

Contents

Guiding Principles for the class	1
“Emotions are the Prime Movers...” an Introduction	3
Anger: Feel It and Channel It: Overview of Key Concepts	5
Chapter One: How Does Your Own Anger Affect You?	7
Anger happens!	8
What happens to your brain and body when you get mad?	9
Understanding the Differences between Appropriate and Inappropriate Anger	11
Past Hurts Come Back!	14
Gunnysacking	14
Acting on Habit	15
Having Unrealistic Expectations	15
Homework and Life Work	18
“Have You Heard the One about the Puzzled New Husband?” a Short Story	19
Chapter Two: Anger and Family Dynamics	23
Anger Is a Natural Emotion	23
When Anger Happens in Families	24
Unconscious Imitation	25
Acting Out	25
Displacement	25
Scapegoating	25
Rivalries	26
Ideas for Stopping, and Re-Channelling, Destructive Behavior at Home	27
What if someone else in your family is being irrational and destructive?	29
What does it take to use your anger constructively?	32
Homework and Life Work	34
Adelita, a Short Story	35
Chapter Three: Anger and Interpersonal Communication	39
Why be concerned about interpersonal communication skills?	39
Your Body Speaks Your Truth	40
What about Your <i>Spoken</i> Language?	44
Good Communicators are Good Listeners!	45
The Communication Stoppers!	45
The Highest Level of Listening	50
Homework and Life Work	53

“Life Lessons...” a Short Story	54
Chapter Four: Anger and Conflict Management Strategies	57
The Aggressive Style	57
The Submissive Style	58
The Assertive Style	59
How assertive are you?	62
Conflict Happens!	63
“I Messages”	65
Active Listening	67
Compromising	68
Postponing	68
Apologizing and/or Expressing Regret	69
Problem Solving	69
Homework and Life Work	73
“I Never Met a Man I Didn’t Like...” a Short Story	74
Chapter Five: More Anger and Conflict Management Strategies	77
When the going <i>really</i> gets tough—what should you do?	79
Arm Yourself Mentally	79
Chill Yourself Out	80
Consider the Consequences	81
How to Respond to Verbal Assault	83
How to Respond to Extreme Hostility	84
How to Respond to a Bully	85
How to Respond to Peer Pressure	87
Resolve Problems with Mediation	88
Homework and Life Work	89
Resources	90

"Emotions are the prime movers," intoned my Psychology professor, who went on to explain: *"everything, I mean everything, we do relates to our feelings in one way or another."* This idea was both astounding and liberating to me. I was in my early twenties and trying to figure myself out. I wanted to understand other people better too, but my personal motivations and behavior remained my own biggest mystery. *"Of course,"* I said to myself, *"that explains it. How come I never realized how important my feelings were before!"*

I was one of those people who grew up in a family that denied not only the importance of feelings, but usually feelings themselves, especially uncomfortable ones. Emotions were rarely admitted as evidence to anyone's statement of need or search for the truth. If a rare circumstance occurred and a feeling was mentioned ("We forgot to include Sammy and now his feelings are hurt") it was usually done in a depreciated way. The undertone would be: "Oh well, it's just a feeling. Buck up, Sam."

My parents and their contemporaries had been through the depression and as a result had a completely practical, show me, don't-bother-me-with-nonsense attitude toward life. If you wanted to lay an egg in our household you stated feelings like hurt, fear or anger. The folks would look at you as if you'd announced that a comet had landed on the roof and then smirk and look away. This was often true even of my mother who was a kind and loving person at heart.

Instead of stating feelings and discussing them, the tone of our household was a stifled calm (which was actually pretty boring). Then out of nowhere an episode would occur. Tempers blew, terrible things were said, loud hysterical arguments went on sometimes for hours and then it would be over. The silence that resulted would

often last for days until the "normal" calm returned as if the blow-up had never happened.

I was usually a witness in these shattering disruptions and occasionally a target. Like everyone else in the family I experienced everything and understood nothing. I was part of the action and part of the denial afterward. As I grew up I fell into one mystifying and painful trap after another with people at school, work, and in my own home because of my ignorance about feelings, especially anger. As a young adult I found to my horror that at times I was the one who offended others and other times it was me who flew off the handle and went out of control.

Just as it was in my childhood home, angry episodes during most of my life have meant temporary, but full-blown insanity of the darkest order. I found that even though the madness would be absent for a time, it could not be eliminated. Anger would surface at the strangest times and I never, ever welcomed it.

