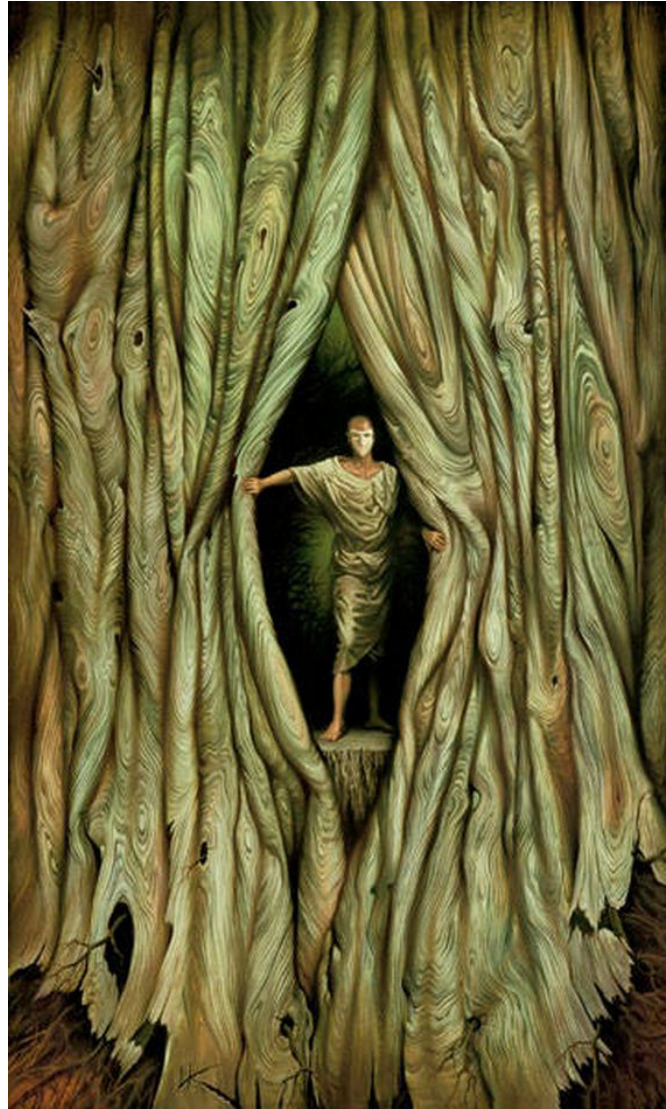


# CONTROLLING YOUR ANGER



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## *BEFORE IT CONTROLS YOU*

Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems - problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion. This brochure is meant to help you understand and control anger.

Anger is "an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage," according to Dr Charles Spielberger, a psychologist who specializes in the study of anger. Like other emotions, it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline.

Anger can be caused by both external and internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (such as a co-worker or supervisor) or event (a traffic jam, a cancelled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about your personal problems. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.

### Are You Too Angry?

There are psychological tests that measure the intensity of angry feelings, how prone to anger you are, and how well you handle it. But chances are good that if you do have a problem with anger, you already know it. If you find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, you might need help finding better ways to deal with this emotion.

Why are some people angrier than others? According to Dr Jerry Deffenbacher, who specializes in anger management, some people really are more "hot-headed" than others are; they get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person does. There are also those who don't show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don't always curse and throw things; sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk, or get physically ill.

People who are easily angered generally have what some psychologists call a low tolerance for frustration, meaning simply that they feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience, or annoyance. They can't take things in their stride, and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust: for example, being corrected for a minor mistake.

What makes these people this way? A number of things. One cause may be genetic or physiological: There is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy, and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another may be sociocultural. Anger is often regarded as negative; we're taught that it's all right to express anxiety, depression, or other emotions but not to express anger. As a result, we don't learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

Research has also found that family background plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic, and not skilled at emotional communications.

## Expressing Anger

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats; it inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviours, which allow us to fight and to defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.

On the other hand, we can't physically lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us; laws, social norms, and common-sense place limits on how far our anger can take us.

People use a variety of both conscious and unconscious processes to deal with angry feelings. The three main approaches are expressing, suppressing, and calming.

Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive - not aggressive - manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding; it means being respectful of yourself and others.

Anger can be suppressed, and then converted or redirected. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behaviour. The danger in this type of response is that if it isn't allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward - on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression.

Unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behaviour (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on) or a personality that seems perpetually cynical and hostile. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to constructively express their anger. Not surprisingly, they aren't likely to have many successful relationships.

Finally, you can calm down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behaviour, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down, and let the feelings subside.

As Dr Spielberg notes, "when none of these three techniques work, that's when someone – or something - is going to get hurt."

### Is It Good To "Let It All Hang Out?"

There's a myth that won't seem to die in popular understanding of anger. Back in the 1960's, psychology (doing the best it could as a very young science) put forth the notion that "venting" your anger, letting it all hang out, was the way to go if you wanted to be emotionally healthy.

Psychologists now say that this is a dangerous myth. Some people use this theory as a license to hurt others. Research has found that "letting it rip" with anger actually escalates anger and aggression and does nothing to help you (or the person you're angry with) resolve the situation.

Venting (a.k.a. cathartic expression of anger) feels great in the moment, and it would seem to make sense that letting it out, instead of keeping it bottled up, would make you less prone to lashing out at those you love, like letting some steam out of a cranked-up pressure-cooker.

In the 1990s, Brad Bushman and his colleagues Roy Baumeister and Angela Stack definitively showed that letting off steam actually leaves you more prone to do it again and again (it does feel good, after all), and stated:

*These results contradict any suggestion that hitting the punching bag [the form of letting off steam in their studies] would have beneficial effects because one might feel better after doing so (which is what advocates of catharsis often say). People did indeed enjoy hitting the punching bag, but this was related to more rather than less subsequent aggression toward a person...hitting a punching bag does not produce a cathartic effect: It increases rather than decreases subsequent aggression.*

Venting keeps your nervous system primed for more angry responses, and you're more likely to keep venting - all over the people in your life - so you can keep doing it. Other people react "badly", and then you can vent at/on them. Quite the feedback loop, eh?

Whatever you practice the most is what gets wired up to be the fastest and first route in your brain. And the "hit" of dopamine that you probably get from venting makes it all the more addictive.

Making more mindful choices is a habit for adults who grew up with attuned communication and secure attachment. Their brains have more ready-for-action wiring in the middle prefrontal areas. For them a surge of angry reaction is automatically shunted upward into the middle prefrontal (mPF) area.

The fact is that most people can keep it together in some situations, but in intimate relationships they frequently "lose it." In intimate relationship conflicts most of us are not able to recruit our higher brain - our limbic system is naturally faster on the draw.

### Emotional Hijacking

Part of the ancient "reptilian brain" is the limbic system, which is in charge of primal reactions, with a remarkable "ignition button", the size of a peanut, called the "amygdala".

The neocortex (from the latin terms neo = new and cortex = bark, i.e. surface) is presumably, in charge of all the "modern stuff", like language, reasoning, etc.

The problem is that the limbic system always comes first: when the amygdala gets activated by any threatening perception, its messages, which can be a matter of life or death, get top priority, and will inhibit the rest of the brain signals for a while.

The worst cases are when a person acts like they are “possessed”, or even those murderers who in the aftermath of the killing claim “not remembering anything”, “acting as in a dream”. This phenomenon of inhibition of the rational brain has been called “emotional hijack”.

Being “hijacked” by one’s own brain. Quite spooky, isn’t it? And to make things even worse, the amygdala, perhaps due to its primitive origins, its deep roots, has a very “easy trigger”, and once it gets impressed by a certain impulse, the impression will NEVER be completely erased.

An emotional hijack activates the two arms of the fight-or-flight reaction:

**Fight** = lashing out in anger

**Flight** = stonewalling

### **Flooding - Being Swamped by Anger**

Habitual and automatic toxic thoughts of being a victim and righteous indignation are typical of partners in troubled marriages, continually fuelling feelings of anger and hurt. These thoughts are powerful; they trip the neural alarm system.

Once the thought of being victimized triggers an emotional hijacking, it is easy to recall and ruminate on a list of grievances, while not being able to recall anything that might disconfirm the view that one is an innocent victim.

Adults who have been emotionally traumatized as children are extremely prone to emotional hijackings; they are easily hurt and angry, and they stay disturbed longer. This makes it more likely that they will resort to criticism and contempt when confronting others, which in turn heightens the likelihood of defensiveness and stonewalling.

The most virulent of such toxic thoughts are found in husbands who physically abuse their wives. When they perceive their wives doing something suggesting rejection or

abandonment, their reactions turn to indignation and outrage. The net effect of these distressing attitudes is to create incessant crisis, since they trigger emotional hijackings more often and make it harder to recover from the resulting hurt and rage.

This susceptibility to frequent emotional distress is called flooding; flooded husbands and wives are so overwhelmed by their partner's negativity and their own reaction to it that they are swamped by dreadful, out-of-control feelings.

