

Your perfect right
A Guide to Assertive
Living
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and
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When angry, count five,
When very angry, swear
Mark Twain

Anger is not A four-letter word

Twain was half right, at least. Counting to five — or fifty — may be a pretty healthy way to deal with angry feelings. (Just don't allow your hostility to escalate as you count!) Turns out that swearing, on the other hand, may not be such a good idea after all. For a quarter century, we've taught and written about ways to spontaneously and assertively express anger. Recent research, however, indicates that expressing anger — assertively or otherwise — may not always be the way to go. In this chapter, we'll take a look at the ~~best~~ latest facts — and some myths about anger, and suggest how it's possible to handle your anger and stay healthy.

Sometimes, you just can't win! Anam took his car to the local dealership for some routine maintenance work. The dealer's shop doesn't take appointments, operating instead on a first-come, first-served basis. Anam arrived at 8 a.m. and told the service manager he would pick the car up around 4:30 that afternoon. Here is what happened when Anam came back for his car: Anam: "Hi, I'm Anam Z. and I'm here to pick up my car." Service Manager (looking through his worksheets): "I'm" sorry, sir we haven't gotten to your car yet. Anam: "Damn! That really makes me mad! This is supposed to ~~be~~ be first-come, first-served, and I was here at 8, what happened?" Service Manager: "Hey, you know how it is. This was just one of those days. We put your car in the back and got busy and just didn't get to it." Anam: "Hell, that doesn't do me any good! It's demanded ~~was~~ inconvenient for me to get my car in and leave it all day." Service Manager: "I know that sir, and I apologize. I promise to get it done first thing in the morning if you want to bring it back." At this point, Anam has a choice to make: persuade the Service manager to have someone fix his car by working overtime; take his car elsewhere; return the next day for the repair work; demand a loan car; shout louder, threaten to contract the Better Business Bureau: — Anam so far has expressed his anger without being aggressive toward the service manager. He was rightfully mad and told the manager so without downgrading him as a person. He might have responded aggressively, "You can take ~~the~~ that repair job and shove it," or "You damn S.B.B. better fix my car right now!" and stormed out. Either statement would likely inflame the service manager, further agitate Anam himself, and not accomplish much toward getting the work completed. Could he have handled it better? No Easy answers about anger — We keep looking for simple answers. We elect public

Officials who offer glib solutions to the incredibly complex issues of the day, as if the good guys and the bad guys could still be identified by the color of their hats. We try to oversimplify relationships between apparent "causes" and their "effects." We want the answers to "why do I behave that way?" to be simple. "Because you were toilet trained too early." "Because your family was dysfunctional." "Because you're a middle child." We search for effortless equations to "explain" the mysteries of the complex human organism. Anger is one of those phenomena which is an easy target for such simplistic psychology. It is variously characterized as "sinful" (and therefore to be avoided at all costs), "freeing" (and therefore to be expressed at all costs) and all of the options in between. Although there is considerable controversy among professionals who work in the anger field, there are some important points of agreement: (1) anger is a natural, normal, human emotion; (2) anger is not a style of behavior (although it is common to confuse emotions and behavior); (3) chronic anger can be a major health hazard; (4) we can — and should — learn to defuse most anger ~~as~~ even before it begins; (5) when we must express anger, we should learn to do so effectively toward resolution, not revenge. These five points give us a solid foundation from which to examine some of the popular myths about anger. Anger Myth #1: Anger is a Behavior. — Let's begin our exploration of anger myths by clearing up one widespread misconception: anger is not a behavior, it's a feeling. The confusion of angry feelings with aggressive behavior has made it difficult for many people to effectively handle this natural, universal, and useful human emotion. Some folks say, "I never get angry." We don't believe it! Everyone gets angry — that is, everyone experiences the feeling of anger. However, some people have learned to control themselves ~~to~~ ~~so~~ ~~that~~ ~~the~~ anger. By minimizing anger in your life, and developing nondestructive ways to deal with the anger you do experience, you can make aggressive actions unnecessary. Anger Myth #2: You should be afraid of your buried anger! Anger remains one of the most difficult emotions for many people to express. Our assertive behavior groups often lose members when assertive expression of anger becomes the topic. Many have "buried" their anger for years, and are terrified of the potential consequences should they well let it out. "I'd sooner suffer in silence than to hurt anyone," is the common, unfortunate plea, yet much pain in human relationships results from anger which is unresolved. Both persons suffer. The angry one silently fumes. The other person continues to behave in ways which are upsetting and wonders why the relationship is deteriorating. But the answer to dealing with long buried anger may not be what you think. It does not lie in pillow-pounding, or shouting at an empty chair, but rather in finding ways to resolve — within yourself or outside — the problem that caused the anger in the first place. Anger Myth #3: You're a Human Steam Kettle for many years, psychologists