I'm still deeply affected by anger, but gradually have become more at ease with it. I noticed that I wasn't the only one who struggled with anger. Everyone seemed to be annoyed about something at one point or another. I also noticed that some people command attention and respect when angry by the way they handle themselves and others expose themselves as vulnerable, weak and even ridiculous when upset. Still others are clearly dangerous. Have you noticed these differences too?

As time went by I got some good help. I enrolled in psychology classes and at length gained a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology which focuses on how people are affected by their experiences as they navigate through each stage of life. I also read numerous useful books (see the resources at the back of this handbook) and worked with experienced counselors.

These steps gradually led me to reach conclusions about anger that worked for me and I began to develop some strategies for managing it. I became more honest with myself and self-controlling. Instead of repressing my anger and swallowing it, I admitted the hurt or fear that I converted into anger. I also stopped denying the unpleasant reasons for my feelings. Before blowing up or ranting where such impulsive actions would create negative consequences for myself, I got better at letting off steam in ways I wouldn't regret later. Being honest with myself and taking control of myself were not easy but as I met these challenges I became stronger.

I realized that I didn't have to allow someone to hurt me with hostile abuse because that person was really mad at someone else so I flatly said so to the individual and refused to say more. That was another assertive step to righteously protecting myself and managing anger and I felt stronger.

At a certain point I stopped making excuses or ignoring someone who had a legitimate complaint about something I had done to offend him or her. I listened and realized that, yes, the person was right: I'd done it. I faced myself. If he or she had done it to me I would be just as mad, probably madder. It took a lot of nerve but I started admitting my poor behavior in these situations and apologizing. How surprised I was that doing so brought pardon and respect from the people I offended. In almost every case we became better friends and I grew stronger.

The first time I decided to use my anger to energize myself to do something necessary that I preferred to avoid, I felt the tremendous *positive* power in anger. I consciously experienced first hand that energy which all of us can take advantage of for our own benefit, or to help someone else. Knowing this is like taking a healthy breath of air in the real world. Knowing

that I never have to be a victim of anyone's anger, including my own, is a lesson I'm still learning. But consciously working on it continues to make me stronger.

Many of these lessons and management strategies had to be learned over and over again. As a child I had been scarred by painful events caused by out-of-control anger. At that time I was not exposed to many people who understood it or how to use it constructively. But my personal struggles have resulted in some helpful information and insights to share with you. That's what this *Personal Handbook* is about. I hope it will be as helpful for you to use as it has been for me to write.

Anger: Feel It and Channel It!

Managing anger takes honesty, courage and strength! In this handbook we will learn about its forms, dangers, and possibilities for usefulness! We will strive to develop the ability to decide how to channel our anger into constructive actions instead of blindly and impulsively reacting with behavior that may be destructive. We will learn ways to respond skillfully to the anger of others. Our ultimate goal is to empower ourselves to develop our own internal guidelines and begin new habits for controlling and using anger instead of letting it control and use *us!*

The stories, ideas and exercises in this handbook are based on the following concepts and ideas:

- Anger is a normal internal feeling usually experienced as a reaction to an external situation or event.
- Everyone has a right to feel anger, including times when someone's anger is in response to something *you* have done.
- The feeling of anger may spur behavior that is unproductive and destructive or productive and constructive. The feeling and the behavior are not the same.
- Different people feel differently about the same situation or event. Understanding this is the basis for acceptance and respect for oneself and others.
- Each of us has our own unique set of "anger triggers."
- Anger generally comes from hurt, fear, anxiety or grief and often its unmanaged expression causes more hurt, fear, anxiety and grief.
- People tend to imitate others they spend time with. Family members are prime examples. Anger-driven reactions are often unexamined imitations of another person's typical behavior.
- Angry responses to situations are sometimes appropriate, justified and rational. Other times they are inappropriate, unjustified and irrational. Perception and judgement of the situation based on past experiences make the difference.
- The ability to recognize one's anger, and to think about it, allows people to "talk with themselves" and make rational decisions regarding how to channel and use their anger.

