are far less repressed in many areas of life, including sexuality, we are no more tolerant of anger than our grandparents. In fact, although we may be freer to express passion, tenderness, or fear than our ancestors were, our tolerance of anger is actually declining.

Anger can create powerful changes in the world. It can be the catalyst for bringing atrocities to light, stamping out injustice, and creating new structures and systems to replace those that are corrupt or inadequate. Anger can empower those who have been tyrannized or victimized, imbuing them with the courage to stand up to their oppressors, to leave an abusive or tyrannical situation, and to stand on their own.

Anger can also create destruction. It can be the force behind war, long-term family feuds, and divorce. Words said in anger can sever the strongest of ties. Repressed anger from childhood can rear its ugly head and cause even the most loving parents to lash out at their precious children, continuing the cycle of abuse into a new generation. If you turn anger against yourself in the form of guilt and shame, it can eat away at your self-esteem to such an extent that it robs you of pride, motivation, and belief in yourself. Anger that has been held in and denied for years can fester until it bursts out unexpectedly—even causing someone to severely maim or kill another human being.

You would think that since anger has such potential for both good and bad, we would all know a great deal about it. From the time we are small children, we should all receive instruction on how to avoid unhealthy ways of releasing anger and suggestions and encouragement on how we can express anger in positive ways. Unfortunately,

this isn't the case. We are discouraged from expressing our anger just as we are discouraged from showing the other so-called negative emotions such as fear, sorrow, guilt, and envy. Instead of being introduced to positive ways of coping with and expressing our anger and told about the positive ways that anger can be used to change our environment—and the world—we are given only half the story and told that anger is destructive and that we shouldn't feel it or express it. Like all children who try to mind their parents and their elders, we try to conform by repressing our anger. This only serves to turn healthy anger into unhealthy anger.

This book is about what happens when you aren't given permission to feel and express your anger. It is also about what occurs when you learn unhealthy ways of expressing your anger and how these unhealthy anger styles negatively affect your life and the lives of those around you.

Honor Your Anger is filled with innovative and practical tools that will empower those who act out their anger in negative ways to gain better control of their anger and their lives. But as aggression and violence in the family, in schools, and on the street continues, we must do more than learn anger management techniques. We need to explore the pain and shame underneath the anger and deal with an equally problematic part of the anger equation involving those who stand by while violence occurs. If you have submerged your anger out of fear or denial, *Honor Your Anger* will help to empower you so that you can begin to assert your anger in safe ways and to stand up for yourself and your children.

Underneath our anger, or our refusal to get angry, are core feelings that we need to unearth if we are to learn healthy ways of managing anger. *Honor Your Anger* will offer a program that will help readers who are stuck in anger and blame to go to a deeper level, uncover the reasons, and move past them.

In addition to learning how to handle anger in a healthier, more balanced way, we also need to learn how to put anger behind us. Instead of holding on to past resentments, ruminating on revenge fantasies, and distancing ourselves from others, we need to learn how to use anger to

motivate and empower ourselves. In *Honor Your Anger*, readers will learn to communicate angry feelings in ways that will be heard and to resolve conflicts in ways that take into account each person's needs.

How *Honor Your Anger* Is Different from Other Anger Books

There are quite a few books available on anger, but most focus on helping those who are out of control or abusive learn to contain their anger or find healthy outlets for it. Although we certainly can't deny that those people create enormous problems for themselves, those close to them, and society at large, those who are unable to express their anger—either out of fear of consequences or because they are out of touch with themselves—pose an equal amount of problems. In this book, I will present the controversial thesis that those who withhold their anger can cause as many problems in relationships and in society as those who act out their anger inappropriately.

We all know there is a problem in our culture with violence in schools, work-related violence, gang violence, wife battering, child abuse, and violent crime, and that anger and rage lie at the core of these problems. Anger management has become a million-dollar industry, as have conflict resolution programs in schools and in the workplace. Companies pour millions of dollars into providing anger management courses for their employees. But few, if any, spend money on helping those who deny, suppress, or repress their anger. And while some books have pointed out to women that expressing their anger will help them to become more assertive and feel more confident, few make the point that women (and men) who submerge their anger actually *encourage* abuse and encourage others to act out their anger for them.

Honor Your Anger is not just another book on anger management. It is an in-depth look at how anger affects and even shapes our lives. It will encourage you to look deep inside to explore the roots of your anger. It will provide an opportunity for you to honestly evaluate what your anger says about you as an individual. And it will present alter-

natives to the old ways of thinking about anger and the customary methods of dealing with it.

