

CLAIM IT AND AIM IT

Avoiding anger is as self-damaging as constant fuming. People may totally suppress anger, express it in sneaky ways, or disown their hostility and see it in others. If you do not claim your anger, it will “own” you. When you embrace your anger, you can contain it and aim it in a direction that will serve you well. Each means of short-circuiting anger has costly payoffs:¹

- Suppressed anger causes people to lose themselves. Having a relationship takes priority over having a self. Giving in, going along with, and putting others first causes feelings of confusion and being used. Wants and needs don’t get met because they are unknown. In the extreme, people lose enjoyment of and interest in life. Headaches, ulcers, or other physical problems may develop. Some people deny their feelings until they explode or turn anger against themselves.
- Stealth anger invites bad will from others due to constant excuses, procrastination, playing helpless, and ignoring requests. Experts at avoiding what they do not want, have trouble knowing what they do want and reaching goals. They rarely receive appreciation or approval from others and ultimately lose self-respect.
- Disowned anger makes the world look hostile. By seeing their own anger in others, people gain a temporary excuse to retaliate. However, it is necessary to be on guard all the time and easy to feel victimized, envious, and jealous. Others view these people as suspicious, unpredictable, and not believable. Eventually, the anger that is seen in others becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

EMBRACE ANGER TO CONTAIN IT

Anger is the least understood and most maligned of all the emotions. Whereas sadness and fear can be private affairs, anger connects us to others. Inappropriate expressions of anger are especially noticeable and the cause of much misinformation in society. This can lead to the internalization of thoughts that disarm us. Learning correct information and identifying beliefs that contradict incapacitating thoughts helps reclaim anger.

Directions: Mark any of the thoughts that you have that suppress anger. Then, mark the beliefs that would help you use your anger wisely.	
Turn Thoughts That Avoid Anger into . . .	Beliefs That Embrace Anger
Misinformation	Correct information
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is bad, judgmental, or a weakness.	<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is a natural reaction to a loss of power.
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is a sin.	<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is neutral. Its use can be good or bad.
<input type="checkbox"/> Ladies do not get angry.	<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is a part of a woman’s passion.
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger is dangerous.	<input type="checkbox"/> Actions are dangerous, not anger.
<input type="checkbox"/> Other people are vulnerable.	<input type="checkbox"/> Others can learn from appropriate anger.
Incapacitating thoughts	Empowering beliefs
<input type="checkbox"/> If I get angry, I’ll lose control.	<input type="checkbox"/> If I release some anger, I’ll gain control.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I start feeling angry, I’ll never stop.	<input type="checkbox"/> If I release some anger, I’ll feel relief.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I show anger, I’ll be punished.	<input type="checkbox"/> I choose how I respond to others’ reactions.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I show anger, others will leave me.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can resolve differences with others.
<input type="checkbox"/> If I show anger, I’ll hurt or damage others.	<input type="checkbox"/> Others are responsible for their reactions.

¹ For further information see Letting Go of Anger by Ron and Pat Potter-Efron (New Harbinger, 1995) and The Dance of Anger by Harriet Goldhor Lerner (HarperCollins, 1997).

DIALOGUE WITH DISPLEASURE

Once you accept your anger, you can hear what it is telling you. Every mad moment is a message that something is wrong. If you are a master conflict-avoider, you may not want to recognize that you are being used or betrayed. However, you can right a wrong with less turmoil in the early stages of mistreatment than when it becomes blatant abuse. Any of the following questions can begin a dialogue with your displeasure:

- If I were angry right now, what would be bothering me?
- What is it about this situation that troubles me? What do I think and feel?
- What do I want to accomplish? What, specifically, do I want to change?
- Who is responsible for what? What am I willing and not willing to do?
- When I make excuses, play helpless, or ignore others, what is really bothering me?
- When I think others are angry, disrespectful, or betraying me, how might I be angry with, disrespectful, or unfaithful to them?
- When I think others are greedy, envious or jealous, what is it that I'm wanting?

THE AIM OF ANGER

Anger needs direction. Without focus, it gets sidetracked into a laundry list of complaints, bitterness, and irritability. Anger avoiders often choose to be victimized, evasive, or guarded and do not take decisive action. They think of anger as a weapon rather than a problem-solving tool. Once you've reclaimed your anger and identified what is bothering you, practice using annoyance to express your feelings, wants, and limits:

- Rehearse expressions of anger with sentences that start with the word "I"—"I feel . . . when you" "Would you . . . , . . . or" "I will (not)"
- Put a new face on anger. Change strident outbursts into firm, controlled expression. Turn resentment into requests. Imagine taking an action when words don't work.
- Allow others to be angry. It's OK for spouses, children, and friends to be upset when you don't do what they want. Be firm and then sympathize with their distress.
- Practice making decisions. When you don't know what you want to do, pretend you know. Every decision helps you learn more about who you are and what you want.
- Say "No" instead of, "I forgot," "Yes, but . . . ," "I'll do it later," or playing helpless, withdrawing, and ignoring. Don't say "Yes" unless you plan to follow through.
- Have a yes/no fight. Say "Yes" and have a support person say "No" with different tones and volumes. Then switch roles. Get the feel of it.
- Make a no-gossiping rule for yourself. If you must talk about someone with whom you are angry, do it with the agenda of planning how to be direct.
- Hang in instead of making excuses. Avoid telling yourself, "Why should I bother?" "I just don't feel like it," or "It's useless." Say things "for the record" rather than to accomplish an outcome.
- Stay angry long enough to make sure something good happens.