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RECOGNIZING HOW ANGER IS PULLING YOUR STRINGS



Think about a dance you know how to do. Maybe you learned the waltz or the two-step at a junior high dance class or recently took some salsa lessons with a friend. At first it probably felt like you and your partner had four left feet between you and moved about as smoothly as a couple of mismatched gears. Gradually you got into the swing of things, knowing that when one of you moved a leg or an arm a certain way the other should respond with a particular step, slide, or kick. Before long you found you could even have a conversation during the dance, your respective body parts seeming to do their thing without needing any explicit commands from you.

This learning capacity is great news for people who love to tango or fox-trot. It's not so great for those engaged in the dance of anger. As explained in Chapter 1, when you feel helpless to control your partner's anger, you naturally try to find some way to adapt to it. Maybe you try to minimize the stress in your partner's life or you talk and act differently to avoid inciting his ire. It wouldn't be surprising if you started to harbor a healthy dose of anger yourself. Maybe you've gotten in the habit of exacting some sort of revenge by getting in your own digs or withholding affection or fighting fire with emotional fire.

When your partner gets mad, what do you usually feel and do? You might

find it a lot harder to answer that question than you would have imagined. It's kind of like giving directions to a destination you've driven to every day for the last five years. You follow the route so automatically that street names and landmarks, distances and trouble spots might be hard to conjure up. When your partner's anger has been a factor in your relationship for a significant amount of time, you've probably developed automatic, habitual responses that you're not fully aware of. In fact you might feel like you're a puppet, and it's your partner's anger that's pulling the strings.

The fact that we all react emotionally to anger, whether the other person's anger is hot and aggressive or cold and passive, makes it even harder to step back and observe ourselves. Your partner makes a snide remark, and you retaliate without thinking. Your partner yells, and you shrink and mutter an apology. Afterward, it may be hard to re-create what happened and why because your decision making wasn't necessarily cool and calculating at the time. The fact that you're reading this book tells me that the next step is not that you two kiss and make up but rather that you have an emotional response that triggers another response in this angry "action–reaction" dance in which you find yourself. And around and around the dance floor you go. Where it stops? That's the focus of this book.

*There's only one way to interrupt this dysfunctional cycle, and that's to change what **you** do.* But to make a helpful change, of course, you have to know what you're doing at any given time. That's the purpose of this chapter: to help you become much more aware of how you respond to your partner's anger so that you can find places to replace this particular duet with one that suits you better.

As I said in Chapter 1, you already know you have little control over what your partner does, but that doesn't mean you should be oblivious to the behaviors he or she employs to express anger. As we explore your reactions to anger, I'll help you see which faces of anger your partner wears, so you can specifically target those when we discuss each one separately later in the book.

ASSESSMENT (A): HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOUR PARTNER EXPRESSES ANGER?

When there are no choices to be made, autopilot can be a boon. But inappropriate expressions of anger leave you feeling trapped, so choices

are exactly what you need. You can't make them unless you can turn off autopilot and become fully present when conflict arises. "Being fully present" means being able to observe yourself more carefully so you're aware in the moment of how you are thinking, feeling, and acting. Once you're aware in this way, you can decide what you need at that moment and choose options for your reaction that are better for you and clearly set boundaries for what you will tolerate and what you will find unacceptable. Then you won't be on automatic pilot anymore, reacting so quickly and habitually that you end up feeling uncomfortable and like a pawn in your partner's anger game.

Again, you can't make your partner change just by changing how you act. But as described in Chapter 1, how you react may set the stage for your partner to try new, hopefully better, behaviors because you're no longer responding in the old ways. Your new actions disrupt your partner's well-learned habits, which won't have the effect your partner desires anymore. Most important, you end up reacting in a way that is best for *you*, a way that reduces your discomfort and helps you get your own needs met.

To help you recognize the way you think, feel, and act in response to your partner's anger, I've developed a questionnaire called the Relationship Anger Profile (RAP). This questionnaire, on pages 26–28, is informed by years of listening to clients describe the impact of anger in their lives, as well as knowledge of the common defense mechanisms observed by psychologists whenever someone feels emotionally threatened by another's behavior. It focuses on four core emotions that seem to capture the major ways we react to an angry, perhaps threatening, face of anger: anxiety, guilt, anger, and fear. Clearly these four basic emotions can't capture everything you might experience when feeling threatened by your partner's anger, but I think you'll find that they are at the core of most likely reactions to anger. You might describe yourself as "apprehensive," a form of anxiety, or you might say you felt "resentful," which is a variant of anger, for example.

Besides describing your typical emotional reactions in a variety of nuanced ways, you might be aware that you react to your partner's anger differently depending on how intense the anger gets, where you are, and who else is present. If your partner gets mad at you when you're with friends or family, you might feel so anxious or embarrassed that you think you'd do almost anything to get her to stop. If the two of you were alone at the time, you might instead react first with anger, possibly then getting fearful if your partner's anger got out of control. Or maybe your

THE RELATIONSHIP ANGER PROFILE (RAP)

Write in the name of the angry person for whom you are describing your feelings and actions: _____ . Think about the last few times this person got angry and how you felt in response.