and the general public believed the old Freudian myth that human emotions are like a "steam kettle." In this view, strong emotions build up inside us somewhere, and if we don't vent them somehow, they'll eventually explode. The popular expression of this was, "you need to get the feelings out!" The idea was that by expressing the anger, the feelings would be released and prevent health problems associated with "building up inside." Contemporary research has shown the concept to be false. We now know it doesn't work that way. What does happen is that we ~~experience~~ remember annoying events and our feelings of anger can be experienced again when these memories are tapped. There are important differences between a "steam kettle" of simmering emotion and a "memory bank" of stored experiences. A steam kettle, for example, needs only release of its pressure build-up; memories can be satisfied only by solving the problem somehow. Anger Myth #4 Venting is Good for your health - One of the most persistent points of disagreement among anger researchers has to do with the value of "venting" angry feelings. Many therapists favor the use of pillows, foam bats, and other "harmless" devices, or shouting at an empty chair, as tools for physical "release" of angry feelings. Others point to research which demonstrated that teaching people such means of expression strengthens the angry feelings, and teaches them to vent their feelings aggressively even at "unsafe" times (such as when the other person is present and a violent fight may ensue). We believe that the best evidence supports the latter view. Venting aggression is not psychologically healthy. Physical expression of hostility does nothing to solve the problem. Banging the table, stomping the floor, crying, striking at the air, hitting a pillow - all are devices for temporary expression of strong feelings without aggression toward another person. However, they are not effective methods for dealing with your anger. What's new, contrary to the popular myth, angry feelings are not "released" through aggressive acts. The result of pillow pounding, shouting ~~obsessives~~ ~~obsessives~~ ~~obsessives~~ - and yes, football or boxing - is that one simply learns ways to handle anger aggressively. A subset of the venting myth comes from the important work of Dr. Carol Tavris, a social psychologist whose studies of anger as a social phenomenon are widely recognized as accurate and authoritative. Among the myths Dr. Tavris has identified: Myth: Aggression is instructive catharsis for anger. Reality: Aggression is an acquired cathartic habit. Myth: Talking out anger gets rid of it: Vent expression can focus or even increase anger. Myth: Tantrums are healthy expressions of anger. Reality: Tantrums, if rewarded, teach the child a method of controlling others. Emotions are subject to the laws of behavior. If you reward it, it will happen again. Dr. Tavris' highly acclaimed, anger: The Misunderstood Emotion, is one of only two books on the subject that we can ~~recommend~~ recommend without reservation. Anger Myth #5. Anger needs to be expressed - In early editions of this book, over twenty years ago, we encouraged readers and our clients to try physical approaches

When learning how to express strong emotions, pounding a pillow; shouting ("No!") or "I'm really angry!" tug-a-war with a towel. Later research — to our dismay — showed that when people learned these techniques, they used them — in therapy or out — often destructively. If no pillow was at hand, they might pound the nearest person! So we shifted our emphasis to "non-destructive" verbal expression of anger, teaching folks to speak up without inhibition at injustice — real or perceived. But research on human emotions doesn't stand still. Now, we must once again respond to new evidence about anger.

This time it's medical science which has thrown us a curve and questioned some aspects of the "spontaneous expression" approach. The latest research comes from long-term studies of the effects of hostility on the heart. Anger Myth #6 Tell other people, but not the person you're angry with. All too often, people express anger, frustration or disappointments with another person by indirect, hurtful methods. If you want to change the behavior of the other person, these approaches are rarely successful. Newlyweds Mantha and John are a "classic" case. In the first few months of their marriage, Mantha discovered at least a dozen of John's habits that she disliked. Unfortunately for both, she was unable — or unwilling — to find the courage to confront John openly with her concerns. Mantha instead chose the "safe" way to express her dissatisfaction with John's behavior; she confided in her mother. Worse yet, not content with almost daily telephone conversations with mother about John's short comings, she also used family get-togethers as occasions to berate John before the rest of the family. This "see-how-bad-he-is" style — telling a third person (or persons) about your dislike of another — has disastrous effects on a relationship. John feels hurt, embarrassed, and hostile about Mantha's attack. He's angry that she didn't choose the privacy of their own relationship to tell him of her annoyances. He's not motivated to change his habits. Instead, he responds to her degressive approach with bitterness and a resolve to strike back by intensifying the very behaviors she would have him change. Had Mantha devoted herself directly by telling John her feelings, she would have created a good foundation for a cooperative effort to change both John's behavior and her ineffective response to it. If John had responded assertively early in the process he might have prevented the escalation of Mantha's attack, and avoided the bitterness and growing resentment. Instead, his determination to get revenge is sure to drive a further wedge into the relationship. John and Mantha seem sure bets for the divorce court. (Why Do I Get So Angry?) You'd probably like to know more about your own angry reactions to people and events. Here are some elements to look for as you answer that question for yourself. Your Genes. The data is not all in yet — indeed, it may never all be in — but the best evidence in

