

This is a chapter excerpt from Guilford Publications.  
*Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships,  
and Express Yourself Without Losing Control*, W. Robert Nay  
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## STEP ONE

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# Understanding and Recognizing Anger

Chapters 1 and 2 will help you understand how you experience anger and when it becomes a problem. You will be challenged to better observe yourself when confronted with aggravating situations. How will you respond emotionally? What will you do when provoked? You must recognize your anger before you can decide how you wish to react in the future.



## CHAPTER 1

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### *The Faces of Anger*

#### WHO DO YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR?

Marcy is hard to figure. Well liked by friends and colleagues at work and in a long-term relationship with her husband, Frank, Marcy seems to have an evil twin. Things are “right with the world” when her two children get off to school without a fuss, when the traffic is smooth, and when others do what they have agreed, quickly and “competently.” The problem is that people often fall short of Marcy’s expectations and she gets “aggravated” and so verbally intense that others often avoid her. Lately, with more responsibilities at work, Marcy’s anger is creating problems with the very people who are usually her greatest fans. When confronted by her most recent outbursts, Marcy becomes defensive: “Why can’t you realize I’m under a lot of stress lately? Get over it.”

Samuel gets angry as often as Marcy but expresses it differently. Rather than becoming intense or loud, he withdraws when angry, often for hours and even days at a time. He is described by a coworker as “passive-aggressive” when he fails to follow company policy he disagrees with yet denies his omission is intentional. His fiancée knows when Samuel is angry because he goes to bed early, as if punishing her, and vents through sarcastic remarks, protesting “You’re too sensitive” when she complains. Samuel’s more passive and indirect approach to his anger frustrates others, but because he never “loses” his temper,

Samuel denies it is a problem. Those who have to interact with him would disagree.

What do Marcy and Samuel have in common? Anger has become a daily visitor in their lives, even if expressed in very different ways, and others are beginning to complain. Yet both would prefer to evade the whole issue. Either it's not a problem or it's someone else's problem.

Why is it so hard for these two bright and otherwise insightful people to see that their anger has become a problem? I guess none of us likes to admit to a loss of control, even if only occasionally. Depending on how we were raised, getting angry might feel like a character flaw. I have found that most of us are uncomfortable admitting we are angry when it starts to create problems.

In actuality, anger is a valuable emotion that tells us we need to address an issue. For some of us, it's heard as a soft tone in the background, signaling that all is not right. Others don't hear this signal that change is needed until it becomes a loud alarm bell. Either way, when recognized and understood, anger can be the first step toward problem resolution, providing us with the energy to right a wrong, stand up for an issue we believe in, or stay the course of managing conflict. Unfortunately, many of us, like Marcy and Samuel, don't use our anger for problem resolution. We simply don't—or won't—see that we're angry or that the way we are expressing this feeling has become a problem in itself.

How can you know when your anger is no longer a valuable prelude to change but is becoming a problem that needs to be addressed in its own right?

## **How Is Anger a Problem?**

Anger becomes a problem when it has certain effects on you and your life. The questions that follow will help you identify the ways in which anger may be a problem for you.

### **Does My Anger Negatively Impact Others?**

While Marcy felt her anger was “just occasional, no big problem,” this was far from the view of her family and coworkers. Her husband

resented having to take over all parental responsibilities in the morning to protect the children from Marcy's frequent outbursts, triggered when her son "dawdled" in getting dressed for school. At work, her secretary asked to be transferred to another position, knowing Marcy was not approachable about her temper and intensity. Similarly, Samuel's withholding of affection and withdrawal into himself was beginning to wear down his fiancée's patience. Increasingly, she was not seeking him out for the apology he seemed to demand and they were becoming more distant as they often slept and ate apart.

Neither Marcy nor Samuel saw this problem building, perhaps because they both had found their anger useful in dealing with others in the past. You may have had the same experience. Maybe it worked when you withdrew from the situation to underscore a point. Or perhaps you got in someone's face to make him or her see your position, even if the other person was a little intimidated by you. It worked. Your anger may have made you feel on top of things. You could rely on its energy to push you into asserting your opinions and righting a wrong. But now your anger may be a problem, perhaps because times have changed. Your current supervisor, your present spouse or friends, or the culture of your current job do not seem to react positively to what worked before.