Which of the four core feelings do you experience when this person acts in an angry way toward you, whether he/she withholds what you want or withdraws in cold anger or acts sarcastic, intense, hostile, or loud/aggressive? Once you've circled Y (yes) for **one or more** emotions—**anxious/tense, irritated/angry, responsible/guilty, or afraid/fearful**—answer the questions that follow the ones for which you circled Y.

I feel ANXIOUS (e.g., apprehensive, worried) when this person gets mad: **Y N**. If YES, then carefully consider and answer yes or no (circle Y or N) to the following questions:

1. When I think this person might get angry, I carefully consider exactly what I am about to say before expressing it. **Y N [a]**
2. I often find myself avoiding saying how I really feel so the other person won't get mad at me. **Y N [a]**
3. There are certain topics I avoid if this person seems upset. **Y N [a]**
4. Sometimes I try to change the topic or keep things from upsetting this individual (e.g., keep our children away, reduce noise, make sure everything is perfect) to avoid this person's anger. **Y N [b]**
5. I have given in and changed my own plans or avoided going places with this person when I was concerned about an escalation of anger. **Y N [b]**
6. I find I will avoid certain people or couples this person dislikes to avoid any possibility of anger becoming an issue. **Y N [b]**

I feel GUILTY (e.g., responsible, sorry, apologetic) when this person gets mad: **Y N**. If YES, then carefully consider and answer yes or no (circle Y or N) to the following questions:

1. At times I find myself trying to make excuses for this person's anger—to somehow justify it to myself or others. **Y N [g]**
2. This person can't help how angry he/she gets—it's just a personality trait that can't be changed, so I must live with it and adjust to it. **Y N [g]**

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| 3. When this person gets mad, it must be my fault also. It takes two to start any argument or conflict. | Y | N | [g] |
| 4. Giving in to this person is the easiest way to get the anger to stop or avoid it in the first place. Life is too short to make a big deal out of things, so I just do it his/her way to avoid the hassle of it all. | Y | N | [h] |
| 5. I try to make up for conflicts with this person by doing something nice to make him/her forget about it. | Y | N | [h] |
| 6. I know this person will get his/her way eventually, so I just don't fight it anymore. It's easier just to give in and get over my feelings. | Y | N | [h] |

I feel ANGRY (e.g., irritated, annoyed, enraged) when this person gets mad: **Y N**. If YES, then carefully consider and answer yes or no (circle Y or N) to the following questions:

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| 1. I spend a lot of time defending myself around this person. | Y | N | [c] |
| 2. I cannot let something this person says go if it's wrong or unfair—I feel I have to defend or justify my position. | Y | N | [c] |
| 3. I find that I am very alert to this person's negative comments about me and react to them immediately. | Y | N | [c] |
| 4. When I get mad, I sometimes do just the opposite of what this person wants, just to let him/her know that I matter too. | Y | N | [d] |
| 5. I find myself withholding what he/she wants as a kind of payback. | Y | N | [d] |
| 6. I get so mad that I sometimes stop talking or withdraw physically (e.g., leave the house, go to another room) and refuse to have anything to do with this person for hours or even days at a time. | Y | N | [d] |
| 7. When this person criticizes me, I get so annoyed I often criticize something he/she said or did in return. | Y | N | [e] |

cont.

THE RELATIONSHIP ANGER PROFILE (cont.)

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|---|---|---|-----|
| 8. I get very impatient and act angry myself when I am treated unfairly by this person. | Y | N | [e] |
| 9. Sometimes I raise my voice in response to what this person says. | Y | N | [e] |
| 10. At times I have been known to yell back at this person. | Y | N | [f] |
| 11. When pushed to the wall, I have gotten physical with this person by (one or more) blocking, pushing, holding, using my hands in anger, or throwing. | Y | N | [f] |
| 12. Sometimes I have said things to this person when I'm angry that I would never want repeated to others I care about—it would embarrass me. | Y | N | [f] |

I feel AFRAID (e.g., fearful, terrorized) when this person gets mad: **Y N**. If YES, then carefully consider and answer yes or no (circle Y or N) to the following questions:

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| 1. When this person gets angry, I sometimes feel so fearful that I am kind of paralyzed and just go along with it so it will stop. | Y | N | [i] |
| 2. I imagine this person will do something, whether intentional or not, that results in me or someone I love (e.g., a child, other family member) getting hurt emotionally or physically. This causes me to give in. | Y | N | [i] |
| 3. I sometimes feel I cannot act or speak out for fear that the situation will just get worse. | Y | N | [i] |
| 4. Sometimes I just don't know where to turn to cope with this person's anger—it is so overwhelming. | Y | N | [j] |
| 5. I have thought of ending this relationship because of the anger, but still care and want it to work. I feel stuck between the two. | Y | N | [j] |
| 6. I feel so powerless and overwhelmed at times I just shut down. | Y | N | [j] |

partner's anger always makes you anxious and desperate to prevent it from escalating. Each emotion that's part of your reaction to your partner's anger sets the stage for some type of action on your part. Therefore, the questionnaire asks you to define how you react when experiencing one or more of the four core emotions in reaction to your partner's face(s) of anger.