Flooded people cannot hear without distortion or respond with clear-headedness; they find it hard to organize their thinking, and they fall back on primitive reactions. They just want things to stop, or want to run or, sometimes, to strike back. Flooding is a self-perpetuating emotional hijacking.

The technical description of flooding is that it begins when the heart rate escalates to 10 beats per minute above the person's resting rate. The heart rate can jump as many as 30 beats per minute within the space of a single heartbeat. Muscles tense; it seems hard to breathe. There is a swamp of toxic feelings, a wash of fear and anger that feel inescapable and subjectively feels like "for ever."

At this point - full hijacking - a person's emotions are so intense, their perspective so narrow, and their thinking so confused that there is no hope of taking the other's viewpoint or settling things in a reasonable way. The problem for a marriage is when one or both spouses feels flooded almost continually. They are always on guard for an emotional assault or injustice, they become hypervigilant and overreact at the slightest sign.

It becomes harder and harder to recover from the physiological arousal, which in turn makes it easier for innocuous exchanges to be seen in a sinister light, triggering flooding all over again. This is the most dangerous turning point for a marriage, a catastrophic shift in the relationship.

The flooded partner thinks the worst of the spouse virtually all the time, reading everything she or he does in a negative light. Small issues become major battles; feelings are hurt continually. Problems seem severe and impossible to fix, since the flooding itself sabotages any attempt to work things out. Partners try to soothe their troubled feelings on their own. They start leading parallel lives and feel alone within the marriage. The next step is divorce.

The cycle of criticism and contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, distressing thoughts and emotional flooding, reflects a disintegration of emotional self-awareness and self-control, of empathy and the abilities to soothe each other and oneself. Divorce is not so much caused by the issues, but by the lack of emotional competencies: being able to calm down; calming your partner.

The problem is that most emotional reactions triggered in marriage have been sculpted since childhood, first learned in our most intimate relationships or modelled by parents. We are primed for bad emotional habits: overreacting; attacking; defending; shutting down, etc.

Managing powerful emotions is particularly difficult in intimate relationships because they are triggered by our deepest needs - to be loved and feel respected, fears of abandonment or of being emotionally deprived.

A key competence is to learn to soothe one's own distressed feelings. This means mastering the ability to recover quickly from the flooding caused by an emotional hijacking.

Another key is the ability to detoxify self-talk - innocent victim or righteous indignation slogans. This requires monitoring, catching and challenging these thoughts, and bringing to mind other perspectives.

The most important key is non-defensive listening and speaking - the skill that keeps couples together. This requires the ability to listen past the anger and the specific issues in the midst of an emotional hijacking; to offer and return implicit peace offerings. Empathic listening means to purposely ignore the insult / criticism / contempt and hear the appeal for love.

## STRATEGIES TO KEEP ANGER AT BAY

### Relaxation

Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help calm down angry feelings. There are books and courses that can teach you relaxation techniques, and once you learn the techniques, you can call upon them in any situation. If you are involved in a relationship where both partners are hot-tempered, it might be a good idea for both of you to learn these techniques.



Some simple steps you can try:

- Breathe deeply, from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest won't relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your "gut."
- Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax," "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
- Use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination.
- Non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer.
- Practice these techniques daily. Learn to use them automatically when you're in a tense situation.

### Cognitive Restructuring

Simply put, this means changing the way you think. Angry people tend to curse, swear, or speak in highly colourful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you're angry, your thinking can get very exaggerated and overly dramatic. Try replacing these thoughts with more rational ones. For instance, instead of telling yourself, "Oh, it's awful, it's terrible, everything's ruined," tell yourself, "It's frustrating, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it anyhow."

Be careful of words like "never" or "always" when talking about yourself or someone else. "This !&\*%@ machine never works," or "You're always forgetting things" are not just inaccurate, they also serve to make you feel that your anger is justified and that there's no way to solve the problem. They also alienate and humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.

Remind yourself that getting angry is not going to fix anything, that it won't make you feel better (and may actually make you feel worse).

Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it's justified, can quickly become irrational. So, use cold hard logic on yourself. Remind yourself that the world is "not out to get me," you're just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life. Do this each time you feel anger getting the best of you, and it'll help you get a more balanced perspective.

Angry people tend to demand things: fairness, appreciation, agreement, willingness to do things their way. Everyone wants these things, and we are all hurt and disappointed when we don't get them, but angry people demand them, and when their demands aren't met, their disappointment becomes anger.

As part of their cognitive restructuring, angry people need to become aware of their demanding nature and translate their expectations into desires. In other words, saying, "I would like" something is healthier than saying, "I demand," or "I must have" something. When you're unable to get what you want, you will experience the normal reactions - frustration, disappointment, hurt - but not anger. Some angry people use this anger as a way to avoid feeling hurt, but that doesn't mean the hurt goes away.

Irrational and dysfunctional ways and patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving are contributing to much human disturbance and emotional and behavioural self- and social defeatism. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy teaches that when people turn flexible preferences, desires and wishes into grandiose, absolutistic and fatalistic dictates, this contributes to disturbance and upsetness. There are three core beliefs or philosophies that humans tend to disturb themselves through:

<p><i>"I absolutely MUST, under practically all conditions and at all times, perform well (or outstandingly well) and win the approval (or complete love) of significant others. If I fail in these important -and sacred - respects, that is awful and I am a bad, incompetent, unworthy person, who will probably always fail and deserves to suffer."</i></p>	<p><i>"I absolutely MUST, under practically all conditions and at all times, perform well (or outstandingly well) and win the approval (or complete love) of significant others. If I fail in these important -and sacred - respects, that is awful, and I am a bad, incompetent, unworthy person, who will probably always fail and deserves to suffer."</i></p>	<p><i>"The conditions under which I live absolutely MUST, at practically all times, be favourable, safe, hassle-free, and quickly and easily enjoyable, and if they are not that way it's awful and horrible and I can't bear it. I can't ever enjoy myself at all. My life is impossible and hardly worth living."</i></p>
<p>Holding this belief when faced with adversity tends to contribute to feelings of anxiety, panic, depression, despair, and worthlessness.</p>	<p>Holding this belief when faced with adversity tends to contribute to feelings of anger, rage, fury, and vindictiveness.</p>	<p>Holding this belief when faced with adversity tends to contribute to frustration, and discomfort, self-pity intolerance, anger, depression, and behaviours such as procrastination, avoidance, and inaction.</p>

At the core of irrational beliefs there often are explicit or implicit rigid demands and commands, and extreme derivatives like awfulizing, frustration intolerance, people deprecating, and overgeneralizations are accompanied by these. The core dysfunctional philosophies in a person's evaluative emotional and behavioural belief system, are also very likely to contribute to unrealistic, arbitrary and crooked inferences and distortions in thinking. When people in an insensible and devout way overuse absolutistic, dogmatic and rigid "should's", "musts", and "ought's", they tend to disturb and upset themselves.

Disturbed evaluations to a large degree occur through over-generalization, wherein people exaggerate and globalize events or traits, usually unwanted events or traits or behaviour, out of context, while almost always ignoring the positive events or traits or behaviours. For example, awfulizing is partly mental magnification of the importance of an unwanted situation to a catastrophe, or horror, elevating the rating of something from bad to worse than it should be, to beyond totally bad, worse than bad, to the intolerable, and to a "holocaust".

The same exaggeration and overgeneralizing occur with human rating, wherein humans come to be arbitrarily and axiomatically defined by their perceived flaws or misdeeds. Frustration and intolerance then occur when a person perceives something to be too difficult, painful or tedious, and by doing so exaggerates these qualities beyond one's ability to cope with them.

### Acceptance

Emotionally healthy human beings develop an acceptance of reality, even when reality is highly unfortunate and unpleasant. It is helpful to develop three types of acceptance: (1) unconditional self-acceptance; (2) unconditional other-acceptance; and (3) unconditional life-acceptance. Each of these types of acceptance is based on three core beliefs:

- **Unconditional self-acceptance:**

I am a fallible human being; I have my good points and my bad points.

There is no reason why I must not have flaws.

Despite my good points and my bad points, I am no more worthy and no less worthy than any other human being.

- **Unconditional other-acceptance:**  
Other people will treat me unfairly from time to time.  
There is no reason why they must treat me fairly.  
The people who treat me unfairly are no more worthy and no less worthy than any other human being.
- **Unconditional life-acceptance:**  
Life doesn't always work out the way that I'd like it to.  
There is no reason why life must go the way I want it to.  
Life is not necessarily pleasant, but it is never awful, and it is nearly always bearable.

### Problem Solving

Sometimes, our anger and frustration are caused by very real and inescapable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it's a healthy, natural response to these difficulties. There is also a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to our frustration to find out that this isn't always the case. The best attitude to bring to such a situation, then, is not to focus on finding the solution, but rather on how you handle and face the problem.

Make a plan and check your progress along the way. Resolve to give it your best, but also not to punish yourself or others if an answer doesn't come right away. If you can approach it with your best intentions and efforts and make a serious attempt to face it head-on, you will be less likely to lose patience and fall into all-or-nothing thinking, even if the problem does not get solved right away.