psychological science now suggests that about half of our personalities
is ~~genetically~~ genetically hardwired. That is, we're born with certain behavioural
predispositions. To some extent not yet fully understood, our "anger
thermostats" are among those inborn traits. This factor is one you can't
do much about, of course, but don't get discouraged. The others are largely
subject to your control. Your Environment - let's set the scene for anger.
Where do you get angry? Consider the temperature, pollution, weather. Were
you caught in traffic jam? Pushed around in a crowd? Waiting in a slow
line? Do you live under political oppression? Economic hardship? Are you
a member of a minority which is often treated unfairly? (Lots of folks
have good reasons to start the day angry.) Your health. Do you have
any significant disabilities? Are you fatigued much of the time? Under
tension? Do you eat a balanced nutritious diet? Have you had a
physical exam recently enough to be sure that your internal ~~chem~~ Chemistry
is right? Any of these factors can make it more likely that you will get
angry if the right situation comes along. Your attitudes and expectations -
Do you believe the world should treat you fairly? Is it important to you
to have people recognize your accomplishments? Do you have a strong sense
of justice? Are there certain ("right") ways things should be done? Rules
everybody should live by? Such attitudes, beliefs and expectations -
while very human - can set you up to get angry at the way the real
world treats you and others. Your job - Do you work with unreasonable
people? Are you happy in your personal and intimate relationships? Is
your work satisfying and rewarding? If you are out of a job, you may be
close to anger all the time. Spend some time thinking - and writing in your
log - about the anger in your life. Look for patterns. Pay special attention
to what triggers your anger and how you express it. Discovering the patterns
and targets of your anger are key to understanding - and dealing with -
your emotional response. Facts, Theories and Myths about Anger - On the
following page is a chart which summarizes some current notions about
anger, classified under three headings: facts - findings which are clearly
demonstrated by careful research, or are self-evident theories - ideas for
which there is some solid evidence, but which lack clear validation and
sometimes lead us astray; and myths - ideas which, despite their acceptance, have been ~~proved~~
proved wrong or which, despite their acceptance, have been proved wrong, or which appear
on the surface to be accurate but contain false assumptions.

FACTS

Anger is a feeling, with physiological components, not a mode of behaviour
Anger is universal among human beings

What really matters is resolving the issue. Thus, the method of anger expression
is important

Facts

- Venting of anger - catharsis - is of value only insofar as it sets the stage for resolution.
- Aggressive expression leads to further aggressive expression, not resolution.
- Anger is not a "steam kettle" phenomenon: it does not build up and finally explode.
- Most anger is directed toward those close to us, not strangers.
- Chronic hostility increases the risk of heart attack.
- Defusing anger is the healthiest way to deal with it.

Theories

- Shy people, depressed people, and suicides are expressing anger at themselves.
- Anger should always be contained until it can be expressed in a calm, rational manner.
- Men in our culture are able to express anger more easily than women.
- Women are generally inhibited in anger expression by their social conditioning in our culture.

Myths

- Venting (by yelling, pounding pillows, hitting with foam bats) "releases" anger and therefore "deals with" it.
- Anger should always be expressed spontaneously / immediately.
- Women are less angry than men.
- Some people never get angry.
- Anger is always a "secondary" emotion with another "real" feeling behind it.
- TV violence, active sports and/or competitive work "releases" anger.
- Aggressive behavior is instinctive in humans.
- Anger is always a destructive, sinful, undesirable emotion.
- Verbal expression of anger is always desirable.

Anger May Be Hazardous to your Health

For a quarter-century we've watched with interest and learned much from the work of California cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman on "Type A" behavior. Their early results suggested that hard-driving, ambitious, angry men - so-called "Type A" personalities - were significantly more heart attack prone than their "Type B" brethren - those whose style is more laid back, ~~not~~ relaxed, easy going. The concept was widely accepted, and ~~to~~ tens of thousands of