Now look over your answers: Which of the core emotions did you report having? Being able to identify this emotional reaction gives you a chance to react differently, instead of immediately responding with one or more of the feelings, thoughts, or actions described below each core emotion. Look at the letter in brackets after each feeling, thought, or action for which you circled Y. Each represents an unhelpful response to the other person's anger. Write in the number of "yes" answers for each letter.

- a—EDITING: _____
- b—REDIRECTING/RESCHEDULING: _____
- c—JUSTIFYING: _____
- d—PASSIVE—AGGRESSION/WITHDRAWAL: _____
- e—HOSTILITY/CRITICISM: _____
- f—AGGRESSING: _____
- g—RATIONALIZING: _____
- h—APOLOGIZING/ATONING: _____
- i—SUBJUGATING/SURRENDERING: _____
- j—SHUTTING DOWN: _____

Looking at your responses, for which actions did you score at least a 1? Even a score of 1 is important as it represents an action on your part that may significantly affect how you continue to feel. To help you understand the meaning of your score on the RAP, first look at the table on the next page, which shows unhelpful reactions you just identified from the RAP to each of the core emotions when another is acting angry.

**Core Emotions, Goals, and Unhelpful
Reactions in Response to Your Partner's Anger**

Core Emotion	Goal	Unhelpful Reactions
Anxiety	Avoiding	Editing Redirecting Rescheduling
Guilt	Atoning	Rationalizing Apologizing/Atoning
Anger	Defending Punishing	Justifying Passive–Aggression Withdrawal Hostility/Criticism Aggressing
Fear	Staying Safe	Subjugating/Surrendering Shutting Down

**WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR PARTNER
GETS ANGRY?**

Look over your answers to the RAP and the specific responses you've had for each core emotion. On the following pages are more detailed descriptions of unhelpful reactions to a core emotion. As you read, pay particular attention to the anger actions you've already acknowledged taking. When you've finished reading these detailed descriptions, you should have a clearer idea of which ones best describe you when you react to your partner's anger.

Anxiety

If you often respond to your partner's anger with anxiety, you might become hypervigilant to circumstances you believe set the stage for anger. When your partner begins to talk about a sensitive or emotional subject, you often tense up, preparing for anger to build. When you feel anxious, you may notice certain physical signs: your stomach may get queasy or upset; your neck, shoulders, jaw, or scalp might get tight and tense (which may lead to headaches or muscle pain); your heart may start pounding or your breathing become heavy.

These physical sensations may be triggered when your partner begins to get angry. But they can also come up even when you're just anticipating anger, such as when you think about your partner coming home from a stressful day at work, when you know you have to discuss money matters or parenting differences, or when you're wondering how to cope with an upcoming event that your partner doesn't want to attend or even discuss.

These feelings of physical discomfort are all part of the “fight-or-flight” response that's triggered whenever your body is gearing up to cope with a stressful event—in this case your partner's anger. Typical physical manifestations of anxiety are shown in more detail in the sidebar on the next page.

In fact, these symptoms occur with anxiety, anger, fear, and whenever we are just plain “stressed out”—all parts of the fight-flight response. They are important signals that not all is well and a change needs to occur: “Stop what you're doing or change what's happening!” Invariably, these symptoms mean some important need is being thwarted (your need for safety and security is threatened when your husband throws an ashtray across the room and you feel anxious or afraid, for example; we'll talk more about your needs being threatened in Chapter 3). If you experience the symptoms in the sidebar frequently, pay attention. Regularly feeling anxious or fearful in your relationship is taxing your body in ways that can cause physical/medical and emotional problems over time. Every part of your body—blood vessels, heart, muscles, gastrointestinal system, blood sugar levels, and even cholesterol—is impacted by daily stress.

Anxiety and avoidance often go hand in hand, which is understandable as a very-short-term solution: avoid the person and any situations that may lead to uncomfortable anger and you get relief. Of course short-term solutions of avoidance do not solve the problem, and you will likely