### Better Communication

Angry people tend to jump to - and act on - conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be very inaccurate. The first thing to do if you're in a heated discussion is slow down and think through your responses. Don't say the first thing that comes into your head but slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. At the same time, listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

Listen, too, to what is underlying the anger. For instance, you like a certain amount of freedom and personal space, and your "significant other" wants more connection and closeness. If he or she starts complaining about your activities, don't retaliate by painting your partner as a jailer, a warden, or an albatross around your neck.

It's natural to get defensive when you're criticized, but don't fight back. Instead, listen to what's underlying the words: the message that this person might feel neglected and unloved. It may take a lot of patient questioning on your part, and it may require some breathing space, but don't let your anger - or a partner's - let a discussion spin out of control. Keeping your cool can keep the situation from becoming a disastrous one.

### Using Humour

"Silly humour" can help defuse rage in a number of ways. For one thing, it can help you get a more balanced perspective. When you get angry and call someone a name or refer to them in some imaginative phrase, stop and picture what that word would literally look like. If you're at work and you think of a co-worker as a "dirtbag" or a "single-cell life form," for example, picture a large bag full of dirt (or an amoeba) sitting at your colleague's desk, talking on the phone, going to meetings. Do this whenever a name comes into your head about another person. If you can, draw a picture of what the actual thing might look like. This will take a lot of the edge off your fury; and humour can always be relied on to help unknot a tense situation.

The underlying message of highly angry people, Dr Deffenbacher says, is "things ought to go my way!" Angry people tend to feel that they are morally right, that any blocking or changing of their plans is an unbearable indignity and that they should NOT have to suffer this way. Maybe other people do, but not them!

When you feel that urge, he suggests, picture yourself as a god or goddess, a supreme ruler, who owns the streets and stores and office space, striding alone and having your way in all situations while others defer to you. The more detail you can get into your imaginary scenes, the more chances you have to realize that maybe you are being unreasonable; you'll also realize how unimportant the things you're angry about really are.

There are two cautions in using humour. First, don't try to just "laugh off" your problems; rather, use humour to help yourself face them more constructively. Second, don't give in to harsh, sarcastic humour; that's just another form of unhealthy anger expression.

What these techniques have in common is a refusal to take yourself too seriously. Anger is a serious emotion, but it's often accompanied by ideas that, if examined, can make you laugh.

### Changing Your Environment

Sometimes it's our immediate surroundings that give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the "trap" you seem to have fallen into and all the people and things that form that trap.

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some "personal time" scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. One example is the working mother who has a standing rule that when she comes home from work, for the first 15 minutes "nobody talks to Mom unless the house is on fire." After this brief quiet time, she feels better prepared to handle demands from her kids without blowing up at them.

### Some Other Tips for Easing Up on Yourself

**Timing:** If you and your spouse tend to fight when you discuss things at night - perhaps you're tired, or distracted, or maybe it's just habit - try changing the times when you talk about important matters, so these talks don't turn into arguments.

**Avoidance:** If your child's chaotic room makes you furious every time you walk by it, shut the door. Don't make yourself look at what infuriates you. Don't say, "Well, my child should clean up the room, so I won't have to be angry!" That's not the point. The point is to keep yourself calm.

**Finding alternatives:** If your daily commute through traffic leaves you in a state of rage and frustration, give yourself a project - learn or map out a different route, one that's less congested or more scenic. Or find another alternative, such as a bus or commuter train.

### Mindfulness - The Best Anger Management Tool Available

Mindfulness is the timeless practice which teaches the non-judgmental observation of one's own thoughts, feelings and state of mind. Mindfulness is central to most positive psychology programs due to its wide-ranging positive health benefits. Mindfulness has been shown to be highly beneficial in reducing symptoms of depression, chronic anger, and anxiety.

Mindfulness is backed by research spanning 35 years showing its merit. A new branch of medicine was recently developed called integrative medicine which blends traditional Western medicine with mindfulness training (based primarily on the work of Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn).

Most recently, active participation in an 8-week mindfulness program was shown to make noticeable physical changes in brain areas associated with memory, sense of self, anger management and stress management. Researchers at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) have demonstrated mindfulness-produced improvements over an 8-week period in the brain's grey matter.

In this study, magnetic resonance images were taken of the brains of sixteen participants two weeks before and after they took part in the 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program at the University of Massachusetts Centre for Mindfulness. In addition to weekly meetings that included the practice of mindfulness - which focuses on non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, feelings and sensations - participants received audio files to use for daily guided mindfulness practice.

A set of MRI brain images were also taken of a control group of people who did not practice mindfulness over the same 8-week period.

Mindfulness group participants spent an average of 27 minutes daily practicing mindfulness exercises. Their answers to a mindfulness questionnaire showed significant improvements in mindfulness and meta-cognition (i.e., thinking about thinking) compared with answers given by participants prior to the study.

**More Peaceful Brain Due to Mindfulness Practice:** The analysis of brain images found increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus, which is associated with new learning and long-term memory, as well as in brain regions associated with self-awareness and empathy.

**Decrease in Stress, De-escalating Anger & the Amygdala:** Those who reported a decrease in stress also had a decrease in grey-matter density in the amygdala, which is associated with the presence of anger, anxiety, depression and stress. Interestingly, no such changes were seen in the control group, indicating that the brain changes were not a result of the inevitable passage of time.

Research on the effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is increasingly showing that there is a beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays an important role in integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, "emotional" areas (like your amygdala - the brain's "panic button").

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to bridge the gap, as it were, between your "thinking" and your "feeling" areas. Your brain can better integrate what's going on in your "emotional" brain areas and your "intellectual" brain areas.

"It is fascinating to see the brain's plasticity and that, by practicing mindfulness, we can play an active role in changing the brain and can increase our well-being, reduce stress and quality of life." says Britta Hölzel, PhD, research fellow at MGH and Giessen University in Germany. "Other studies in different patient populations have shown that mindfulness can make significant improvements in a variety of symptoms, and we are now investigating the underlying mechanisms in the brain that facilitate this change."

### What Is Mindfulness?

Modern psychology and psychiatry since the 1970s have developed a number of therapeutic applications based on the concept of mindfulness in Buddhist meditation.

Psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn has simply defined mindfulness in this way:

*"paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."*

This sounds simple, but mindfulness is a skill that takes practice to cultivate and maintain. Why? Let's consider the different parts of the definition...

#### "Paying attention"

How much of the time are you really paying attention to what's happening in your life – as opposed to thinking about something else, remembering things, imagining possible futures, and acting out habitual patterns or, more accurately, reacting to people and situations based on old habits of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving?

Paying conscious attention can be especially hard when a current interaction reminds us of past hurts or betrayals – and before even realizing it, we can automatically and defensively respond as if those old experiences were happening again.

#### "On purpose"

It takes a conscious decision, and effort by one's mind and brain, to pay attention to what's happening in the present. In fact, such choices and efforts are required over and over again, since we are continually pulled back into habitual ways of processing information and responding to things.



Too often we're on "auto pilot," not even trying to pay attention to what's actually happening in the unique situations and interactions that make up our lives.

### "In the present moment"

Most of us, most of the time, are absorbed in memories of the past or visions and plans for the future.

For most people, it is rare to be aware, without some amount of distraction or multi-tasking, of what is actually occurring in the present moment.

Particularly when strong emotions arise, people often respond not to situations as they are, but to reactive perceptions and thoughts based on painful experiences in the past. In the most extreme instances, one may not be "here" in the present, but "back there," reliving the past through reactions to present situations.

### "Non-judgmentally"

This is one of the hardest things to achieve. We so often react intensely to our experiences, particularly unwanted experiences, and to our initial reactions to them.

"This is horrible!" "What an idiot!" "How could I do that?!" "I can't take this anymore!" "Here I go again." You know the ways you can instantaneously and automatically judge situations, other people, and your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours – often in a chain reaction of increasing judgment and distress.

"I need..." "I want..." "I deserve..." Positive judgments and the cravings they evoke can also be a problem, particularly when they are automatic and intense. We can lose our focus, forget what's important, get caught in cycles of addiction, and selfishly take advantage of others.

In contrast, the non-judgmental quality of mindfulness brings great freedom – to see things more clearly, to evaluate situations with some distance from our habitual emotional reactions and impulses, to observe emotions and impulses as they arise without either trying to escape them or letting them carry us away.

### Why Mindfulness for Anger Management?

Mindfulness teaches us how to recognize anger before it becomes explosive, before you lose control, so that you can release it and return quickly to a calm, rational state in which nonreactive and generally better decisions and communication can occur.

Mindfulness is a centuries-old practice usually cultivated through meditation. It is experiential, meaning that you must experience it in order to understand it. Just talking about it only gets you so far. This is why meditation is so important in cultivating a more mindful life. Meditation is the formal practice of cultivating mindfulness, while everyday life gives us plenty of opportunity for applying the practice.

