

By Hollis Pirkey

Understanding Anger

A Personal Journey

Dedicated to my family. With love ,HP.

Introduction

In this journey of self-discovery, I delve into the complexities of anger, starting with my own tumultuous history. Peeling back its layers, I uncover the true nature and purpose of this powerful emotion. From the subtle sparks of irritation to the fiery infernos of rage, I unveil the spectrum of anger, recognizing that it can serve as both a protective shield and a destructive weapon. Before diving into my story, I'll begin with the basics—a definition of anger, so we can all be on the same page.

Definition of Anger

There are two types of anger: definitive anger and distorted anger. Definitive anger is anger born out of real circumstances. For example, when you are betrayed by someone you love, you can prove they betrayed you. They may even acknowledge they betrayed you. Distorted anger is when you think a loved one betrayed you, but you cannot prove it. For example, they may be trying to organize a surprise party for you, but because of the secrecy you think they are having an affair with your best friend.

One question you always want to ask yourself is whether your anger is generated from within you or outside of you? Another question to ask is: who or what am I angry at? Am I angry at myself for screwing up again? Am I angry at a co-worker for taking credit for my work? Am I angry at my situation, such as waiting in a traffic jam that messes up my schedule? Be clear and up front about what is triggering you.

Anger is a complex and powerful emotion that arises in response to perceived threats, injustices, or frustrations, among many other triggers. It is characterized by feelings of intense displeasure, irritation, or fury, accompanied by physiological changes such as increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, and muscle tension. Anger serves as a natural and adaptive response, signaling the need to address or confront situations that may jeopardize personal boundaries, values, or our well-being. While anger is a normal and universal emotion, uncontrolled anger can lead to destructive behavior and harmful consequences, making it crucial to develop effective strategies for managing and expressing anger in a healthy and constructive manner. Now that we have a working definition, let me take you on a journey through my own experiences with anger; a journey that spans decades and has shaped who I am today.

My Story of Anger: The Early Years

I was always a friendly kid, and that continued into my adult years. I made lots of friends and few enemies. Connecting with people was something I loved deeply. Seeing and hearing what others liked made me feel warm inside. But beneath this friendly exterior, I was hiding a dirty secret: I was often angry for reasons I could not understand or define. Imagine carrying a body covered in sensitivity buttons, each one a potential trigger for explosive anger. That was me. If anyone touched one of those angry buttons, I would tee off on them. Before they could think, I would release a torrent of intense anger directed at them. They would usually shrink and walk away, muttering under their breath about how crazy I was. That turned out to be an accurate definition of me: a crazy MF. Or, more precisely, an out-of-control angry MF.

Some of my friends, after experiencing my somewhat unprovoked outbursts, would joke about it or simply disappear when I went off, avoiding being targeted. If anyone dared to tell me to relax or calm down, I would turn my anger towards them with even greater intensity. My anger regularly sent me down a rabbit hole of recrimination towards others. Conspiracies would swirl through my head, or I'd follow one angry strand of thought to another, even angrier one. This could go on for ten minutes or more, each strand taking me deeper into my sea of anger.

The Roots of Distrust

As a child, I discovered early on that I didn't trust my parents, or any adult, for that matter. This distrust extended to my siblings and their friends unless they were nice to me first. In pre-school, it didn't take long for me to become known as 'The Kid That Could.' This wasn't a compliment – it meant I could beat up [RW4] any kid in school, given the right motivation. That motivation? Touching one of my anger sensitive buttons. All of this happened despite being the smallest kid in school and wearing ultra-thick glasses. I carried that moniker through elementary school, a reputation that both protected and isolated me. Halfway through elementary school, I began to call on my friends to become my family. I would try to spend more time with them than with my actual family. In some cases, where my friends' families were either more dysfunctional than mine or were broken families, this arrangement worked, for a time. But the family of friends broke apart many times between grades four and twelve. It was typically a combination of my anger blowing them away until they had reached their limit, or their families demanding that they spend less time with me and more with them.

During those years, I developed a reputation for exploding on unsuspecting friends for reasons nobody really understood, including me. This unpredictability made maintaining friendships challenging and left me feeling increasingly isolated.