The Physiology of Anxiety: Signs and Symptoms to Look for in Yourself

Heart and blood pressure	Heart rate and blood pressure increase to supply more oxygen to brain and muscles. Pounding pulse may be observed in temples, wrists, throat, and chest. Most people cannot detect blood pressure changes, so a blood pressure cuff is necessary.
Respiration	Breathing rate will increase to get more blood to brain and muscles. Look for shallow breathing, chest heaviness, holding breath, feeling suffocated, throat feeling restricted/tight.
Gastrointestinal (GI) responses	Stomach and GI system are emptying of blood as digestion slows or halts to free up blood for brain and muscles. Look for stomach upset, queasiness, acid reflux, sometimes nausea and even vomiting, changes in bowel and urination frequency, including diarrhea and irritable bowel syndrome.
Musculoskeletal responses	All of your muscles begin to tighten, poised to help you "fight" or "flee" from the situation. Notice particularly your shoulders, neck, forehead, jaw, and also tension in your arms and legs. As arousal continues, muscle soreness or pain may result. Poor posture or improper body mechanics (e.g., sitting in a chair with inadequate back support) contributes to muscle tension and discomfort.
Vascular changes/skin temperature	Blood vessels in the face, hands, and elsewhere constrict or dilate to control blood flow. Look for the face to feel flushed, warm, or hot (described by others as "red") and the hands to feel hot with anger, cold with fear. Many notice a general flushing, like heat rising in chest and throat up to face.
Senses more acute	Vision, hearing, smell, and touch are all more sensitive and magnified. Sounds, like someone's voice, seem louder. Pupils dilate to permit better night vision, which may change focus in daytime. Movements toward you or someone touching you may seem more threatening.
Blood chemistry changes	Adrenaline and cortisol are among chemicals released into your blood to trigger the "fight-or-flight" response. Red blood cells become more "sticky" to increase your ability to clot in case you are injured. More fats and sugars are released by your liver into your blood.

face your partner's anger again and again. Did you circle "Y" for any of the following common reactions of avoidance on the RAP?

Editing

You have begun to edit what you say around this person. Melanie was in the habit of choosing her words carefully and trying to tone down her emotions so that her husband wouldn't get upset. Sometimes she would just suppress her observations about other people or the kids for fear he would overreact or start a quarrel. After a while her editing became automatic and she began to feel more removed from honest dialogue with her husband. Her true feelings and ideas were either held inside or vented with close friends or her mother. Intimacy seemed to corrode, beginning with the two of them having little "real" communication and later less physical contact, even at the lowest level, like hugging or merely touching each other.

Editing can begin almost unnoticed. You start to think about how the other person will react and adjust your words or carefully parse certain points you want to make to avoid any possibility of a confrontation. After a while **you stop thinking through your own thoughts and needs as you are so wrapped up in ensuring that this person remains calm.** You may have begun having thoughts like "It's just not worth bringing this up and starting another argument" or "If I tell him my opinion, he'll just ignore it anyway. What's the use?"

Redirecting/Rescheduling

You try to stage-manage your life to avoid possible anger episodes. Maybe when the kids start to get noisy, you shoo them into another room to play so your spouse doesn't get irritated. Or you steer your partner toward innocuous topics when the conversation starts to drift toward ones that have inflamed him in the past. Maybe you arrange your social calendar to avoid events where your partner might act irritable or withdraw or even make a scene out of anger at feeling forced to attend or to be around someone she dislikes. One of my clients would not go out to dinner with his wife and her colleagues because she made sarcastic comments and belittled him after her third glass of wine. He didn't want to embarrass both of them by calling her on it; nor did he want to humiliate her in front of her coworkers—or leave her to drive home drunk—by going home alone. He also avoided family get-togethers for fear that the criti-

cal remarks his wife made in private about his siblings would become public if she got angry at a party. His choices began revolving around his assessment of her mood and stress level. You may find yourself shielding others you care about from this unpleasantness and shielding yourself (and your partner?) from embarrassment.

Being a “traffic cop” to avoid anger incidents is effective much of the time, but you’ve probably begun to notice that you’re turning yourself inside out at great personal cost. You may wonder when your own needs will be considered. Do you ever resent having to work so hard to keep things “normal”?

Guilt

Think for a moment about the power of guilt to motivate us to atone for some mistake we’ve made, particularly when we’ve hurt someone we love. Psychologists are kept busy around the clock helping people understand and somehow resolve their guilt over actions that may have occurred as long ago as childhood. In fact, righteous guilt is a mark of advanced civilization. It motivates us to do the right thing, to avoid hurting others, and to stay within society’s boundaries. If you couldn’t feel guilt, you would be much less human. People who feel little or no guilt often suffer from a condition called *antisocial personality disorder*, and they typically end up toxifying the lives of most people they touch. In fact, many end up in prison.

But how much guilt and for what? Did you actually do something with the intent or outcome of hurting or harming your partner? If so, guilt is probably appropriate. But if not, feeling guilty makes you more vulnerable to your partner’s anger actions in the future. When you feel guilty (a form of anger directed at yourself), you experience immense emotional pain that you naturally want to stop. To make it stop you can either give in to your partner’s demand for certain actions or take the consequences of not doing this. To make this decision you must determine what course of action is sensible and helpful given what your partner has done. When another person expresses anger toward you in an inappropriate way—such as when Nancy uses cold anger and refuses to talk to John for days at a time—feeling guilty in response and trying to atone for your “sins” is a big mistake. It will only pay off the inappropriate actions, making them more likely to recur.

Rationalizing your partner’s anger actions tends to fuel and sustain

these misplaced guilty feelings and may lead you to give in or atone when in fact you were the one who was wronged.

Rationalizing

This occurs when you try to talk yourself into excusing or explaining the other person's anger actions as somehow acceptable, even though at some level you know they are out of bounds. This is a thinking trick we can play on ourselves. Versions of these mental gymnastics include:

- *Stress*: “She is just so stressed that she can't help getting upset—wouldn't anyone?” Very often this plays into the hand of the angry actor because being “stressed out,” “exhausted,” or “just overwhelmed” are excuses at the top of the list of every angry actor I've met.