### Mindfulness Begins with Breath Awareness

Eckhart Tolle (A New Earth) recounts an incident where someone showed him the prospectus of a large spiritual organization containing a veritable smorgasbord of seminars and workshops. The person asked Eckhart to help him to choose one or two courses. "I don't know," Tolle replied. "They all look so interesting. But I do know this," he added. "Be aware of your breathing as often as you are able, whenever you remember. Do that for one year, and it will be more powerfully transformative than attending all of these courses. And it's free."

Listen to the free flow of your breath. The breath energizes and sustains every cell of our body. It nourishes everything in its path. It is like the freshness of water. It is with us every second of our lives, but most people pay little attention to it. Our breath is mainly automatic and unconscious and regulated by the instinctive and primitive involuntary or autonomic nervous system. Autonomic is derived from the word 'autonomy', it has the quality of being 'independent' of the conscious, voluntary mind.

By practicing conscious breathing, we gradually strengthen the connections between our unconscious, autonomic reactions and our voluntary, or consciously chosen responses. This strong bridge between the primitive "lower" mind and the "higher" mind enables us to mend the split between the raw reactions that ruin our relationships, and the wise responses that we could choose to nurture our love.

Breathe a shining light into your mind. Conscious breathing builds the connections between the limbic system and the neocortex.

Breath awareness shines a light into the workings of our mind. By observing the mind (thoughts, emotions, desires, intentions, perceptions and expectations) we can free ourselves of the knots that bind. Observing the breath allows us to take a deep look at the nature of mental formations such as fear, anger and anxiety and helps to bring about an understanding of how our mind works. To improve your mind, you need to be aware of how it works.

The breathing process is connected directly to the brain and the central nervous system. The breath can control the flickering nature of the mind.

Breath awareness serves another function, because it trains your mind to stay focused on a natural - and essential - body process. By focusing your conscious intention on your breath, you begin to slow down mental “busy- ness.” Your thoughts become fewer and more integrated, and your body begins to relax. Many people’s breath is unnaturally shallow. The more you are aware of your breath, the more the natural depth will re-establish itself.

### A Mindfulness of Breathing Practice

**Sit comfortably with your spine straight**, in a relaxed way, on a straight-backed chair or cushion on the floor. It is important that your spine is straight, and your body relaxed, to promote mental alertness and clarity. Sitting this way may be a new experience, and you may need to experiment a bit.

**Establish a proper motivation** before beginning the practice. For example, you might affirm the intention to simply use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment, with a sincere desire to learn something new, with an **attitude of open-minded curiosity**.

**Close your eyes**. (If this doesn't feel comfortable, or feels like too much vulnerability to internal sensations, keep your eyes open and gaze at the floor about 5 feet in front of you with a soft focus, not attending to anything in particular.) As you inhale and exhale naturally, **bring your attention to the sensations of your flowing breath**, either at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen.

Take a moment to **notice the sensations of touch and pressure** where your body makes contact with the chair or cushion and the floor, and any sensations that might indicate tension in your body. Just notice these sensations with curiosity and acceptance. If you need to slightly adjust your posture, that's fine, but if some tension or pressure won't go away, that's OK too, so long as it's not painful (in which case you may need to try sitting on something else).

**Consciously and deliberately take a few deep breaths**, but do not strain. The idea is to emphasize the movement and sensations, to clarify what you are attending to.

Now **allow the breath to find its own natural rhythm**. Allow the body to breathe on its own, without attempting to change it in any way. Shallow or deep, fast or slow, it's OK. Allow the inhalations and exhalations to come and go, just noticing the sensations of your flowing breath at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen. You may notice the slight pauses between each in-breath and out-breath.

Gently and without wavering, allow your attention to rest or float on the changing rhythms of your inbreaths and out-breaths. **Whenever your attention wanders or loses its alertness – and it often will – gently but firmly bring your awareness back to the breath** and observe with fresh curiosity the sensations as they arise and pass away.

**It is totally natural for your mind to wander**, and nothing to be concerned about. Again, when you notice that your mind has wandered, gently and firmly bring it back to the breath with fresh curiosity and alertness.

If you find yourself judging yourself when you discover that your mind has wandered, instead briefly congratulate yourself for making the discovery – then go gently and firmly back to your breath...

Bringing the mind back to the breath trains the mind to be attentive and mindful. It takes effort, but slowly the mind will grow stronger.

Continue with this practice for **15-20 minutes**, or just 10 minutes or less if that feels like enough for the first time. During this time, sometimes when you find that your attention has wandered, you might remind yourself of your intention: simply to use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment.

If at any time you find yourself becoming not just perturbed but overwhelmed by feelings or memories, immediately stop and do something (healthy) that you would normally do to cope with these experiences.

### **Mindfulness of Hearing and Thinking**

Practice mindfulness of breath until you feel reasonably settled.

Allow the focus of your awareness to shift from sensations in the body to hearing – bring your attention to the ears and then allow the awareness to open and expand so that there is a receptiveness to sounds as they arise, wherever they arise.

Simply open your mind so that it is receptive to awareness of sounds that are close, sounds that are far, sounds that are in front, behind, to the side, above, or below - opening up to the whole space of sound around you. Allow awareness to include the space between sounds and silence itself.

Be aware of sounds simply as sounds, as bare auditory sensations. When you find that you are thinking about the sounds, reconnect, as best you can, with direct awareness of their sensory qualities (patterns of pitch, timbre, loudness, and duration), rather than their meaning or implications.

Whenever you notice that your awareness is no longer featuring sounds in the present moment, gently acknowledge where your mind has drifted off to, and then return your attention back to hearing sounds as they arise and pass away moment to moment.

When you are ready, let go of featuring sounds and instead feature thoughts centre stage in your awareness. Just as you were aware of whatever sounds arose - noticing their arising, lingering, and passing away - so now, as best you can, allowing your awareness to discern any and all thoughts that may arise in the mind in just the same way - noticing thoughts arise, as they linger in the space of the mind, and as they eventually dissolve and disappear. There is no need to make thoughts come and go - just let them come and go on their own, in the same way that you related to the arising and passing away of sounds.

You might find it helpful to bring awareness to thoughts in the mind in the same way that you would if the thoughts were projected on the screen at the movies - you sit, watching the screen, waiting for a thought or image to arise. When it does, you attend to it so long as it is there "on the screen," and then you let it go as it passes away. Alternatively, you might find it helpful to see thoughts as clouds moving across a vast spacious sky. Sometimes they are dark and stormy, sometimes they are light and fluffy. Sometimes they fill the entire sky. Sometimes they clear out completely, leaving the sky cloudless.

If any thoughts bring with them intense feelings or emotions, pleasant or unpleasant, note their "emotional charge" and intensity and let them be as they already are.

If at any time you feel that your mind has become unfocused and scattered, or it keeps getting repeatedly drawn into the drama of your thinking and imaginings, see if it is possible to come back to the breath and a sense of the body as a whole sitting and breathing and use this focus to anchor and stabilize your awareness.

### Patience in Mindfulness

Patience means accepting a slow pace of change; bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences with calmness.

As soon as we attempt to follow the sensations of breathing without distraction, we discover just how out of control our minds are. Even after years of mindfulness meditation practice, most people will not have unbroken control over where their attention is directed for more than a few moments at a time. But experiencing this fact over and over again, and repeatedly observing – with acceptance, non-reactivity, and curiosity – that one's mind has wandered or been carried away in a chain reaction of conditioned thoughts and feelings, is a wonderful way to cultivate patience.

And these experiences can translate to daily life, enabling us to become more patient with ourselves and others as we all continue to fall into habitual responses that increase our suffering.

Another meaning of "patience" refers to calmly bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences. In the Buddhist tradition, the term "equanimity" is often used. Mindfulness practice provides repeated opportunities to observe the arising of unwanted, difficult and painful experiences and one's habitual reactions to them.

Again, as the observation of such experiences increasingly includes acceptance, non-reactivity and curiosity, one's patience grows and can be spread to other experiences in one's daily life.

## Feeling Anger

Hedonistic by nature, we don't like anger because it makes us feel bad, and it makes us feel bad to a large degree because we learn to judge our experience of anger as negative. In our culture and in most of our families, we develop an aversion to anger. We learn to shirk, run, hide, bury, freeze, resist, redirect, or create more creative methods for dealing with anger.

While these anger-management tactics often work to keep anger out of our awareness to some degree, the use of such tactics results in greater suffering that we would have had if we'd just felt the anger in the first place. Some very wise teacher said, "You can either deal with chaos (meaning out of control emotions such as anger) now or greater chaos later." Not dealing with anger as it arises is like going to the bathroom after being constipated for days at a time. There's going to be a lot of anger stored up.

Are you one of those people who either feels no anger most of the time and then too much some of the time? Not sure? Think about how intense your anger is when you finally feel it... Do you go from 0 to 10 in no time? Do you feel no anger and then punch fists through walls when you finally feel angry? Does it take your anger being at level 9 or 10 for you just to recognize that you're angry? If you answered yes to any of the above questions or if you know that you do things you regret when you're angry, how about improving your anger management skills by cultivating mindfulness?