The War at Home

Perhaps the most significant relationship affected by my anger was with my mother. I had started a war with her that lasted for thirty-five years[RW5] . She was a screamer, letting me have

it day after day. Some days, I was hit with a belt, a yardstick, or a switch. As I grew taller, she focused on screaming louder than my voice and avoided the physical weapons, knowing that I could rip them from her grip and turn them back on her. I learned to defend myself against her tirades by using her same words against her. This tactic only served to make me more confident in my anger while making it stronger, more focused, and more poignant. It was a vicious cycle that reinforced my angry behaviors and responses.



Self-Medication and Escape

In fifth grade my eldest brother introduced me to cannabis, and that changed me forever. I immediately saw and felt how I could regulate my anger by getting stoned. That began a fifty-plus year relationship with cannabis, a relationship that would prove to be both a crutch and a hindrance in my journey to understand and manage my anger. Even though I could then regulate my anger to some extent, I couldn't stop it from raising its ugly head and hurting other people. At first, I blamed those who touched my exposed angry buttons for my strong reactions. As I grew older, I began to see that often I was attacking people who didn't deserve what I was spewing at them. I realized I was merely hitting them with automatic negative reactions (ANRs) that I didn't even know the origin of. I tried to justify my actions inside my addled brain, but I never could.

Around high school, feelings of guilt for my angry reactions towards others began to take root. I didn't like what I was doing to others. I didn't like how the anger made me feel. I didn't like how much time it took me to calm myself down, even with the help of cannabis. But none of that made a difference as to why or how intensely, my anger came out.

In an attempt to find new ways to calm my temper, I stopped physical fighting and adopted a no-violence position. Luckily for me, this principle has stuck with me since that day even if my verbal outbursts continued.

College Years and Beyond

By the time I reached college, I was sinking into depression about my unknown, unresolved, and out-of-control anger. It profoundly affected the way I interacted with others. I avoided dating to keep from blowing up on women. I wasn't a particularly good student, but then I channeled my energies into my studies -while getting stoned. One day, one of my professors offhandedly remarked that if I came to class stoned, I should take tests and study stoned, too. So I did. Then I was introduced to psilocybin mushrooms and LSD. I loved how they inspired me to think differently and raised my level of joy and laughter. I began using them more and more to help with my ongoing anger and depression issues. While these substances provided temporary relief and moments of insight, they were not a long-term solution to my anger problems.

Upon graduation from college, the economy was in shambles, and my depression worsened. Nevertheless, I dove into the film/video production field and began freelancing. It provided me with a lifeline and plenty of work. I met more people like me, and the crews in the industry were all hardworking and caring people. I grew to love that about the industry. My depression waned, and I began to feel better about myself.

However, I still had anger issues, and I still didn't know where they came from. I thought everyone had the same issues I had. Cannabis was still my main way of regulating my anger, but even that wasn't working as well as it did before. So, I added alcohol to the mix. That didn't help much, but alcohol would help me sleep when I got wound up.

The Turning Point

By the time I reached my 50s, nothing had really changed except that I had hurt many people with my anger, including my wife and kids. I had sabotaged myself countless times in relationships, work, and friendships. I had accepted myself as an angry guy, like many other angry guys out there.

That's when I began to take stock of who I was, how I looked at myself, and how I saw the world seeing me. What I saw freaked me out. My vision of myself was quite different from how the world saw me. I saw myself as a basically friendly and happy guy, but the world saw me as the opposite.

Looking back, I spent 50+ years in a state of confusion about my anger. I grew weary of the buttons I wore. My over-the-top reactions continued unabated until I decided to change. That is exactly why I wrote this book – to change myself and to prove to myself that I could change for the better and learn to manage my anger more effectively.

The adage, "People don't change," is totally wrong because I'm an example of a man who has changed his life. I'm not done changing. I never want to go back to the days of intense, uncontrolled anger. There are other people just like me all over the world. Yes, people can and do change.