- *Legitimacy*: Here you justify being treated this way because your partner has a “good” reason to be mad. Of course anger is justifiable when an important and realistic expectation is not met (e.g., someone goes out of his way to be rude or to deprive you of something you've rightfully earned). The issue is not the anger but the mode of expressing it. Being hurtful and confrontational should not be explained away.

- *Personality*: “He's just a hot-blooded person. And he can't help it.” “She has always been impatient and intense—it's just the way she is!” The justification is that being hostile or passive-aggressive is a personality trait and it is unrealistic to expect the person to change. While anger is an emotion and some of us are born with more intensity than others, this is no excuse for the poor ways we learn to express ourselves. Parents sometimes start this misconception early on in a child's life—“He's the smart one, she's the angry one,” and so on—thus reinforcing a role that the child may feel she must play.

- *Stability*: “So she gets angry and we all hate it, but it is just not worth ruining a whole weekend with arguing to call her on it. Better to just keep a low profile and she'll eventually get over it. Why rock the boat?” Here, putting up with the person's anger is justified as a way of keeping the peace—at almost any price. The message the angry person gets is “I can let off some steam any way I want—no problem.”

Much more will be said about the power of such thoughts to fuel unhelpful feelings and actions in Chapter 4.

Apologizing/Atoning

In contrast to merely explaining away the person's toxic actions, here you try to appease the other person by apologizing because you feel you were wrong or it's the best way to help this person stop acting angry. You might apologize for aggravating her in the first place, offering to atone for your faults in some way. For example, agreeing that your partner was "right" and you were at fault would likely end a conflict, but at what expense to your own pride and self-esteem? Clearly this is not to say that apologizing is always wrong. If you believe and the facts indicate that you violated someone's rights or wronged her in some way, apologizing can indeed be a tonic for the soul. It also helps restore the relationship to its former status. Refusing to apologize or even atone for a bad action is unlikely to resolve the rift those actions may have caused and may lead to a roadblock in reestablishing the rapport and intimacy of the relationship. Conversely, apologizing and atoning to placate a person whose anger expression was clearly inappropriate is likely to solve your problem for only a short while; it will return the next time this person doesn't get what is desired or demanded. In the long run, you have humbled yourself just to keep the peace, and this will likely lead to greater discomfort and further episodes of appeasement—clearly undermining your self-esteem and right to be heard and considered in the future.

Jared came to me having intense migraines and complaining that his relationship with Greta, his fiancée, was a major source of stress. He believed he had no choice but to constantly apologize or give in to her to stay in her good graces. He felt that if he stood up to her she would freeze him out, refusing to talk or be intimate for days at a time. So he would give in and tell her what she wanted to hear. This was not a good solution for Jared because it felt so dishonest and "wimpy" to him. He felt hurt, humiliated, and often furious with himself, but he loved Greta and did not want her to write him off as she had threatened to do many times.

Jared's migraines, for which he now took medication, had seemed to arise "suddenly" after his engagement. His neurologist suggested that he explore the stressors in his life that might be contributing to his pain. Clearly, he needed to find an alternative to constantly apologizing to Greta by standing up to her threats so the two could have an honest dia-

logue about their relationship. His migraines were obviously a symptom of stress caused by his unresolved needs to feel in control of his life and to feel affirmed by her.

Just leaving Greta, as his friends suggested, was not an option for Jared—he wanted to do everything he could do to make the relationship work. We implemented a treatment plan that reinforced what he was and was not willing to do to keep this relationship, as discussed in the next chapter. When his new limits were reached, Jared learned to resist apologizing, instead simply stating his own thoughts, feelings, and needs in a calm, assertive fashion. Letting the “chips fall where they may” when he honestly and directly told Greta his needs was scary to Jared at first. He was relieved to find that she did not leave him but instead began to take his feelings into account. He started to feel more confident of his worth to her and to himself.

Anger

When your partner gets angry, do you find yourself getting mad and wanting to defend yourself or lash back? Are you experiencing the symptoms of intense arousal like those on page 32? Perhaps you normally try to edit and redirect until your limit is reached; then you find yourself blowing up or paying your partner back for being unfair or hurtful. Perhaps you expect to shock your partner into being calm and caring. Or by withdrawing into “cold anger” you are “giving him some of his own medicine,” a kind of tit for tat, which you believe will get him to change. Or maybe you are just so angry that you don’t care what happens next. You just want to let him have it—to displace the anger you “rightly” feel onto the “cause” of your ire. Do any of the following angry reactions to anger sound like you? As you read the illustrations, think about how they’ve worked for you up until now.

Justifying

You can’t let go of the clearly unfair things your partner says when angry. You feel you must rise to the occasion and defend each insult, misstatement, or unfair characterization even though it seems to lead to never-ending arguing. One couple I know said that each had to get in the last word, which meant that loud debates would go on for fruitless hour upon hour. Each felt completely justified in trying to win the other over, and soon they were arguing and not listening. While there is nothing wrong

with calmly responding to an inaccurate point someone makes—in fact this is desirable—you must ask yourself where you cross the line into becoming so defensive and committed to winning the argument that both parties end up frustrated and angry with no resolution. Remember, the other person is already expressing a provocative face of anger. Do you find yourself taking the bait and then wishing you had stopped the discussion until tempers cooled?