Have you experienced any of these telltale signs that others are having a problem with the way you express anger?

1. Others comment on your reaction to a stressful situation or criticize your behavior. Remember, most people will not readily discuss their feelings about your actions, so when they do it usually means the problem is relatively serious.
2. You feel embarrassed following an anger outburst. Don't ignore your inner feelings that you may have stepped over the line. They may be valid.
3. A relationship you value is strained or lost. Another person may seek you out less or even cut off a friendship or family tie. Have you explored why the relationship is cooling?

If your anger is a problem for significant others, it's a problem you will eventually have to deal with.

### **Is Anger Affecting My Efficiency and Performance?**

Marcy found it hard to concentrate on work when she was irritated, causing her to fall behind. Her team's performance was set back when two key employees decided they could not work with her due to her outbursts. At home, her increasing aggravation with her "poor playing" caused her to give up the tennis lessons that used to be relaxing. Samuel found that his withdrawal from his coworkers made it hard for him to keep up with new developments at work. As others felt distant from him they were less likely to open up or invite him to be a part of team meetings.

Research shows that when your stress rises beyond a moderate level, performance rapidly deteriorates. Think about times when stress might have negatively affected an exam in college, a presentation at work, or a physical activity like golf or tennis. Unresolved anger is a silent brake on your efforts, taking a toll you may not even be aware of.

### **Is My Health or Quality of Life Suffering Because of My Anger?**

As will be illustrated further in Chapter 2, anger is associated with a variety of physical symptoms we experience when under stress. Marcy's daily tension headaches, fueled by tight shoulder and neck muscles, made it hard to concentrate. Ruminating about her aggravating day, she often found it hard to fall asleep, making her even more irritable in the morning. For Samuel, the quality of his life suffered as he held on to his resentments and withdrew from the people who really mattered. Unhappy and disillusioned, he was not sure how to break out of this pattern.

Do you notice any of the following signs that anger may be affecting your health or level of comfort?

1. Your energy level, physical comfort, or sense of satisfaction is not what it used to be.
2. A health problem has been aggravated lately or flares up when you feel particularly "stressed" or irritated.
3. You find it harder to relax, let your hair down, and have fun.

Others have commented on your being too serious or preoccupied. Everything seems like a chore.

4. You avoid activities with people, hobbies, or sports because they now seem too much of a hassle or aggravate you.

Before the quality of your life and health deteriorates further, it's time to stand back and examine how anger is robbing you of enjoyment, the rewards of your work.

## **When Is Anger a Problem?**

Each of us has no doubt apologized and been forgiven for an occasional temper outburst or loss of decorum. Our work and play may have suffered, or we may have consumed a few more antacids than usual after a fruitless day at work or an aggravating afternoon of holiday shopping. Such is life.

But when these episodes of anger begin occurring more often and taking up more time, we may not be able to view them as forgivable flukes anymore. Anger as a frequent intruder can be exhausting and may cause you enough discomfort to consider the possibility that you need to make a change. Ask yourself the following questions.

### **How Often Do I Experience Anger?**

When Marcy first came to work, her quick wit and clear ability won everyone over. So what if she was intense and occasionally lost her cool? But for some reason, unknown to them and baffling to her husband, Marcy's anger evolved into a daily event to be avoided at all costs. At that point, it was not only less forgivable but also a source of stress for those who caught her wrath. Noticing more of these outbursts, her husband tried to talk with Marcy, but she deflected all discussion with the vague "I'm just stressed out lately."

Any behavior that serves a normal function in life, including anger, is likely to have a negative impact on you and others when its frequency becomes too high or too low. Whether it's eating, sleeping, working, or playing, too much or too little threatens your physical, emotional, and mental balance. Anger is no exception. Imagine your

concern if a friend couldn't get angry, even when directly provoked or abused. In contrast, there is someone like Marcy, who was angry so often that others could no longer tolerate it, even though they liked her and wished things could be different.