- Repressing anger within oneself is not healthy because it only remains hidden until something happens to cause it to express itself in behavior. Often this expression is overblown and/or unfairly displaced on someone, or something, other than the actual cause of the anger. Physical and emotional problems can also result when anger is not acknowledged and held inside.
- Anger exists to provide energy which can be used for useful purposes such as protecting the people we love, including ourselves.
- Some of the most unfortunate, destructive expressions of anger occur in homes between family members.
- Anger is easily generated or diminished simply by the way people communicate with each other.
- The messages people send themselves (self-talk), when respectful of self and others, are crucially important elements in managing anger.
- The assertive style of thinking and acting is the basis for anger management.
- Conflicts between individuals and groups can be managed by using a number of strategies that have been proven effective.

How do you experience anger?

What images or forces come to mind when you reflect on your angry feelings? (Volcanoes, electrical power surges, etc.) Make a list:

Is anger bad?

Think about a time when you became angry. Afterward, how did you feel about yourself?

Anger happens!

Many people have bad feelings about themselves when they feel angry or just afterward. They do their best to avoid anger or deny it when it happens. But anger is not bad--or good; it just is. Guilt, embarrassment, and shame are unhelpful feelings about your own anger. The fact is that you feel what you feel. *What you do with your anger is what matters!*

**Accepting anger is the first step in taking charge of it.
(This takes honesty.)**

You be the judge!

Here are three scenarios. Read each one and decide if the anger each person feels is appropriate or inappropriate by checking on the line of your choice.

John felt furious at his friend, George, because George got sick the day they were going to go fishing.

John's anger is: _____ appropriate _____ inappropriate

Can't decide? Here is some more information: When John was small his parents frequently promised to take him to exciting places. Then they would often drink heavily the night before and have hangovers the next day. When this happened they told John the trip was off because they were sick. When George called John to tell him he wasn't well, John said to himself: "I should have *known* it wouldn't happen. You can't count on anybody."

Annette felt rage at her sister, Liz, when Liz told Annette's boyfriend how cute Annette used to be when she was little and first beginning to talk.

Annette's rage is: _____ appropriate _____ inappropriate

Can't decide? Annette's family speaks French as well as English so when she was little Annette sometimes used a French word in a sentence she'd begun in English. She also lisped. The family got a big kick out of the lisping and language errors and constantly made fun of her. They even laughed and pointed out her mistakes in front of visitors. When Liz talked with Annette's boyfriend about it, Annette's thoughts were: "I hate her. None of them are happy unless I do something stupid to make them laugh."

Harold was extremely disappointed with his wife, Sue, when he came home from work and she wasn't there. Sue had promised to be ready to go out to dinner but she didn't leave a note or call. She showed up three hours later. She didn't apologize, explaining that she "got carried away" at the mall and lost track of time.

Harold's extreme disappointment is: _____ appropriate _____ inappropriate

Can't decide? During Harold's life he has worried people and has been worried by others in this same way. But now, Harold makes it a point to keep his promises and when he is going to be late he leaves a note or calls. Harold has asked Sue to do the same but now and then Sue worries him in this way. Before she came home Harold said to himself: "Something happened to detain her and it could be bad, or she's being inconsiderate again. Either way I don't like it."

The part of our intelligence, the ability we have that other animals don't, is always available to us. We can *choose* to use this ability to "check in" with ourselves anytime to see how we are feeling, to evaluate circumstances and situations, and to *make conscious decisions* for how to use the energy anger gives us for handling ourselves in constructive ways. As we continue to learn how to do this and what strategies to use for handling difficult situations, let's start off by finding out more about the nature of anger and how it operates.

Understanding the Difference between Appropriate and Inappropriate Anger

It's easy to see in others: sometimes people get upset for "righteous," justifiable reasons. At other times they get upset for "just plain crazy" reasons. But this is not so easy to recognize in ourselves. The difference between appropriate and inappropriate anger lies in how a situation is perceived and understood. Clear, present-time reality perception of a provoking situation usually leads to appropriate anger. (Examples might be complete indignation for getting balled out for something you didn't do, or for getting a ticket for speeding when you, in fact, were not speeding.)