Passive–Aggression/Withdrawal

You may recall from Chapter 1 that Nancy failed to clearly identify her feelings and needs through direct communication with her husband. Instead she fell back on a well-learned pattern first modeled in childhood when her father displeased her mother. Her mother would withdraw into the bedroom, refusing to talk to her husband, fix meals, or have anything to do with him until he finally apologized for his “insensitivity.” Witnessing this for years, she internalized the same pattern. Nancy found herself trying to “make” John understand her justifiable hurt by punishing him in a way that he hated: she turned off and rejected him, often withdrawing to another room to dramatically illustrate her displeasure. This face of anger, meant to punish and bring about change, involved withholding what John wanted or doing the opposite of what he desired (e.g., sometimes Nancy would cook a meal John disliked when angry with him) or emotionally and even physically withdrawing (e.g., Nancy often refused sexual intimacy for days at a time to let John know how unhappy she was). Of course a major problem is that John had to guess at what Nancy’s “problem” was and often would react in a similar way by withdrawing from her as a way of expressing his displeasure. Do you find yourself going to a passive face of anger to get your point across when someone you love is angry with you?

Hostility/Criticism

If you’ve ever stood in line with someone who was “fuming” with impatience, mumbling under his breath, and highly stressed and irritated, you know what hostility is. People who are hostile tend to be relentlessly critical when someone else fails to meet their expectations. Julie sometimes adopted a hostile face of anger with Ned in retaliation when he got impatient with her, loudly complaining that the house was “too messy” or the kids were “out of control.” The more critical and loud she got,

the more he would increase the intensity of his complaints, “demanding” that she talk with him “right now!!” As you might imagine, her “counter”-hostility only fueled more intense anger on his part, thus leading to an endless loop of hostility, which only deepened the gulf between the two. Clearly, what she was doing was not working, yet Julie told me she felt locked into this vicious circle and couldn’t seem to get through to her husband. When she decided to change what she did by no longer meeting his hostility with her own intense anger, the circle was broken once and for all.

Aggressing

As you will recall from Chapter 1, when anger actions are meant to hurt or harm, they become aggressive. Aggression can be expressed with hurtful words like name-calling or put-downs or of course with violent actions (any touch that is unwanted, including pushing, shoving, hitting, throwing, blocking, and holding). Some of my clients meet aggression from their partner with counteraggression—they equal and perhaps exceed the intense and hurtful actions they’re faced with. Serious consequences can ensue when both partners express their anger aggressively. One couple came to see me after being “thrown out” of a restaurant they enjoyed patronizing. They were told that their loud arguing and language had bothered other patrons and that it would be best if they left immediately and did not return. They were both mortified that they had been so publicly humiliated and wanted to get control of how they solved differences. As I will highlight in later chapters, alcohol tends to fuel angry acting out. While these two lacked good conflict resolution skills, it was clear that the martinis contributed to things getting out of control. As is the usual case, meeting aggressive words or actions with aggressive responses only adds fuel to the flame of anger and may lead to verbal and physical abuse. Aggression rarely solves any problem, and my clients sometimes have to experience severe consequences (like public censure, arrest, or legal punishment) to see the light. It should be noted that when a relationship becomes physically abusive, women are at least four times more likely to be injured, even if physical abuse is mutual. Much more will be said about aggression in Chapters 7 and 8: how to cope with a partner who is aggressive, when to stay, and when to leave and get help.

Elise would have an attack of gastric reflux for days following an argument with her sister. This pattern of internalizing and feeling physi-

cally sick when forced to confront family issues was “old hat” to her. Since she spent her childhood with very aggressive and controlling parents, Elise felt unentitled to express her anger to anyone and recalled getting sick and even missing school when her parents were in loud conflict. She married Ethan, who was very passive, to ensure that her life would be filled with peace. Unfortunately, his passivity often took the form of withdrawing from her and not discussing his feelings and needs when she asked for a talk. As she became frustrated and more aggressive in seeking him out and loudly demanding he respond, he withdrew more and sometimes refused to talk or retreated to his computer for hours. Never learning how to clearly express her feelings as a child, Elise would fall back on her parents’ script and blow up at him, screaming, throwing things, and even pitching his computer monitor across the room on one occasion: “There. Sleep with that from now on. You obviously care more about your damned computer than me!” Countering another’s destructive face of anger (such as Ethan’s passive withholding and withdrawal) with your own destructive face of anger not only makes little sense but is likely to fuel the other person’s actions even further. It is never justified and sets you up to be accused of being a part of the problem and not the solution (e.g., “Who are you to talk about *my* anger!”)