### **How Intense Is My Anger and How Long Does It Last?**

Marcy's upset at her son's slow progress in the morning did not blow away easily. She often left the house so irritated that her drive to work was an ordeal of cursing and gesticulating at "careless and slow" drivers, which set the stage for her first encounter at the office. Her secretary dreaded the forceful barrage of questions and obvious frustration that pervaded Marcy's mood. Once triggered, her anger was very intense, long-lasting, and difficult to quell.

Similarly, Samuel's withdrawal from his fiancée was hard to turn off. He would avoid speaking to her for long periods and seemed unable to quickly move beyond whatever had angered him in the first place. In evaluating your own anger, consider how intense it becomes and how long it lasts. Others likely will be noticing.

## **Is Anger a Problem for You?**

Keeping in mind what you have just learned about anger, do you think you have a problem with your own anger expression? I have developed a brief assessment that should help you decide and also reveal how you tend to express your anger. For example, when you think of "anger," do you associate it with loud, intense talk or some outward act of aggression? Many people do. Maybe that's why we're so uncomfortable admitting to it. In fact, anger is expressed in a variety of ways we will call "faces of anger" that include not only these intense and highly visible actions but also more passive and indirect behaviors. Recall how Samuel expressed his anger by withholding what others wanted or by using a sarcastic tone of voice, actions that can create problems to the same degree as their more intense cousins. By better understanding your mode of anger expression you can answer the questions about how anger is affecting your life with more precision.

I encourage you to take a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire, which will help you assess your own anger.

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## **What Does Your Anger Look Like? Self-Assessment of Anger Questionnaire (SAQ)**

First, check the box in front of any of the following descriptions that apply to you.

### **How Big a Part Does Anger Play in Your Life?**

Reflect on the past six months: what you recall about your own experiences and what others have said to you about your anger. Add up the scores of the items you checked off.

- You handled an aggravating situation poorly. (score 1)
- You feel/felt embarrassed or guilty about the way you handled your anger. (score 2)
- Another person has told you that your way of expressing anger was a problem. (score 2)
- An important relationship at home, at work, or among friends or family has been strained by your expression of anger. (score 3)
- Someone you care about has urged you to get help for managing your anger. (score 3)
- You have gotten into serious trouble because of the way you expressed your anger. Examples might include a reprimand at work, a legal problem or arrest for “road rage” or assault, being hurt or hurting another, a separation or divorce. (score 4)

*Scoring.* Add up your total score. If you scored 3 or more, you likely have a problem with anger that should be addressed. A score of 6 or more indicates you may have a serious problem with the way you express your anger. Don't put this book down. If you checked off the last item, you should consider seeking the help of a mental health professional who specializes in treating anger issues.

### **How Do You Express Your Anger?**

Next, consider the following ten challenging situations. As you read each of them, think how you might react if this or a similar situation occurred in

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your own life now or in the recent past (within the last thirty days). Because you may express your anger in various ways, perhaps depending on how you felt at a given time, be sure to circle as many of the possible reactions as apply to you for each item. For each situation described, circle one or more of the reactions you could see yourself having to this or a similar situation. If none of the specific descriptions applies, circle "Other:"

1. Your partner does something you've repeatedly said you dislike. Your reactions might include:
    - ◆ Withdrawing from your partner; just wanting to be alone and not to discuss it. [C]
    - ◆ Thinking of something to say that will make your partner squirm or feel uncomfortable. [B]
    - ◆ Acting very forceful in getting your point across. It's important that your partner hear how upset you are whether he/she wants to hear it or not. [E]
    - ◆ Feeling very intense and irritable, which could lead you to do things like talk louder, slam a door, or drive faster. [D]
    - ◆ Thinking to yourself, "Just wait until he/she wants something from me." [A]
    - ◆ Other: It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
  