Childhood Influences and Societal Pressures

When I grew up, I was constantly told what to do by my parents, family members, teachers, ministers, church-goers, and anyone who had something to say. I was told to be attentive to others, to listen to my elders, and follow their instructions. Basically, I was taught to defer to everyone. I learned that to get anywhere, I had to get the support of others. Though accurate to some extent, to me, that was a fundamentally flawed thought. God forbid I should trust myself. I saw the hypocrisy of my elders as they would say one thing and do another. Studying the Bible and observing the adults in my life, I noticed they would say “don’t steal” and then steal themselves. They would tell me to be good while they did bad. They would say one thing and do another. How was I, as an impressionable child, to come to grips with these differences? I was told to give up my life and hand it over to God or others because they had more experience. The premise was that they understood the world and I did not. I saw that adults didn’t seem to believe in the Bible or the Ten Commandments. Their faith seemed to be squarely based on their achievements in the world of reality. Bible verses were just something they recited on Sunday so they could feel comfortable with themselves about going out Monday and screwing other people. Then came the inevitable decision that faces all Christian children: to either believe in the Bible or not. Or to take from it what you want it to be. Most people today cherry-pick what they like from it. After seeing respected adults break the Ten Commandments so regularly, it seemed that faith was more of an afterthought than a way to live life.

Once in the world of reality, we create our own vision of the world and add a few of the teachings to feel like the people of the day. My whole life was a tumultuous time for me. Considering the vast changes in the world from the 1950s to today, old visions of the US were being rewritten by the changing times, and people were becoming more conscious of the world around them. They also began to question their parents as I did. This time put a pall over a highly impressionable child, me. I was trying hard to grasp what it all meant. I began to define things for myself, and that was not looked upon as a good thing by the adults in my life, but I didn’t know what else to do.

The Struggle for Self-Trust

Virtually every adult felt compelled to tell me what to do based on their experience, not mine. I was told not to speak but to act when told. They told me not to trust myself but to trust others. How foolish was that, to teach or tell people not to trust themselves? This BS just made me feel angrier at adults. After all, they had created and accepted this world as reality. Growing up, I felt like the only way I could get anything in life – work, money, or love – would be to follow others’ words and actions. The result was that I deferred my decision-making to others and based on that support or lack of support, I would make my decisions. I thought I was being smart, but I was being totally and completely stupid.

Here's an example of how I deferred my decision-making in my young age. After mom cut my music lessons based on how my older siblings had hated them, I taught myself to play guitar. I didn't know any keys or chords, just notes that sounded right as I played along to the songs coming from my radio. I was good enough to pick up riffs from the likes of BB King, Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, and Duane Allman. One day my oldest brother listened to me, and his jaw dropped. I could feel his surprise and maybe jealousy. But he said nothing, and since he said nothing, I felt like my attempt to get his approval had failed. I put the guitar down and never picked it up again.

Later, even as a thick-glasses-wearing boy playing pickup football, I became an excellent receiver and QB. In college, my dorm team beat all other teams, including my college football team and a few other college football teams as well. We played 5-on-5 or 7-on-7 touch. I was offered the opportunity to play with my college team. Instead of joining the college team to gain acceptance and notoriety, I chose not to play based on the thought that being of slight build meant the big guys on the defense would crush my small body.

Other times I deferred decision-making to others' beliefs or their success. Those decisions were right for them but were not right for me. When I began to see what those bad decisions of listening to others had cost me, I stopped. True, I didn't burn in flames every time I followed others' advice. But I also didn't succeed. It took many years of reflection to realize that fact.

The Path to Change

Later, I came to understand that nobody knows what is right; everyone is making it up along the way. Making decisions based on someone's advice or suggestions is not seeing who you are and what you want. Or what you have to offer and what your purpose is. It is abdicating your decision-making, and that makes you vulnerable and susceptible to being taken advantage of, leading to not getting what you want. This all leads to anger. It seemed that everything in my life led to anger. The point is that I should never have allowed myself to let another person make decisions for me. But I didn't know any better. Since then, I have accepted that I can either decide what I want or allow a non-decision to decide what is right for me. Making decisions by choosing what I don't want is the same as not making decisions or allowing someone else to make the decision for you.

The only way to live is to make the decision and let it go. Not deciding is deferred living. It is living a different life than why you are here for. All this led me to want to change. I knew I could not continue to live the way I was, or I was going to die in some stupid, rage-filled act where I was out of control. To continue doing the mean anger-related things to others was unacceptable anymore. I wanted to show my kids that I could change, that I could rid myself of my anger issues and treat them and everyone else better.

That was the beginning of my self-guided tour to solve my anger issues and live a different life. I had already been through close to thirty years of therapy and counseling. None of it gave me a resolution or a fix that I could depend on. I wanted to fix myself. That was the impetus to begin my own research by reading self-help or self-development books.

A Note On Therapy

Now that I have become a mental fitness coach, my story of anger seems even more relevant than ever. The thirty years of therapy I had endured were worth it for a simple reason: it kept me on the path to fixing myself.