## How Does Anger Work?

You can learn how anger works so you can work with it and not be worked by it. Dr Richard Pfeiffer describes anger as a chain reaction starting with a stimulus or situation

that causes you physical or emotional pain. He explains that pain triggers thoughts that cause you to blame someone or something for that pain, while your brain is sending signals to other parts of your brain to prepare you for fight or flight.

The more you experientially understand mindfulness meditation, that is, the more you experience being more awake in every moment, the more of yourself you will experience, and the more awareness you will have about what your internal experience really is. Some of you reading this might respond to what you've just read with "Well, I already know most of the time or all of the time what my experience is, but so what? How is that going to help me when I'm angry?"

Mindfulness meditation increases your awareness and slows everything down so that you understand even more about yourself than you did then, opening up new possibilities, new choices. For instance, you may already know how you go from Point A, totally calm, to Point Z totally enraged, but you will likely start seeing the subtle shifts that occur bringing you through Points B through Y. Time will slow down as you start to notice Points A, B, C, D in the moments themselves, as these shifts occur, offering new points in time at which you can work with your anger until you reach the point of no return.

### Being with Anger, Non-Reactive

If you've reached that point of no return, you probably remember feeling so incredibly angry you couldn't stand it, you didn't care about anything except releasing your anger, and possibly even unleashed your anger on the person, creature, or thing that seemed most deserving of it at the time. You were not calm and rational and most likely not particularly mindful either; therefore, you may not have been able to stop yourself from doing or saying something you later regretted. You were what's called highly reactive.

When you exercise mindfulness, you exercise non-reactivity or the capacity to stay centred, grounded, and unshaken in response to a stimulus. Now, don't confuse non-reactivity with non-feeling. Let's use road rage as an example. You're driving, and someone cuts you off, and in response to being cut off you flip the driver the bird. You've just behaved reactively.

Contrast that with what non-reactivity would look like in that scenario: You are cut off by the driver, and rather than focusing your attention on the event itself, you focus it on you. You focus it on the sensations you are feeling in your body, most likely a fast heart rate, perhaps a tightness in the chest, or constricted breathing. Then you shift your attention to your breathing, sending the breath into the parts of your body that are feeling the anger - your heart, your chest - wherever it is for you.

In the time it took you to do this exercise, you never even thought about flipping the driver the bird because you were too busy focusing on your reaction; that driver has probably gone on his or her merry way by now. This is non-reactivity.

Non-reactivity allows us to feel all of our feelings but not react to them. We feel them until we organically feel something else or until we decide mindfully, with awareness and choicefulness, that either we want to focus on something else or we want to act.

### Increasing the Spaciousness of Present Awareness

Think of a time you were really stressed recently. Not only were your thoughts moving really fast, and probably somewhat out of control, but your current awareness was "clogged" with negative thoughts, feelings, memories, images, etc. For most people, most of the time, not just when they're stressed, their current awareness is virtually packed with thoughts, feelings, images, etc. – and not only about what they're currently doing.

By practicing focusing your attention on the present, and gently coming back to the present when you've wandered into the past and future again, you can expand your present awareness. Not only does the present moment become more vivid and fresh, but your awareness becomes more spacious, less clogged with extra and unnecessary thoughts, feelings and images.

You can probably remember what this experience is like, by remembering a time when you were calm, relaxed, and not under pressure to do anything - maybe lying on the beach several days into a vacation, or on a long and relaxing hike in nature.

The more spacious your present awareness, the less likely that negative thoughts, feelings, and memories, when they inevitably arise, will dominate your experience and become overwhelming.

With a more spacious awareness, you can have unwanted and painful experiences but have enough "mental space" to remember and experience positive and healthy thoughts, memories, and images of your future. You can tap into larger perspectives on your life and who you are, what you have accomplished, and what you are capable of achieving.

### Sky Mind Exercise

Try a "sky mind" exercise with a difficult response or emotion (but not yet one that's really difficult). As the negative experience arises, close your eyes and imagine your mind getting bigger and bigger to hold it. Imagine your mind as wide as the sky.



When you feel your mind as wide as the sky, where is the difficulty then? What happens to it? How does it feel in this "big mind?" This is an experience and ability that, with practice, you can bring to increasingly difficult and painful experiences.

Functionally, making the mind bigger is like this: If you put a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water it will taste very salty and be hard to drink. But if you put that salt into a lake, you won't even be able to taste it. Like the "sky mind" practice, mindfulness is about expanding the container for difficult emotions, like pouring salty water from a glass into a lake.

When you have that more spacious mind, watch how thoughts come and go and come and go. Thoughts and feelings are always arising and passing away. It is their nature to do this. In some ways, simply seeing this can help us relax and not worry about them. Spaciousness of mind allows this to happen.

### Feeling versus Expressing Anger

Learning how to express anger mindfully requires that you understand that feeling does not equal automatically expressing emotions, be it anger or any other emotion. You can feel anger without expressing it, but if you don't express it, then you will become beholden to your defence mechanisms to manage your anger for you.

Find a healthy way to express your anger mindfully because if you don't, you will suffer over the long-term. Keep in mind that anger is not just a feeling or state of mind; anger is energy that stimulates our system, preparing us to focus and fight. Expressing anger mindfully, then, is not a matter of communicating, but rather releasing the energy itself (physically).

It's helpful to know that up front so you can plan for those moments in which you feel energized by anger. Next time you feel that powerful surge of energy, expend it wisely by exercising, working, or releasing it in some form that does not injure yourself or wreak havoc on your relationships.

If you're in a conflict and feeling angry past the point of being able to hold a calm, rational, mindful discussion, it's probably best to kindly and gently remove yourself from that conversation by simply stating, "I'm feeling (really) angry, so I think it's best if I remove myself from this conversation until I cool off." If it's not socially appropriate to say this out loud and to excuse yourself from the conversation, then put your attention on your breathing and refrain from doing anything until you are in greater control of your words and actions and then perhaps excuse yourself from the room without making a dramatic grand exit in anger.

You need to work on becoming aware of how you do anger. When and how does it arise, and what happens then? Where does the anger go?

As you begin to learn about how you've been doing anger, try opening to it instead of fighting it. When you open to it, what happens? Does it immediately become too intense for you or can you tolerate it for a little while focusing on your breathing? The more space you allow the anger, the more you will start to feel liberated from it and the more energy you will have.

### Acceptance in Mindfulness

Accepting the reality of one's current experience is particularly important when it comes to potentially intense negative emotional responses. Once such emotional reactions have arisen in one's current experience, neither mindlessly being carried away by them nor attempting to suppress them will be particularly helpful.

The practice of acceptance in mindfulness allows one to see emotional reactions more clearly for what they are – unwanted and intense but passing experiences – and choose how to respond to them, perhaps with acceptance and nothing more.

Accepting rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does not mean believing or "accepting" that one can do nothing to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment.

Nor does it mean accepting and allowing one's own automatic and habitual reactions – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel. Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you not to allow the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom in the next moment.

### Mindfulness and Labelling

Labelling refers to mentally applying a word or brief phrase to a particular content of experience.

The idea is to help oneself simply notice something arising in your experience, without judgment, so that you can get back to observing the flow of experiences arising and passing away. This practice can also eliminate the control of particularly "sticky" thoughts and feelings over one's attention.

For example, one might use the labels "sadness" or "anger" when these emotions arise; or "planning," "worrying," or "remembering" when those common cognitive processes arise. More specific phrases can be used for other experiences, for example, "remembering something painful" or "fearing how others see me."

Some repetitive patterns of thought may be compared to "tapes" playing in the mind, and labelled with phrases like, "there's the 'it's my fault' tape," "there's the 'I don't deserve this' tape," or "there's the 'he's such a jerk' tape."

### Mindfulness is Non-reactivity

Non-reactivity is responding to experiences, including emotions and impulses, without getting carried away by them or trying to suppress them.

All organisms, including human beings, are conditioned to react automatically to most of the experiences they have. We grasp at what we want and like and push away what we don't want or like. Before we even know it, such conditioned responses to stimuli and emotions carry us away.

Mindfulness involves the skill of non-reactively observing split-second conditioned reactions, which provides the option of not acting out the entire chain reaction that would normally follow. This nonreactivity opens up space for new observations, reflections, learning, and freedom. It also saves one from a lot of regrets later.

### Working with Uncomfortable Feelings

Part of the picture with chronic anger management problems is that we have a deep habit of avoiding uncomfortable feelings. Life is unpredictable and ever changing, a rich mixture of pain and pleasure, success and failure, coming together and falling apart. We like to feel in control in order to manage the chaos, but the truth is we really don't know what's going to happen next week, tomorrow, or in any given moment for that matter.

This uncertainty often makes us feel vulnerable and deeply uncomfortable. In a very large degree, what state of mind we have and how our life unfolds depend on how we respond to this unpredictable and uncertain nature of our existence. For those of us with anger management problems, our default response is frequently irritation, frustration, resentment, blame, attacking others, and various other forms of aggression and anger.