Why I Wrote This Book

Anger has been of interest to me for a long time. For many years I've studied it, wrestled with it inside myself, and observed how my clients deal with it. I've noticed how anger is intricately tied in with other emotions—how it can mask feelings of vulnerability and pain, how some people need to express anger in order to get to the pain underneath, and how some need to express pain in order to get to the anger underneath. I've noticed how anger is often triggered by shame and how the way we express our anger can cause us shame. I've noticed how afraid many people are of their anger and how some seem to be oblivious to the fact that their anger frightens other people.

I've grown to know anger intimately not only through my practice as a psychotherapist but through my own personal work. When I first sought therapy in my mid-twenties, it was because I was deeply depressed. I would cry for hours and had difficulty leaving my home. I felt hopeless and helpless.

I knew that I had been sexually abused as a child, but I honestly thought I had put it behind me. In therapy I discovered that I was enraged at my abuser. I also discovered that I was enraged with my mother, who had been extremely emotionally abusive and neglectful of me. This rage felt so overwhelming and threatening that I was deathly afraid to touch it much less express it. Instead I chose to stuff my anger down with alcohol, food, and sex. And while I had allowed men to take advantage of me all my life, I had also taken my anger at my abuser and my mother out on these men by being overly demanding, distrustful, and accusatory.

It took many years of therapy with a supportive psychotherapist before I could own and honor my anger. Even then I was ashamed to express it in front of her. I tried going behind the couch where she couldn't see me to use the foam-covered bats that clients often use to express their anger in a safe way. But this didn't work either. Eventually

I began Neo-Reichian therapy (a body therapy with an emphasis on the physical release of emotions) to work past my fear and shame concerning my anger and to find ways to express my anger constructively. I found the support and the techniques that would help me tap into the deep pool of rage I had been carrying around most of my life. This work helped to empower me and to let go of what I came to realize was a victim mentality.

As so often happens, because I felt newly empowered and because I was determined never to be victimized again, I became the abuser in many of my relationships. I became extremely controlling because I still felt so out of control of myself. I still drank too much, and when I drank I became very critical of my partners, harassing them over and over with the same complaints. In essence, I had become my mother. It would take another round of therapy before I would be able to come to terms with my demons. This time the focus was on my shame and on my shadow, or dark side—that part of ourselves that we reject or deny in our attempts to be all good.

Throughout my life I have personally experienced every type of anger style I discuss in this book. I've expressed my anger directly and I've misdirected my anger. I've been both the victim and the abuser in my relationships. By focusing on my anger instead of hiding from it or running away from it, I've found that I have been able to develop an anger style that is assertive without being domineering or aggressive. I've learned when to express my anger and when to contain it. And I've learned to spot my anger in my projections, my depressions, and my conflicts with other people. In fact, the positive management of my anger has been one of my greatest accomplishments. Today I'm neither abusive with my anger nor do I allow others to abuse me with theirs. I become angry far less often, and when I do, I allow myself to feel and express the anger in appropriate ways. Most important, I learn from my anger. I learn what my anger is trying to tell me about myself, a situation, or another person. I learn what role I played in a conflict and how to avoid similar situations.

Overall, anger has served me well. It has motivated me to leave destructive relationships and it has been a guiding force behind my

drive for success. It has helped me to fight some of my most difficult battles, including both my personal and professional battle against child sexual abuse. It has empowered me to take a stand on everything from child abuse to environmental issues.

I've also found that once I learned to channel my anger into creative endeavors, the misdirected anger that destroyed some of my relationships and the anger I turned on myself in the form of self-destructive behaviors was transformed into positive energy, inspiration, and insight. And I've learned that by having the courage to face how I have harmed other people with my anger, I've been able to let go of it and to forgive those who have harmed me. Because of this intensive personal work, the amount of studying I've done on anger, and the work I've done with my clients throughout the years, I believe I have a lot to share with you. I believe I have a unique perspective about anger and that I've even discovered some aspects of the subject that I've never read or heard about anywhere else.

In this book you will find that I do not talk down to anyone, even those who are guilty of abusive behavior. Instead I offer compassion and empathy and share accounts of my own struggles with my anger. This will give those of you who have been abusive with your anger permission to be as honest as possible about the negative effects your anger has had on others and will hopefully encourage you to continue struggling to overcome your destructive patterns, even when the going gets tough.

PART ONE

CHANGE YOUR ANGER
STYLE, CHANGE YOUR LIFE

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