True, therapy did not lead me to an answer or a resolution to my anger issues, but it informed me of how therapy works and what parts of it were helpful to me and what parts were not.

I recall a messy situation in a men's group years ago. Some of the men had not been through any therapy at all, and it showed as they would make selfish, uncaring statements about their own issues instead of commenting on or supporting someone else's story. After one really hard session where a few men discounted another's story as fiction while cynically stating they knew how to fix the other man's problems with a weapon, I became agitated with those comments.

Before the end of the session, we did a round of comments from all the men on how they felt about the evening. The two men who had attacked the other man with words of dissatisfaction stated how proud they were of themselves for helping the man see the error of his ways. I could see the pain in the other man's face and feel his frustration with the two men. He kept silent, but my anger button was ticked by the two men.

When it came time for me to speak, I lit into both men, telling them that the group was not a place to judge others or their stories but a place to give respect and honor the other men's stories as fact. "You are here to listen and to work on yourself, not to criticize others' experiences," I said. My tirade worked. Both men kept their mouths shut and left the group, never to return. I was okay with that.

This experience taught me an important lesson about the power of standing up for others and the importance of creating safe spaces for vulnerability and growth. It also showed me that my anger, when channeled properly, could be a force for good.

Therapy was good, but talk therapy is overrated. The above story illustrates how therapy groups can be sidetracked by people with a different agenda than working on themselves. It also is a way for people to stay stuck in one place by refusing to discuss how they have learned and changed from the sessions. Rather, they continue to work on the same issue until everyone is sick of hearing about it. Don't get me wrong, talk therapy is great to begin your therapeutic journey, but at some point, I had to go to more structured sessions to work on resolution exercises and solution-based techniques.

The Self-Guided Journey

My self-guided tour after therapy began with reading Wayne Dyer and his books on intentionality. That was followed by reading the books of Eckhart Tolle on the value of being in the moment. Then I went on to Esther Hicks and her channeling of an ancient sage named Abraham. From there, I found Louise Hay. At that point, I was getting a good education on the world outside of the reality we see every day. They all helped to open me up to larger worlds out there that might hold solutions for me.

They also helped me to keep trudging down that lonely path of personal illumination. My next teacher was Dr. Joe Dispenza and his powerful meditations to heal ourselves and raise our awareness and consciousness. I loved how he used science to explain what others said existed but were never able to prove. Dr. Joe proved his process works through science and statistics.

Still, though, my anger kept raising its ugly head when least expected. All this new education was allowing me to see myself in a new light. I learned to love myself and to regulate myself without drugs and alcohol. But my anger was still there, deep inside me, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting people.

I was working hard on catching my ANTs (automatic negative thoughts) and ANRs (automatic negative reactions) and changing those angry retorts into calmer phrases. I was intentionally changing my thoughts and words from negative to more positive. I was catching my negative mindset and moving it to neutral or positive. I was lightening my mood and personality, but something was still wrong with me.

Uncovering the Root CauseThe Self-Guided Journey

I had to find what the origin of my anger was. That new search led me to Bruce Lipton and his books on childhood issues and trauma. Then I was given Oprah's book with Bruce Perry on childhood trauma. Those two books made me realize that my anger most likely goes back to my early childhood, more like my days or months as a baby.

As I repeatedly meditated on my childhood, something came up for me. It was a powerful memory of how I distrusted and disliked all adults, including my parents and siblings, growing up. This memory led me to more research about child-rearing techniques of the 1950s. In turn, it led me to realize that one of the popular child-rearing techniques was to let your baby cry themselves to sleep.

I then looked into the experiences of children of addicts, parentless children, children left alive after wars, and children of unattentive and uninvolved parents. We all had the same symptoms: an inability to regulate ourselves, to trust others, to love ourselves, and feel connected to the world in a positive way.

The lightbulb went off in my head. I now knew what had happened to me.

The Revelation

This realization was both liberating and painful. I understood that my anger wasn't just a personal flaw or a lack of self-control. It was a deeply ingrained response to early trauma, a protective mechanism that had long outlived its usefulness.

The popular parenting technique of the 1950s, letting babies "cry it out" – was based on the misguided belief that responding to a baby's cries would spoil them. We now know that this approach can be deeply traumatic for infants, who rely entirely on their caregivers for comfort and security.