Fear

There is a difference between feeling anxious or worried and feeling fear. Fear is your nervous system’s immediate reaction to any event your brain interprets as life-threatening to you or someone you love and must protect. Fear mobilizes your body to a more extreme version of the fight-or-flight response discussed earlier and can lead to immobilization and shutting down when it escalates too far. It is kind of like a “flee” response—“This is dangerous and I feel overpowered, so let’s get out of here”—but the person may not practically be able to run (e.g., he has family, work, or other responsibilities) and thus may feel stuck and overwhelmed. In essence: “I am experiencing this overwhelming internal fear but cannot mobilize myself to do anything about it.” In general, more intense faces of anger like extreme hostility or verbal threats or physical aggression trigger fear for yourself or fear that others you love might be hurt emotionally or physically in some way. Your needs for safety and security are sure to be threatened, and the result is usually an intense emotional reaction. Here are some of the actions that usually come with intense fear.

Subjugating/Surrendering

Because you fear that this person might harm you or someone else you love, you may find yourself giving in and going along because you are just too frightened or immobilized to decide what you want in the situation. You're in effect surrendering your rights and responsibilities to yourself as a way of protecting yourself or others from verbal, physical, or emotional abuse. This tactic, sadly, often works to immediately shut off the other's angry tactics. By "paying off" these aversive actions by going along or giving in, you are providing powerful reinforcement for their occurrence in the future. In simple terms, we all learn from what works. In childhood we might learn that threatening to smack a kid gets us his toy truck or doll. We later learn that being a bully gets us a strange kind of respect—we are feared, so others do what we want or stay out of our way. This pattern can continue into adulthood. For example, most offices contain at least one or two "intimidators," people whose anger is so obnoxious or threatening that others go out of their way to accommodate them—when they are not trying to avoid them.

Shutting Down

While most readers of this book may not be able to relate to this reaction, it's worth noting that aggression can take a toll on the recipient's self-esteem, mood, emotions, and even health over time. I've seen individuals become so worried and/or depressed that they can't function as before. They may begin to miss social occasions, family events, work, or even retreat into using substances like alcohol or prescription drugs to get through the day. The process of shutting down occurs when one's spirit, one's individual self, is so overpowered by another's aggression and threats that it begins to retreat into dysfunction. Well before this point is reached it is imperative to get professional help and consider separating from the aggressive individual until both parties can get help to transform this sad and dysfunctional pattern.

If you see yourself engaging in one or more of the destructive behavior patterns resulting from fear, you must immediately seek advice from a professional who is familiar with these issues and can offer a plan of action to get you unstuck. As I've emphasized, **if you feel in immediate danger, take steps to protect yourself, like calling 911, leaving the situation, and alerting others.**

WHAT ARE THESE FEELINGS AND ACTIONS DOING FOR YOU?

Now that you've identified how you are reacting emotionally to your partner's anger and what actions you often take either before or after the fact, you are in a position to evaluate how you feel about what you're currently doing. Ask yourself these questions:

- How do you feel when confronted with your partner's anger? How often do you feel this way, and how are these emotional states like guilt or anxiety interfering with the quality of your day and overall life? These are the emotional costs of the present situation.
- As you examine your anger actions described by the RAP, ask yourself:
 - Are they working to change your relationship? Do you see progress or stagnation in the ways your partner expresses anger to you?
 - Are these behaviors helping you achieve whatever your daily and longer-term goals are (e.g., a new career, providing the kind of childhood for your children you've always wanted, achieving a personal goal like having more friends or getting more fit)?
 - Do your actions fit with how you want to be as a person? Do they enhance your sense of self-respect? Would you want your son or daughter, niece or nephew to react to a boyfriend/girlfriend as you are reacting?

INCREASING SELF-AWARENESS BY STAYING PRESENT

You may already be thinking about how you'd like to change things in your relationship. Perhaps you've decided to be firmer in communicating what you want from your partner. Or you've resolved not to give in to demands made with anger, standing your ground when your needs and concerns are not being taken into account. A major goal of this book is to help you decide on new boundaries—what actions are acceptable and what are not—and to stick up for yourself when these bounds are violated. But before you can try out new actions for standing up for yourself

and asserting your thoughts, feelings, and needs with your partner, **you must become more aware of those moments when declaring your boundaries is necessary.**

For example, if your partner's hostile tone causes you to shrink from any confrontation and try your best not to infuriate him further by editing what you say and do, it's critical to be aware of his unpleasant tone of voice *as it begins* to intrude on your conversation. Then you can signal him early on that his manner is unacceptable. You have derailed your interaction from proceeding into the old pattern by which his hostility leads you to withdraw and give in.

In addition to being aware of how your partner is acting, it's critical to pay attention to yourself. This chapter has revealed a number of thoughts, feelings, and actions you currently experience when your partner gets mad. To make changes you must be aware of how and when these old reactions *begin* to occur so you can redirect yourself to new actions that reinforce your boundaries. For example, you can't avoid an argument with your spouse if you're not aware of saying mean things until both of you are already yelling and feeling put down. The sooner you can be aware of what your partner and you do in your angry exchange, the greater the likelihood that you can change things early on, derailing the old pattern and trying out new actions and reactions.

The table on the next page shows the external and internal events you may need to be more aware of as they occur.