We Shut Down in the Face of Uncertainty. For example when someone does something we don't like, when we are alone and don't know what to do with ourself, when something unpleasant happens, when we're cut off in traffic, when our partner ignores our needs, when our boss takes us for granted, when we're hurt or betrayed in some way, in these kinds of scenarios we each have our ways of dealing with the loss of control and vulnerable feelings that come up. We have our habits of biting our fingernails, squirming in our seat, running out the door, holding our breath, tightening our jaw, becoming defensive and angry, mentally obsessing, and many others.

What do you do when you feel uncomfortable? How do you respond when things get edgy? Think about it now for a moment... In the journey of learning to better manage your anger, this is important information. These moments of transition, when a situation changes from going along smoothly to sudden unwelcome chaos, these moments are powerful keystones where we have the opportunity to unlock the patterns keeping us stuck in chronic anger.

We can learn to connect more with uncomfortable feelings. Learning to “work with” and simply “be with” our edgy feelings of irritation and anxiety opens the door to a world less permeated with anger. By getting to know our patterns of avoidance we can soften and open to these feelings, which after all are normal and very human indeed. We all feel so much, everyone encounters feelings and situations that we don’t want to experience, but the question is, can we learn to be with those feelings without having to shut down in anger or other forms of avoidance?

We definitely can do it. We can learn to become more comfortable in our body, and we can learn to relax our state of mind, and we can learn to work with uncomfortable feelings in a more open and healthy manner.

### Working Directly with Uncomfortable Feelings

You might like to try this two-stage process. The length of the first stage is determined by how long it takes for you to feel you have made some progress. It may be one week or two, or it could be longer.

Here’s what you do:

- **Stage One:** In a notebook create an “Uncomfortable Feelings” journal. Make three columns: one for the “Triggering Event”, one for “The Uncomfortable Feeling”, and one for “How I Responded”. Take your journal with you throughout the week and have it ready to make your entries when appropriate.

During your day, pay attention and watch for these uncomfortable feelings to arise. It may take time to get in the habit of remembering to pay attention, so set a strong intention to do this process fully, and then make it happen. For some people sticky notes can be helpful as a reminder.

Then, when you have alone time to write in your journal, make your notes in the three columns. Recall and write down what it was that triggered the unwelcome feeling(s), what were the actual feelings, and how did you respond to those feelings.

In stage one doesn't try to change how you respond to the feelings, just observe and notice and write it in your journal. If you try to change things it will interrupt your ability to observe and actually see what is happening, which is the main purpose of stage one.

Once you have some experience and familiarity with your patterns, then you can move on to cultivating change, which is what you do in stage two.

- **Stage Two:** Just like in stage one, watch for uncomfortable feelings to arise during your day. When they do, the exercise is to practice just staying open with them. Rather than your habitual response of avoiding the edginess, let yourself feel uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as that may be. It's not a big deal and it won't hurt you to simply feel the bursting anxiety and edgy feelings when they arise.

When you try to do this, you will likely find yourself wanting to run away, to shut down, to get angry, or some other pattern of avoidance. Notice this urge, and simply stay put with the feelings, including the urge to run from them. A good way to do this is to contact the feelings as they exist in your body. Feel your skin and muscles, feel your ribcage breathing, feel the weight of your body on the earth, and as you do, feel the intensity of the anxiety or the edginess or the irritation, whatever the uncomfortable feeling is. Feel the intensity in your body, and feel the vividness in your mind, just feel the almost overwhelming quality of it, and do your best to stay open.

Then, once you feel you have made some kind of real connection with the feelings, whenever you are ready, simply let go of the practice, and move on. So, touch in with the feelings, allow yourself to really feel them for some time, say thirty seconds or a minute or five minutes, depending on how long it feels right for you, and then finish the exercise.

That's all there is to it. Depending on how strong your patterns of avoiding these feelings are, you may find this process difficult. But if you do it, if you place your intention and attention on working with this two-stage practice, you'll have an opportunity to make powerful shifts with your anger management problems and with your state of mind altogether.

### Observing Thoughts and Feelings as Events, Not Facts

We often respond to our thoughts and feelings as if they were facts or truths that "demand" or "justify" particular responses. However, it is also possible to understand and experience our thoughts and feelings as events that arise under certain conditions, and then pass away. This is true of all sensations, perceptions, feelings, memories, fantasies about the future, and other mental experiences.

Understanding and experiencing our thoughts and feelings in this way opens up some "space" around them. Instead of the thoughts and feelings having you, and carrying you away, you can experience yourself as having certain thoughts and feelings under certain conditions, and as having options about how you respond to them. One of the most liberating options is to simply observe thoughts and feelings as arising under certain conditions, and as capable of passing away without you having to do anything else but observe them.

People who cultivate mindfulness are pleasantly surprised when they discover just how many thoughts and feelings that previously seemed so compelling, and seemed to absolutely require and justify habitual reactions, are much better understood and experienced as sources of information about mental habits which have actually been increasing their suffering.

For example, consider an emotionally charged thought that often arises in the mind of someone who was deeply hurt as a child: "There must be something about me, something wrong with me that made him (or her) pick me to abuse." It is possible, with practice, for this person to recognize this thought as common and normal, and one that is likely to arise at times of self-doubt and depression.

Then, instead of getting caught up with the thought, one can attend to the emotional needs – perhaps for support, help, and encouragement – that created fertile soil for that thought to arise in the first place. Embracing such thoughts and beating up on oneself or trying to push them away or argue with them in your mind, will tend to increase their grip on you.

Viewing such thoughts as an event, and as sources of information about your current state of mind and body, and what will be helpful to you in that state, opens up all kinds of healthy possibilities and options.

### Inviting a Difficult Emotion and Working with It through the Body

Sit for a few minutes, focusing on the sensations of breathing, then widening the awareness to take in the body as a whole.

When you are ready, see if you can bring in the situation or person that seems to be causing your difficult feelings. Now allow yourself to take some time to tune in to any physical sensations in the body that this the difficulty evokes. See if you are able to note, approach, and investigate inwardly what feelings are arising in your body, becoming mindful of those physical sensations, deliberately directing your focus of attention to the region of the body where the sensations are strongest in the gesture of an embrace, a welcoming.

This gesture might include breathing into that part of the body on the in-breath and breathing out from that region on the outbreath, exploring the sensations, watching their intensity shift up and down from one moment to the next.

Once your attention has settled on the bodily sensations and they are vividly present in the field of awareness, unpleasant as they may be, you might try deepening the attitude of acceptance and openness to whatever sensations you are experiencing by saying to yourself from time to time: "It's okay. Whatever it is, it's already here. Let me open to it."

Then just stay with the awareness of these bodily sensations and your relationship to them, breathing with them, accepting them, letting them be, allowing them to be just as they are. It may be helpful to repeat "It's her right now. Whatever it is, it's already here. Let me open to it."

Soften and open to the sensations you become aware of, letting go of any tensing and bracing. Say to yourself: "softening or "opening" on each out-breath. Remember that by saying "It's already here" or "It's okay," you are not judging the original situation or saying that everything's fine, but simply helping your awareness, right now, to remain open to the sensations in the body.

If you like, you can also experiment with holding in awareness both the sensations in the body and the feeling of the breath moving in and out, as you breathe with the sensation's moment by moment.

And when you notice that the bodily sensations are no longer pulling your attention to the same degree, simply return 100% to the breath and continue with that as the primary object of your attention.

### Lovingkindness – An Essential Companion of Mindfulness

The non-judgmental quality of mindfulness is very important. However, the absence of judgment toward unwanted experiences is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to cultivate the presence of kindness – toward ourselves, toward others, and toward the inevitable unwanted, painful and otherwise distressing experiences in life.

There are two especially important forms of basic human kindness, which Buddhists refer to as "lovingkindness" and "compassion." These are ways of relating to ourselves and others that promote acceptance, calmness, happiness, and freedom.

While lovingkindness and compassion are (moral and ethical) ideals for relating to others, they are also mental qualities essential for achieving greater peace, freedom, and happiness.

"Lovingkindness" is an English translation of the word "metta" from Pali, a language used to record the early teachings of Buddhism. The word has two root meanings, "gentle" and "friend," and the foundation of lovingkindness is being a gentle friend to yourself, no matter what kind of experience you happen to be having in the moment.

Lovingkindness refers to an unconditional and open love. This is not the kind of "love" that has requirements and conditions attached to it ("I love you because...", "I'll love you if..."), or that only accepts pleasant experiences and thus distorts one's perceptions based on wishes and illusions. Lovingkindness is not bound up with personal agendas or desire. Lovingkindness does not want things – including unwanted experiences – to be anything other than they actually are, in the present moment. Instead, the present moment and current experience are embraced. Paradoxically, this makes even unwanted and painful situations more "workable," by providing other options for responding than automatic and habitual reactions which cause more problems and suffering.

Accepting rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does not mean believing or "accepting" that one can do nothing to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment. Nor does it mean blindly accepting and simply allowing one's own automatic and habitual responses – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel.

Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you not to allow the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom in the next moment.

It's not about "letting down your guard," but rather guarding your mind – guarding it from being carried away with automatic, habitual, and unhelpful responses based on reactions to past hurts; guarding it from being consumed by fear and self-defence rather than being supported by clear perception, effective reasoning and wise choices about how to respond skilfully and without worsening the situation.

With lovingkindness, taking care of oneself and responding compassionately to others are not in conflict, but go hand in hand. Most of us sometimes "defend" ourselves when it's not necessary or respond with more extreme self-protective measures than are required or helpful in a particular situation. And most if not all of us think we were "just trying to defend myself" when attacking another person. Lovingkindness practices can reduce and eventually help to eliminate these habitual ways of thinking and behaving.



## Compassion Practices

Here are some compassion practices to try out and experiment with. Remember, don't try to force things, and give the practices and yourself some time. It's not helpful to judge yourself or give up hope – but if judgments or hopeless thoughts and feelings arise, don't judge yourself for having them or lose hope!

Simply repeat, with a genuine intention, a few **phrases of kindness and compassion toward yourself**. Some commonly used phrases are, "May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be free of suffering."

Another option is, "May I have a calm, gentle, and loving mind." Or you can make up phrases of your own, experimenting until you find ones that work for you.

After a few minutes of repeating these phrases, and continually reconnecting with the intention behind saying them, you may find that feelings of kindness and love, a state of calm, and/or other nice things are happening in your mind and body. Doing this practice for 10 to 20 minutes once a day can be very powerful and can create a resource to draw on during particularly stressful times.

**Offer compassion to your painful feelings.** A common phrase to use is, "I care about my pain." Again, you may be surprised to discover the power of simply repeating a phrase like this with a sincere intention.

**When difficult emotions arise, try holding them like you would a crying child.** Hold the fear like you would hold a fearful child. Hold the anger as you would hold an angry child. Ultimately, it's about learning to meet each one of your thoughts and mind-body states with this unconditional love, like welcoming all your children home.

**Offer compassion to the hurt part of yourself.** Bring to mind an image of yourself at a time of hurt and pain and offer compassion to the child or adult you were then. You might use phrases like, "may you find peace, may you be free of suffering."

## How Could Mindfulness Help Me?

There are several ways that mindfulness can help reduce the intensity, duration, and frequency of unhelpful habitual response patterns.

### **Loosening the grip of habitual responses that cause (additional) suffering**

Learning to bring one's attention back to the present moment, including the ever-present process of breathing, over and over again, involves learning to catch oneself entering into habitual patterns that prevent clear awareness of the present moment.

With continued practice and increasing development of mindfulness, one becomes increasingly able to notice those habitual reactions that prevent one from responding consciously and constructively.

For example, instead of realizing 5-10 minutes later that you've been lost in bad memories or fantasies of revenge, you can catch yourself after only 30-60 seconds. Better yet, you can learn to catch yourself in the process of getting lost in a memory or fantasy. In time, you can increasingly observe these habitual responses as they arise, and choose to respond in other, more skilful ways.

For example, instead of getting really angry at yourself for feeling helpless and sad when someone makes a harsh comment, or feeling guilty when you start thinking of harsh replies, you might notice, without judgment, that you have the habit of responding to harsh comments with (a) feelings of helplessness and sadness, followed by (b) angry thoughts of come-backs, followed by (c) anger and guilt about those initial responses.

Once you notice such common human responses in yourself without judgment, you can choose to bring your attention back to what's actually happening in the conversation now, to consider whether and how you might redirect or end the conversation without creating more negative feelings.

### Reducing the intensity of unhelpful habitual responses

The less time a habitual response has to develop, the less likely it will become intense. Of course, some habitual responses happen extremely quickly and almost instantaneously reach high levels of emotional intensity and behavioral impulsiveness. But most of the time, it takes a few seconds for a habitual response to reach a high level of intensity, and "nipping it in the bud" prevents a full flowering of destructive emotion.

If within the first few seconds you can recognize, with some reflective awareness, that the habitual response is occurring, then you have an opportunity to prevent further escalation. After all, these are chain reactions in the mind and body, and if you can break an early link, you can stop the process.

The less judgment one has toward a habitual response, the less likely it will become intense. This doesn't mean that one simply accepts one's habitual responses. Rather, it means that you neither accept nor condemn. Instead, you simply observe them for what they are: habitual and, however quirky or bizarre, quite human responses to unwanted experiences. If you can observe these responses without judgment, no matter how immature or unhelpful they may be, you can avoid adding more emotional fuel to the fire.

## Increasing positive emotions

One recent study found that novice meditators stimulated their limbic systems - the brain's emotional network - during the practice of compassion meditation, an ancient Tibetan Buddhist practice. That's no great surprise, given that compassion meditation aims to produce the emotional state of "lovingkindness."

These changes included ramped-up activation of a brain region thought to be responsible for generating positive emotions, called the left-sided anterior region. The researchers found this change in novice meditators who'd enrolled in a course in mindfulness meditation - a technique that borrows heavily from Buddhism - that lasted just eight weeks.

## Christian Anger Management Tips

The following are anger management tips and anger management activities that are based on Christian Biblical principles.

### 1. Temper your Temper

When someone annoys you and fans the flames of ire within you, be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry. (Ecclesiastes 7:9) Therefore, if you have been provoked, engaging in anger management activities such as taking a few deep breaths to cool down or going for a walk and leaving the burning issue or listening to soothing music and defuse your temper completely. If despite all this you still get livid, Be ye angry, and sin not (Ephesians 4:26) with your words or actions.

If you are infuriated and also expected to make a decision, request for time to think about it so that you can reflect on the issue when you are cooler, calmer and more collected and not make a decision when you are mad (pun intended).

### 2. Extinguish the Fire

Extinguishing the angry flames inside you as quickly as they arise is one of the best anger management tips since we are told, let not the sun go down upon your wrath (Ephesians 4:26) because Anger resteth in the bosom of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:9) So, don't let anger simmer inside you for it may explode and hurt you, your relationships and even career.

### 3. Forgive and Forget

Forgive the people who have hurt you and release them from your mind to release the rage that binds them to your heart. Forgive and then Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before (Philippians 3:13) move on into your future unchained by anger.

#### 4. Expunge Revenge

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. (Romans 12:19) Therefore, do not think about or give in to the temptation to revenge and hurt those who have hurt you. Let God avenge you as you cry out to Him in prayer saying, Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless. (Psalm 10:14)

#### 5. Control Yourself

He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls. (Proverbs 25:28) Therefore, exercise self-control for it acts as a wall which stops anger from controlling you. Even if you can't stop people from annoying you, you can defend yourself by controlling your response to them so that you act appropriately rather than just react (usually inappropriately) to the angering situation.

#### 6. Soothe Angry People

A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. (Proverbs 15:1) If you are having a discussion with a person and their temper begins to rise, try to listen to and hear the appeal for love behind the accusation. If you are not able to reflect and validate their hurt and their need, rather keep quiet as this should make them realize that they need to calm down if the conversation is to continue.

If their temper continues to flare and the temperature in the room continues to rise, walk away from the heat if you begin to feel threatened. Return once they have cooled down. When they have sufficiently calmed and you begin speaking again, speak quietly, demonstrating love and understanding.

#### 7. Avoid Angry People

Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: Lest thou learn his ways and get a snare to thy soul. (Proverbs 22:24-25) Therefore, do not befriend or spend time with angry people or those who have a problem controlling their anger as you may adopt their ways and thereby trap yourself with their angry mannerisms.

#### 8. Guard your Heart

Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. (Proverbs 4:23) This means that you should protect your mind since it is the source of your thoughts, feeling, words, actions and behaviour by carefully choosing what you think, what you read, what you watch and what you listen to.

Therefore, do not watch rage filled movies, read books populated with angry characters or listen to rage fuelled music for you will begin to seethe mentally, feel angry, rant and rave over minor issues and lose you top over minor issues.

## Practicing Christian Anger Management

Practicing Christian stress and anger management means keeping the Lord in mind when faced with difficult situations. Meditating using the Bible will remind you of all the instances when God was able to use His anger constructively and how He would like others to use their hostility. It may be helpful to write down Bible scriptures that reference hostility to remind yourself of how you should handle certain situations and people. The following are a few scriptures from the bible that you can reflect on:

"People with a hot temper do foolish things; wiser people remain calm." "If you stay calm, you are wise, but if you have a hot temper, you only show how stupid you are." Proverbs 14 (17,29)

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:29-32)

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:26-27, 31-32)

"Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20) Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Refrain from anger and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. (Psalm 37:8)

## Buddhist Wisdom on Anger Management

Do you get annoyed or angry with people at work, home or on the road while driving? Yesterday I came across a woman driving a van with one hand and talking to somebody on a cell phone with the other hand at a four way stop sign. She reached the stop sign after me. I had already stopped at the sign, but she drove right through, without even batting an eyelid. I did get annoyed with her for a moment. Then again, I thought to myself, "Is there a better way I can deal with this kind of situation without getting angry or annoyed?"