  2. On your way to work in the morning with some friends, another driver suddenly pulls in front of you, forcing you to slam on your brakes. The reactions you might have include:
    - ◆ Feeling so intense and angry it's hard to shake it off as you begin your day at work. [D]
    - ◆ Trying to pull next to the other driver to tell him/her off or make a rude gesture. [E]
    - ◆ Trying to pull ahead of the other driver, then slowing down, holding him/her up as a payback. [A]
    - ◆ Trying to think of put-downs or cutting remarks that describe his/her lousy driving skills. [B]
    - ◆ Getting so upset you stop talking with others in the car with you, holding your anger in. [C]
    - ◆ Other: It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
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3. A close friend keeps you waiting at a restaurant for thirty minutes. When he/she arrives unapologetic, acting as if nothing happened, your reactions might include:
- ◆ Immediately accusing him/her of acting inconsiderately, raising your voice to let him/her know just how irritated you are with this rude behavior. [E]
  - ◆ Feeling so upset that you eat fast, get impatient with the waiter, and in general feel tense and grumpy during the entire meal. Hard to shake it off. [D]
  - ◆ Minimally responding to his/her comments. Making him/her do most of the talking because you just can't act like everything is fine—it isn't. [A]
  - ◆ Telling the other person you cannot remain any longer and leave him/her sitting there. Now maybe the other person will realize just how rude he/she was. [C]
  - ◆ Making a biting remark like "I'm really glad you value our friendship so much that it's at the top of your priorities." [B]
  - ◆ Other: It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
4. You are waiting in a long line in a convenience store. The check-out clerk is "gabbing" with a coworker and not paying attention to her job. Your reactions might include:
- ◆ Muttering under your breath and to other customers something like "This person is clearly incompetent" and/or "The store should never have hired him/her." [D]
  - ◆ Getting so upset you end up leaving your items in the store and walking out and/or deciding never to do business there again. [C]
  - ◆ When you finally get to the counter, acting like you are praising the clerk with a remark like "Keep up the good work. You have a real future here." [B]
  - ◆ Deciding to tell the clerk just how angry you are and how incompetent and inconsiderate the store is for hiring him/her with a remark like "If you can't do this job properly, you should care enough about the customers to quit." [E]
  - ◆ Slowly placing your items on the counter with the computer codes turned away so the clerk has to work harder to scan them. [A]
  - ◆ Other: It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
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5. You are furious with your spouse/partner for making plans for you both to go out with friends without asking you. As he/she is telling a story to these friends at the restaurant, you might react by:
- ◆ Walking away on some pretext (e.g., going to the rest room) as soon as he/she begins telling the story. You are not going to sit there and be an audience. [C]
  - ◆ Making a wry remark to your friends that kind of puts down his/her story with humor, like “What an interesting story. Are you plumbing the depths of *Reader’s Digest* again, dear?” [B]
  - ◆ Avoiding eye contact with your spouse/partner, not reacting in any way to his/her story and quickly changing the topic. [A]
  - ◆ Putting down what he/she says by forcefully questioning his/her facts or criticizing. You are angry and he/she needs to know it. [E]
  - ◆ Feeling impatient for him/her to finish the story. After a brief time interrupting him/her to ask someone else a question. [D]
  - ◆ Other: It’s unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
6. You feel hurt and angry because your partner seems to be neglecting you/is not affectionate enough and won’t talk about it. You might react by:
- ◆ Deciding that the next time he/she wants something from you, “Forget it.” You will show him/her how it feels. [A]
  - ◆ Giving the other a dose of his/her own medicine by withdrawing from conversation and going to bed early. [C]
  - ◆ Making a remark with an edge, like “It’s really great that you’re so loving—I can always count on you to be there for me.” [B]
  - ◆ Letting your anger out by forcefully telling the other that he/she is cold and acting like a [fill in an uncomplimentary name]. You are not standing for this. [E]
  - ◆ Feeling so upset and tense about his/her letting you down you find yourself irritated with others (e.g., your children, a friend, your fellow drivers). [D]
  - ◆ Other: It’s unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
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7. You have just been told that your supervisor is giving another employee a perk or position you think you should have been given and never even discussed it with you. Ways you might handle this include:
- ◆ Going to your supervisor and letting him/her have it. You are not going to take this unfair mistreatment, and he/she is going to know it. [E]
  - ◆ Running thoughts through your mind about just quitting and getting out of there. If they don't appreciate you, why stick around? [C]
  - ◆ Deciding you will be too busy to help your supervisor out by staying late or taking on additional work. [A]
  - ◆ The next time you see your supervisor, making a remark like "I really appreciate the fair way you treat your employees. It's great working for you." [B]
  - ◆ Noticing more muscle tension and inner tightness and more impatience with others and things (e.g., slow elevators, busy signals). [D]
  - ◆ Other. It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
8. You are ready to leave for an important occasion, and your partner is already twenty minutes late after you have specifically told him/her how important this is to you. Your reactions might include:
- ◆ Finding yourself increasingly tense, pacing and/or muttering under your breath, "I can't believe how long this is taking." It is hard to relax and accept this lateness. [D]
  - ◆ When he/she is finally ready to leave, telling him/her off by saying something like "I can't believe anyone could be so rude [or hopeless or just plain irresponsible]." [E]
  - ◆ Making a remark like "I can see you really listened to my feelings about getting there on time. You are a wizard of efficiency and organization." [B]
  - ◆ Not speaking as you usher him/her to the car. You avoid him/her for the rest of the day. [C]
  - ◆ Even though the other did something special or well, refusing to compliment him/her for the rest of the day. Why should you? [A]
  - ◆ Other. It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
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9. After putting in a lot of effort on a community project, the committee chairperson acknowledges everyone else but you at an awards banquet. You feel angry at the slight, and your reactions might include:

- ◆ Refusing to speak or responding minimally to the chairperson later in the evening when he/she tries to talk with you. [C]
- ◆ When the chairperson acknowledges the omission, not acknowledging his/her statement and changing the topic. You will not let him/her off the hook that easily. [A]
- ◆ Finding yourself telling an embarrassing story about the chairperson to other committee members and kind of enjoying seeing his/her discomfort when others laugh. [B]
- ◆ Telling him/her off for being so inconsiderate of your feelings and noticing that he/she is kind of intimidated by your intense voice. This feels good given what he/she put you through. [E]
- ◆ Being so upset that on your way home you find yourself driving faster and being more likely to yell at other drivers' behavior. Feeling tense and noticing that you are easily irritated for the rest of the evening. [D]
- ◆ Other. It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.

10. Your neighbor fails to return something he/she borrowed from you even though you've mentioned it numerous times. You see this neighbor using your item in the yard and might handle your irritation by:

- ◆ Ignoring the person when he/she tries to start up a friendly conversation. How can you talk to so inconsiderate a person? [C]
  - ◆ Deciding to park your minivan in front of the neighbor's house when you know it infuriates him/her. [A]
  - ◆ Telling your neighbor you really appreciate living next door to someone who is so considerate. [B]
  - ◆ Deciding to do yard work later and going inside because just looking at your neighbor causes you stress. You find it difficult to quickly "let go" of your tension. [D]
  - ◆ Forcefully demanding your item back, telling him/her to forget borrowing in the future and to stay away from you. Why be around someone with no morals? [E]
  - ◆ Other. It's unlikely I would react in any of these ways.
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**Scoring the SAQ**

How you express your anger is indicated by your score on each of five scales. As will be illustrated in more detail in Chapter 2, each scale represents a mode of expression, a “face” of anger that is unhelpful and likely to lead to further problems for you or others who interact with you.

To obtain your scores, add up how many “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “E” items you circled. Now fill in your totals on the corresponding scales below.

SCALE A: PASSIVE–AGGRESSION \_\_\_\_\_. You tend to withhold from others when you are angry by failing to do what they want, being late, or otherwise holding back. You minimize or deny that you are angry when others express frustration or question your actions.

SCALE B: SARCASM \_\_\_\_\_. You use sarcasm, biting wit, or “humorous” putdowns as a way of expressing your anger indirectly. Your facial expression/tone of voice may convey disgust or criticism, which you deny. When others find your comments or actions hurtful or complain, you may accuse them of being too sensitive or minimize their feedback.

SCALE C: COLD ANGER \_\_\_\_\_. When angry you refuse to talk things out and may withdraw from others, with minimal or no contact for hours or days at a time. You may secretly enjoy punishing others by making them work hard to get you to respond but would not admit it.