When a baby cries and no one comes, they experience intense fear and distress. Over time, this can lead to a fundamental mistrust of the world and difficulty regulating emotions. The baby learns that their needs don't matter, that the world is an unsafe place, and that they must fend for themselves.

This early experience matched perfectly with my lifelong struggles: my difficulty trusting others, my hair-trigger anger response, my tendency to push people away before they could hurt me. It all made sense now.

The Path Forward

Armed with this new understanding, I felt a mix of emotions. There was sadness for the baby I once was, anger at the well-meaning but misguided parenting advice of the time, and hope that with this knowledge, I could finally make real progress in managing my anger.

I realized that my journey of healing wasn't just about managing anger in the moment. It was about reparenting myself, learning to trust, and creating the secure attachment I never had as an infant.

This revelation opened up new avenues for healing:

Self-Compassion: Instead of berating myself for my anger, I began to have compassion for the hurt child within me. I learned to soothe myself in moments of distress, much like a loving parent would soothe a crying baby.

Mindfulness: I doubled down on my mindfulness practices, using them to become more aware of my emotional states and to catch anger before it spiraled out of control.

Inner Child Work: I began to actively communicate with and nurture my inner child through visualization exercises and journaling.

Seeking Healthy Attachments: I made a conscious effort to build and maintain healthy relationships, slowly learning to trust and be vulnerable with others.

Continued Education: I kept learning about developmental psychology and trauma, which helped me understand my experiences and reactions better.

Somatic Practices: Recognizing that trauma is stored in the body, I explored somatic therapies and body-based practices to release old tensions and patterns.

The Ongoing Journey

As I write this, I want to be clear: I haven't "cured" my anger. It's still a part of me, and there are still times when it flares up unexpectedly. But now I understand it. I can see it coming, and more often than not, I can choose how to respond.

My journey has taught me that anger, like all emotions, has a purpose. It signals that something is wrong, that a boundary has been crossed, or that a need isn't being met. The key is learning to listen to that signal without being consumed by it.

I've also learned that change is possible at any age. The brain's neuroplasticity means that we can form new patterns and responses well into adulthood. It takes work, consistency, and patience, but it is possible.

To those reading this who struggle with anger, I want you to know that you're not alone. Your anger doesn't define you, and it's not your fault. It's a response to your experiences, but it doesn't have to control your life.

Conclusion

Understanding anger – its roots, its purpose, and its impact – is the first step in learning to manage it effectively. My journey from an anger-filled child to a more balanced adult has been long and challenging, but infinitely rewarding.

As we move forward in this book, we'll explore specific techniques and strategies for managing anger. We'll delve into the science behind anger, examine how it manifests in different cultures and contexts, and learn practical tools for emotional regulation.

Remember, the goal isn't to eliminate anger completely – that's neither possible nor desirable. Instead, we're aiming to develop a healthier relationship with this powerful emotion. To harness its energy for positive change rather than destruction.

Your journey might look different from mine, but I hope that by sharing my story, I've shown you that change is possible. That understanding and managing your anger is within your reach. And that by doing so, you can create more fulfilling relationships, achieve your goals, and live a life of greater peace and satisfaction.

As we close this chapter, I invite you to reflect on your own relationship with anger. What has it cost you? What might be possible if you could understand and manage it better?

In the chapters to come, we'll embark on this journey together, exploring the complexities of anger and learning to transform it from a destructive force into a tool for positive change. Are you ready? Let's begin.

Reflective Questions:

1. Think about your earliest memories of anger. How has your relationship with anger evolved over time? Can you identify any patterns or triggers that have remained consistent throughout your life?

2. I described how societal and familial expectations influenced my behavior and decision-making. How have external expectations shaped your own relationship with anger and self-trust?

Are there any decisions you've made based on others' expectations that you now question?

3. The chapter discusses the impact of my childhood experiences on adult behavior, particularly regarding anger. Reflect on your own upbringing. Are there any experiences or parenting techniques that you think might have influenced how you express or manage anger today?

4. My journey involved various forms of self-medication and escape before finding healthier coping mechanisms. Have you ever used unhealthy coping strategies to deal with anger? If so, what were they, and how have you worked to replace them with more positive approaches?

5. Towards the end of the chapter, I emphasize the importance of self-compassion in dealing with anger. How do you typically respond to yourself after an angry outburst? How might practicing more self-compassion change your relationship with anger?