As a psychologist I see at least 2-3 people a week who are in acute anxiety states or depression due to some work or a family crisis situation related to anger. I think these days people are pushed to their limits. The problem is when it happens, most people do not know how to deal with it. It is not the problem itself but how we approach the problem that makes us better at coping with situations like this.

The focus in Buddhist teachings is not on the other person. The focus is on yourself. We have no control over the other person. We have some control over our minds. How can we achieve this? To help us understand this better I will discuss a very interesting disclosure of Buddha called the Aghatapativinaya Sutta.

Buddha said there are five ways of removing annoyance when it arises in you:

1. "Loving-kindness can be maintained towards a person with whom you are annoyed: this is how annoyance with him can be removed."
2. "Compassion can be maintained towards a person with whom you are annoyed; this too is how annoyance with him can be removed."
3. "Equanimity can be maintained towards a person with whom you are annoyed; this too is how annoyance with him can be removed."
4. "The forgetting and ignoring of a person with whom you are annoyed can be practiced; this too is how annoyance with him can be removed."
5. "Ownership of deeds in a person with whom you are annoyed can be concentrated upon thus: 'This good person is owner of his deeds, heir to his deeds, his deeds are the womb from which he is born, his deeds are his kin for whom he is responsible, his deeds are his refuge, he is heir to his deeds, be they good or bad.' This too is how annoyance with him can be removed."

You might think this is crazy! How can you develop loving kindness or compassion toward a person who is annoying us? The obvious reaction when we are annoyed at another person is to develop anger or hatred towards him. But anger hurts us, not the other person. Buddha said: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned".

If you think about this, you realize that this is true. You will suffer mentally and physically when you are angry or annoyed at somebody else. You cannot think clearly, your heart rate and blood pressure rise, you may even start to shake. You may also not be able to sleep well at night. The practice of loving kindness or compassion is the antidote to this.

Buddha said: "The one who practices loving-kindness sleeps and wakes in comfort and has no bad dreams; he is dear to both humans and creatures; no danger harms him. His mind can be quickly concentrated, his expression is happy and serene. He dies without any confusion of mind. Lovingkindness protects him."

I would like to share a small story with you. One day just after office hours, a father and a young son got on the subway. The father was very quiet, but his son was very loud and annoying. He was running up and down in the train and was making a lot of noise. The people were tolerant for a while, but this kid was very "hyper." He went on non-stop annoying people who were trying to get some rest after a long day at work. It seemed like this child was not going to stop his "hyperactive behaviour." Finally, one person got so tired and went up to the father and said "can you discipline your child! He is very annoying and is disturbing all the people in the train!" The father quietly turned toward this person and said "My wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer a week ago. The doctors said that she has one week to live... and she just died today, and we are just going home from the hospital.... This is my son's reaction to the news." The people in the subway went "numb" after hearing this. This story gives us a very good message. We often judge people too quickly and incorrectly.

Now supposing your boss gets angry or upset with you, you have to ask yourself these questions. Is it possible that your boss is angry because his wife or a child is sick at home? Did he have an argument with his wife or his teenage daughter that morning? Maybe he just did not have a good night's sleep and is having a bad day at work. This may be his way of coping with his stresses in life.

I told you about a driver who did not stop at a four way stop sign. Maybe she just received a call from the doctor, and she was just rushing to the hospital to see her sick mother. If you can think like this, you can practice lovingkindness or compassion towards this person who is upsetting you.

In reality the actual problem with these people who annoy us will be something else, but as long as we learn to look beyond that we have already solved most of the problem. If you think like this, you will have less chance of getting annoyed at this person. You are doing yourself a favour too. You are not hurting yourself because there is less anger building up within you. Try this next time when somebody is angry at you and see for yourself the benefits that you can achieve.

How do we practice equanimity - looking neutrally - towards a person you are annoyed at? You may want to practice loving kindness and compassion first. If it does not work, try to practice equanimity (look neutrally) at this person. This is how it works. When a person speaks to us, we first pick up information from our external senses. We then process the information and if it is agreeable, we get a pleasant feeling. If it is disagreeable, we get an unpleasant feeling and may get annoyed at the person. It is also possible for us to reject both these pleasant and unpleasant feelings and practice equanimity. Equanimity will help us to overcome this annoyance in us. This will take a lot of meditation practice.

The next method of overcoming an annoyance is by forgetting or ignoring the person. You can do this in two ways, physically or mentally. You can physically remove yourself from the situation.

This will be the easier method. You can walk away from the situation till the person "cools down". This is sometimes called "positive withdrawal." This means you remove yourself from the situation for your own benefit. On the other hand, mental withdrawal is little more difficult. Unless we have practiced enough Vipassana meditation your mind is going to bring back to all the thoughts and memories again and again. These thoughts are going to be "food for the mind." We keep feeding on this "mental food" until we get very angry and depressed. You may try to replace these thoughts at the beginning itself with pleasant thoughts previously experienced by you. Otherwise before we know our mind will be full of anger and ill will and we will be suffering from it.

How can you replace unpleasant thought with a pleasant thought? This is how Buddha explained this: "When you are thinking about an object, it sometimes occurs that evil, unwholesome thoughts connected with hate and delusion come to your mind. The way to get rid of them is to concentrate on another object that is wholesome and good. Just like a skilled carpenter knocks out a coarse peg with a fine one, so the evil thoughts will disappear. With their departure, the mind will be calm, unified, and concentrated once more"

The final method is where you give the ownership back to the person who is bugging you. There is a classic story in the Buddhist literature which relates to this.



The Buddha was invited by a Brahman to have a meal in his house. But when he arrived, the Brahman greeted him strangely, with a torrent of abuse. Politely Buddha asked, "Do you have visitors come to your home, good Brahman?" "Yes," replied the Brahman. "What preparations do you make for them?" asked the Buddha. "We get ready a great feast," said the Brahman. "What happens if they don't arrive?" asked the Buddha. "Then we gladly eat it ourselves," said the Brahman. "Well, Brahman, you've invited me for a meal, and you have entertained me with hard words. I want nothing from your preparation. So please take it back and eat it yourselves," said the Buddha.

So next time somebody speaks harsh words at you just think it is his own "food." You did not cook the "food." He cooked it and dished it out for you to eat. You have the option of eating and getting sick (angry and depressed) or refusing to eat it. If you are mindful enough you will simply refuse to eat the "food." Think that he is the owner of his own "food." He will have to eat it!

These are the methods of getting rid of annoyance or anger when it arises in you according to Buddhist wisdom. You should try them out yourself next time it happens. You may not be successful the first time but if you make diligent efforts sooner or later you are going to make it. Try it out. It works!

### Do You Need Counselling?

If you feel that your anger is really out of control, if it is having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, you might consider counseling to learn how to handle it better. A psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can work with you in developing a range of techniques for changing your thinking and your behavior.

When you talk to a prospective therapist, tell her or him that you have problems with anger that you want to work on, and ask about his or her approach to anger management. Make sure this isn't only a course of action designed to "put you in touch with your feelings and express them" – that may be precisely what your problem is. With counseling, psychologists say, a highly angry person can move closer to a middle range of anger in about 8 to 10 weeks, depending on the circumstances and the techniques used.

### Summary

Remember, you can't eliminate anger - and it wouldn't be a good idea if you could. In spite of all your efforts, things will happen that will cause you anger; and sometimes it will be justifiable anger.

Life will be filled with frustration, pain, loss, and the unpredictable actions of others. You can't change that; but you can change the way you let such events affect you. Controlling your angry responses can keep them from making you even more unhappy in the long run.

Let me now summarize how you can better manage your anger:

- Practice relaxation techniques like diaphragmatic breathing and visualization
- Change the way you think by eliminating over-generalization and exaggeration
- Cultivate unconditional self-acceptance, other-acceptance, and life-acceptance
- Learn better problem solving and communication strategies, especially nondefense listening skills
- Don't take yourself so seriously - see the lighter side of life
- Give yourself a break - change your environment if necessary
- Learn and practice mindfulness meditation
- Use breath awareness to reduce reactivity
- Give yourself permission to feel and access your anger
- Learn how to express anger and to release anger's energy in a non-destructive way
- Stay as present as possible in every waking moment, especially when you feel your temperature rising
- Shift your attention to your breath to calm yourself until you are past the point of no return
- Once you've reached boiling point, mindfully remove yourself from conflict and only return to the discussion once the anger has been released and you feel calm
- Find a therapist for extra support and guidance in learning how to work with your anger

I'd like to highlight a few key points. First, change can be quite scary, so if you're feeling resistance to changing how to manage your anger, give yourself time. Second, no matter how hard you try to do anger better, know ahead of time that you will most likely fall back into old habits in certain situations. Embrace those moments as reminders of how far you've come, of how deeply ingrained our habits are, and then apologize, forgive yourself, and let go of the past, returning your attention to the present.

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*Artwork by Vladimir Kush*