SCALE D: HOSTILITY \_\_\_\_\_. You handle stress poorly, often feeling very intense and acting it out with a loud, forceful voice and disgust and disapproval when others or situations do not meet your expectations. You may sigh, roll your eyes, and in general make nasty comments that others often find stressful and intrusive. You hate to wait and suffer “fools” poorly.

SCALE E: AGGRESSION \_\_\_\_\_. You act in a manner that may intimidate or harm another person, either emotionally or physically, whether you intend to or not. Yelling, name calling and putdowns may threaten or intimidate your spouse, friend, or coworker. While not directly assessed by the SAQ, physical aggression includes physically blocking, holding,

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pushing, hitting, or restraining another person without express permission to touch. This face of anger is the most serious and often requires professional help, especially when levels of verbal and/or physical abuse are harming others.

*Did you score highest on one particular scale?* This mode of anger expression should be a focus for your efforts at making changes as you apply what you learn about anger management in the chapters ahead. Are you surprised at scoring highest on this scale?

*Did you score on multiple scales?* If so, you need to reflect on the “mix” of behaviors you reveal to others and decide which to target for change first as you set priorities.

*How does someone who knows you well see your anger?* If you're reading this book because someone else has said you need help, but you don't see that reflected in your scores on the questionnaire, get another opinion. In addition to the person who urged you to do something about your anger, give the SAQ to another person who is significant in your life and knows you well—spouse, partner, close friend, or colleague (or give it to two or three to get a broad representation of how people see you)—and ask them to fill out the questionnaire too. A copy of the SAQ suitable for reproducing is included in Appendix 1. If several others agree with you, the problem may lie with the perceptions of the person who said you need help. But if not, take a close look at what your friends or relatives have said about you. Not only might they give you a different view of how big a role anger plays in your life, but they may also help you see ways that you express your anger that you're not wholly conscious of but that you need to address.

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## **Where Do I Stand in My Relationship with Anger?**

So, what do you think? After reviewing the SAQ and thinking about how anger has impacted your life, what have you concluded about your relationship with anger?

Can you identify with one or more of the dysfunctional faces of anger? Which one(s)?

How is your anger expression affecting others who are important to you, even if you are okay with it?

Is it affecting your enjoyment or performance at work, at home, or at play?

Is your health, sense of wellness, or the quality of your life suffering as a result of your anger?

How often do you get angry in the ways you've identified through the questionnaire?

How intense is your anger, and how long does it last?

Still have doubts that your anger is a problem for you? You're not alone. Anger by nature usually comes with a sense of righteousness; we're angry because we've been wronged, and expressing that anger is a vehicle for getting the wrong righted. What would we do without it?

I'm not suggesting that you do without it. But if, like many of the people I have worked with over the years, you have opened this book at the urging of someone who cares about you, you're apparently willing to entertain the possibility that anger is standing in your way. So, rather than answering the question "Is anger a problem for me?" with a strict yes or no, think of the possible answers as ranging from "not at all" to "yes, definitely." If you are somewhere in between, this book can help you improve the quality of your life and relationships.

## **Charting a New Course**

My job is not to eliminate anger from your emotional repertoire but to guide you on a journey that will change your relationship with anger.

If I am successful, your anger will retain its role as a valuable signal that you need to change something and provide you with the energy to stay the course. Your anger will be expressed in a way that does not make problems worse but leads to calm resolution. Your relationships as well as your ability to get things done and to feel more in control of your life will be enhanced.

Afraid you can't change entrenched habits? Ask yourself this: Are you the same person you were even ten years ago? Some of us are moving from the self-focused behaviors of early adulthood to the committed "settling" into a marriage or a first significant relationship. Others are having children and learning how to be parents, while still others are transitioning from the world of work to retirement. It doesn't matter what age you are or what your background is. You have faced choices throughout your life and you have made changes. The critical issue is your personal motivation to change.

If you decide to read on, the next chapter will help you recognize your anger, what triggers it, sustains it, and directs how you express it to others. Once you are able to understand and recognize the "anatomy" of your anger, later chapters will help you direct your anger in ways that better meet your needs.