Notice that the table illustrates both verbal and physical actions of your partner that may signal the onset of an anger incident. For example, are you aware that your spouse begins to get louder, becomes more emphatic with gestures like finger pointing and shaking his head "no," steps closer to you to a point where you feel intimidated or uncomfortable, or uses name-calling or insults to get your attention? These and any other actions that make you feel threatened, distressed, or uncomfortable are signals that your partner's anger expression is beginning to violate your personal boundaries.

Of course you should monitor your own self-talk, emotions, and actions too, as personal signals that the situation with your partner is becoming a problem for you and needs to be addressed. It has been noted that how you think about your partner's anger actions determines how you feel and sets the stage for what you do in response. Keeping track of your thoughts, feelings, and actions is best done by writing them down whenever your partner's anger seems "over the top." Here is a strategy that you can begin right away.

Goals of Personal Awareness

Your Partner's Actions

Face(s) of Anger

Passive-aggression (e.g., withholds)

Cold anger (e.g., withdraws from you)

Sarcasm (e.g., hostile joking, snide remark)

Hostility (e.g., impatient, rude)

Aggression

Verbal (e.g., name-calling)

Physical (e.g., holding, restraining)

Voice Characteristics

Loudness (e.g., raising voice, "stairstepping")

Silence/"stonewalling"

Interrupting you

Tone (e.g., sharp, sarcastic)

Body Language

Facial expression (e.g., stern, pinched)

Eye contact (e.g., glaring vs. avoiding)

Physical closeness (e.g., "in your face")

Aggressive gestures (e.g., pointing finger)

Unwanted touching in any form

Your Reactions

Thoughts that:

Fuel discomforting emotions

Reduce personal control/confidence

Rationalize partner's anger actions

Restrict your options

Feelings

Anxiety/fight-or-flight sensations

Guilt

Anger

Fear

Actions that:

Avoid communicating boundaries

Placate/reward wrong behaviors

Reduce your own sense of worth

Place you in danger

The Daily Log

Lynn decided to keep a diary of how she reacted to her boyfriend's passive-aggressive and cold angry actions when he didn't like something she did. In the past Lynn would become very solicitous (e.g., "What's wrong? What did I say now that is upsetting you? Can we talk?"). She briefly recorded the situation (e.g., what he said or did or didn't do, like talk to her) and then jotted down her thoughts, feelings, and any actions. Finally, she recorded the outcome of the encounter with him. Here is an example of one of her recordings:

Lynn's Daily Log Situation: Bill stopped talking to me and went upstairs when I told him I wanted to visit with my family over Christmas break. He was clearly angry but wouldn't discuss his feelings or try to work it out.

Thoughts: "He will never change. He clearly hates my family and will never be comfortable around them. What can I do?"

Feelings: Sad, hopeless, and angry

Actions: I tried to get him to talk. I went upstairs and pleaded with him to talk about this with me. He refused.

Outcome: He won't talk, and I feel miserable. I feel completely out of control in my marriage.

This format for recording your reactions to your partner works well as it forces you to think about what happened externally (what your partner did or said) as well as how you reacted. (You'll find a blank form in the Appendix that you can photocopy if you wish.) Research on self-observation indicates that when you monitor a set of behaviors, you're more motivated and likely to alter them in the direction you desire. This effect is called *reactivity*—your actions react to your observations. As you become more aware of yourself, you can decide what and when to alter how you think, feel, and act. This sets the stage for new behavior on your part. Your behavior change then forces your partner to confront the fact that you're acting differently. What used to work to get your attention or to influence your behavior no longer works, setting the stage for your partner to make changes because sticking with old anger actions will achieve nothing and will fail to influence you! This doesn't mean your

partner will be forced to change in response, but it does challenge your partner to decide whether to change or remain stuck in old actions that no longer offer him or her the same benefit.

Lynn decided to calmly inform her husband of her ideas and feelings about how they should spend their holiday. She made the case that they had not visited her family for over two years and that she believed it only fair and reasonable to be with her parents for the upcoming holidays. When he began to get angry and to raise his voice (which used to intimidate her), she calmly told him she would be happy to continue the discussion only when he spoke in a softer, calmer tone. She walked away, and soon he approached her with a calmer tone of voice—the two then worked out their differences.

I use the phrase *being present* to capture the state of heightened awareness of your partner's actions and your internal and behavioral responses as they are occurring. Being present calls on your senses to be more alert to what you are observing, hearing, and in some way feeling inside. Think about the last time you fully partook of a beautiful, sunny day. Perhaps you felt the warmth of the sun on your face, smelled the fresh air of a fall morning, heard the rustling of the wind blowing multicolored leaves through the air, and felt the first stirrings of the winter months to come.

If you now have a clearer vision of what you want to change about how you react to your partner, you must also be thinking about what actions on his or her part are unacceptable to you. What would you like this person to stop doing? How would you like to be treated from now on? This is a question that directly relates to boundaries: What will you find acceptable and not? You must decide this before you can plan for how you will react differently in the future. Chapter 3 helps you define the boundaries you wish to reinforce with new actions from now on.