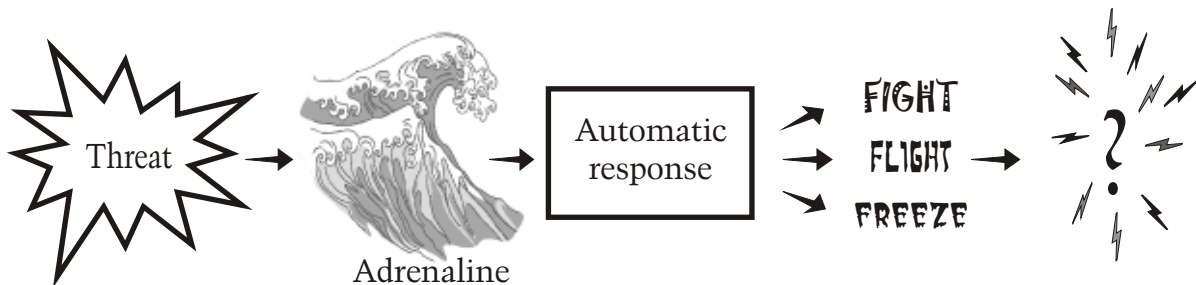
Inappropriate anger occurs when perception and thinking are distorted in some way usually by re-experiencing unpleasant feelings from something similar that happened in the past. (Examples: the person who got balled out for something he didn't do might cuss at the brother of the person who balled him out and feel hateful toward anyone in that family. The person who got a bogus ticket might become incensed and start yelling and pounding on the steering wheel the next time she sees a policeman.)

Inappropriate anger that is blown way out of proportion to the actual circumstances is generally caused by other deeper feelings we have already mentioned. Like a volcano with deep forces of hot magma inside, we have forces like hurt, fear, anxiety, disappointment and grief below the surface. These deeper feelings result from deprivations or painful events, sometimes traumatic ones, that happened at an earlier time. *Inappropriate anger has a way of feeling like it's appropriate and that can lead to big problems.*

When a new situation resembling the old one occurs we sometimes "believe" that the same bad thing is happening again and we are prone to "become" the age we were when the old situation occurred. For example, you might become inappropriately angry and feel like a deprived, victimized child when someone eats in front of you and doesn't offer to share (and you are hungry), if you were often punished for misdeeds as a child by not getting to eat dinner with the family.

That's because your brain understands that the threat or danger is gone and stops sending the alarm. In three minutes we usually return to normal but before that our quick and heavy flow of adrenaline has literally drained us.

Walter B. Cannon, a physiologist at Harvard Medical School, first described this "fight or flight" response to threat during the early twentieth century. Later, an endocrinologist, Hans Selye studied this response and discovered exactly what happens in the brain and body when it is experienced. It's a split-second chain reaction shown in this simple diagram:



*Notice the question mark at the end which is meant to show an *unknown outcome*.

First, our "animal instincts" take over and we do what is necessary to stay alive. The fight choice is the right one if self-defense is actually necessary. Flight is the correct choice if we have to get away quickly from real danger. And freezing is best if we are safest by staying perfectly still. All of these will result in an outcome which could set the chain reaction going again.

Most of the threats we face don't endanger our lives and limbs, however. They threaten our sense of security or self worth causing appropriate anger. Other threats hassle us, scare us, make us worry, grieve us, hurt us, and disappoint us and we often convert these feelings into anger as well. Why? Because anger feels better than anxiety, grief, hurt and disappointment. It takes away weak feelings and replaces them with an emotion that feels powerful. But complications set in when the normal feeling of anger enters the chain reaction because the automatic response, *fight*, easily takes over and often leads to an undesirable outcome where the question mark is shown on the diagram. Frequently the undesirable outcome leads to new chain reactions with outcomes that are even worse. Later, we wonder how things got so out-of-hand. We ask ourselves, "Why did I say that?" or "Why didn't I just keep my cool?"

Another undesirable outcome is "swallowing" our anger and then forgetting we did so. Numerous medical studies have shown that people who repress their anger again and again are more prone to become ill and depressed than those who express their anger in some way. It's like swallowing poison which stays in the system and becomes more dangerous as time goes by.

Past Hurts Come Back!

It's easy to understand why John, Annette and Harold became upset. Yet when all of the factors leading to their feelings and thoughts are considered it becomes clear that in one case (Harold's) the feelings were appropriate and justified. (Harold felt very bad but did not become enraged.) In the two other cases we find that the feelings of fury and rage are inappropriate because they are based on past hurts. Both John and Annette were extremely upset and "fed" their upsets with negative thoughts. They felt the same awful feelings in full force that they experienced at earlier times in their lives when similar things happened.

What else causes inappropriate anger?

Many causes exist for inappropriate anger, however three others are worth looking at. (The first two are similar to "past hurts" but are different variations.)

Gunnysacking

This happens when someone silently collects irritations and slights until "the last straw is placed on them" causing an overblown reaction. An example is a teen who becomes infuriated and blows her top when a friend teases her about her shirt as they walk home from school together. The shirt was splattered with paint in art class and throughout the day one student after another made a joke about it. During the day the art student suffered the jokes in silence. She "gunnysacked" them. Her friend's remark was the last straw.

Does gunnysacking sound familiar? When have you seen this in someone else or felt it within yourself?

Acting on Habit

This is a behavior pattern that occurs when someone automatically "plugs in" an angry feeling in response to certain situations because "when things like this happen I always get mad." An example is the driver who becomes extremely angry and rants and raves whenever he comes up on someone he believes is driving too slowly.

Does this type of anger sound familiar? When have you seen this in someone else or felt it within yourself?

Having Unrealistic Expectations

When something hoped for doesn't happen most people become understandably disappointed and possibly angry. That's appropriate. But it is inappropriate to become extremely angry on top of disappointment when *expected* things don't happen when those things are one's own unrealistic ideas or fantasies. An example is the child who asked for, and began to expect, an expensive gift for Christmas when his father had recently been laid off from his job. When the expectation was not met the child was very put out and whined all day.

Does anger that happens in this way sound familiar? When have you seen this in someone else or felt it within yourself?

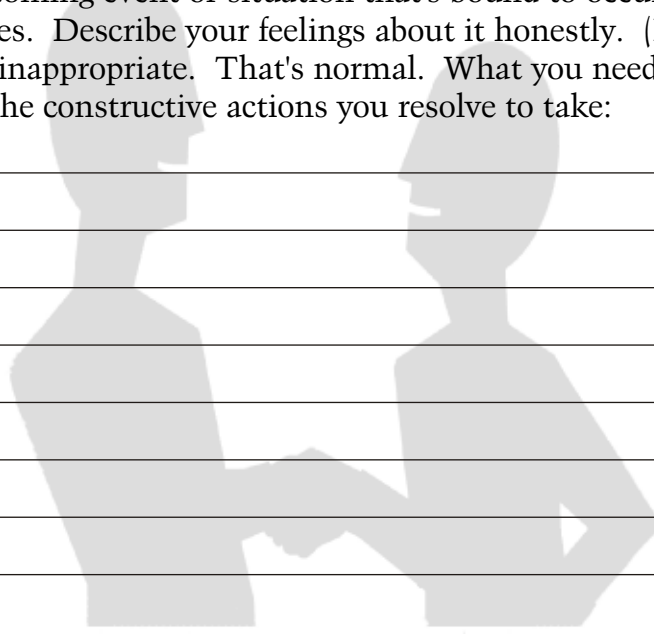
Look back at yourself again.

Fortunately, everyone has the ability to grow and change. We can learn from the feelings we felt and the things we did in the past and evaluate them. Think back to a situation that angered you that you would feel differently about, and react to differently, if it happened now. (You might even be angrier.) Describe the situation, how you felt and reacted, and how you would feel and react at this point.

Look to the Future!

The more aware and accepting you become of your feelings, and the more you are able to honestly talk with yourself about whether they are appropriate or not, the more you can choose constructive actions. These are actions that will not make things worse for you or anyone else. Because anger is such a powerful emotion, positive actions you intend to take are likely to bring very good results.

Think about an upcoming event or situation that's bound to occur such as a holiday with relatives. Describe your feelings about it honestly. (It's okay if some of your feelings are inappropriate. That's normal. What you need to do is realize it.) Then describe the constructive actions you resolve to take:





**The final step to becoming in charge of yourself
is resolving to act constructively,
no matter how you feel.
(This takes strength.)**



HOMEWORK: If you haven't read the short story, "*Emotions are the Prime Movers...*" an introduction to your handbook on pages 3 and 4, go back and read it now. Did you skip any of the sections in this chapter? Find them and re-read the ones you skipped. If you left any of the spaces blank, write answers to those questions.

LIFE WORK: Before going to the next chapter step back into life. For about a week watch what happens around you and watch people's reactions. See what causes them to become angry and try to tell if their anger is appropriate or inappropriate. Do the same with yourself. In the next chapter you will have a short quiz about these two types of anger. You will also get a chance to examine how angry feelings are handled in your family.