of men tried to convert themselves from Type A to Type B. Later research, however, failed to confirm the Type A hypothesis, and it lost respectability for a time. Recently, Type A is back, qualified by an important new finding from the heart patient studies. Seems it's not Type A behavior per se that ~~caused~~ caused heart problems but hostility (~~as measured by such well-established psychological tests as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory~~) which is the key factor in heart disease. Psychiatrist Redford Williams and his colleagues at Duke University have identified a "hostility syndrome" - a collection of additional and behavioral characteristics - which predicts heart disease with astonishing accuracy. The Duke hostility research, with a large number of patients, shows three major factors in toxic anger: cynical thoughts, angry feelings, and aggressive behavior. Incidentally, most of the heart research has studied men, but limited data on women show a similar pattern. Williams' book, *Anger Kills*, co-authored with his wife Virginia Williams. (This is the other book we recommend on anger.) Although the facts are not quite as dramatic as the title would suggest, the picture is not pretty. Chronic anger can be deadly. Colorado State University psychology professor Charles Cole is another researcher who has found a definite health risk for people who are chronically angry. Cole studied 50 heart patients and learned that the large blood vessels constricted - causing reduced blood flow, increased blood pressure, and risk of a heart attack - for some patients when they merely discussed subjects they were angry about. For the chronically angry - those who are angry most of the time - says Cole, the constriction of blood flow is ~~also~~ also chronic and heart attacks may be much more likely. So what does this new information mean to our use of assertive methods to express anger? Are we simply to "take a deep breath" and forget the feelings? Is it ever OK to Express anger? I'm confused. On the one hand you're saying, "It's not healthy to express anger. On the other, you say, 'You need to resolve your anger; don't let it become chronic.' Which is it? Do we show anger or not?" We warned you that ~~there~~ there are no simple answers. Human emotions are incredibly complex and there aren't any "one size fits all" ~~solutions~~ solutions. Here are some guidelines, however, and the rest of this chapter is devoted to helping you sort out the complexities. To begin our examination of healthy ways to respond to angry feelings, Williams and Williams offer a "Hostility Roadmap" (Does the matter worth my continued attention? "Am I justified?" "Do I have an effective response?") They're suggesting that, when you begin to feel angry, you take a moment to consider just how big a deal this really is, and how right you really are. In chapter 19 we've provided a detailed guide to choosing when to take assertive action. Then if you decide that your angry feelings must be expressed, do so assertively, without hurting someone else (physically or emotionally) in the process. Honest and spontaneous expression aimed at resolving

The disagreement can help to prevent ~~in~~ inappropriate and destructive anger, and may often achieve goals at the outset. Even when assertion doesn't gain what you're after, however, it still defuses the anger you might otherwise direct toward ~~yourself~~ yourself if you had done nothing. When you do choose to express your anger, one of the most constructive steps you can take is to accept responsibility for your own feelings. You feel the anger, and that doesn't make the other person "stupid," or "S.O.B.," or the cause of your feeling. The central objective of effective anger expression should be to achieve some resolution of the problem that caused the anger. Getting sets the stage. Working out the conflict with the other person, or within yourself, is the all-important step that makes the difference. That doesn't mean pounding a pillow until you are exhausted; it means working out some resolution of the issue yourself - through relaxation, forgiveness, attitude changes, negotiation, confrontation or psychotherapy. If you take action which doesn't help you to cope or to resolve the problem, your anger may actually increase, whether you've expressed it or not. So focus your energy on problem-solving actions. Work to resolve the issue through assertive negotiation of solutions with the person with whom you have been angry. If direct resolution is not possible, find satisfaction within yourself (perhaps with the aid of a therapist or trusted friend). In either event, don't stop by saying "I'm mad as hell!" follow through with... Don't take it too lightly, or too seriously. Learn what triggers it, teach yourself to "lighten up" in the face of situations that usually set you off and develop effective ways to deal with it when it comes. So what can I do about my anger? We'd like to offer you a simple, three-step method for dealing with anger in your life. We'd like to, but we can't. Anger is a complex phenomenon, and handling it is complex as well. Fortunately, however, there are some really helpful procedures which are of proven value. As it happens, they fall naturally within three general guidelines (1) minimize anger in your life (2) cope before you get angry; and (3) respond assertively when you get angry. Minimize anger in your life: Our first ten steps are borrowed from the Williams' recommendations in *Anger Kills*. (1) Improve your relationships with others through community service, tolerance, forgiveness, even caring for a pet (2) Adopt positive attitudes toward life through humor, religion, acting as if today is your last day (3) Avoid overstimulation from chemicals, work stress, noise, traffic (4) Listen to others. Practice trusting others (5) Have a confidant. Make a friend and talk regularly, even before you feel stress building (6) Laugh at yourself. You really are pretty funny, you know. (It goes with being human.) (7) Meditate. Calm yourself. Get in touch with your inner being. (8) Increase your empathy. Consider the possibility that the other person maybe have a really bad day.

(a) Be tolerant. Can you accept the infinite variety of human beings? (b) forgive
let go of your need to blame somebody for everything that goes wrong in
life. In the Williams' ten, we add two of our own to this section: (11) Work
toward resolution of problems with others in your life, not "victory"! (12) Keep
your life clean! Deal with crises when they arise, when you feel the feelings
not after hours/days/weeks of "stewing" about it. When you can't deal with it
immediately, arrange a specific time when you can and will! Cope. Before
you get angry - Anger is a natural, healthy, non-evil human emotion and
despite our best efforts to minimize its influence in our lives, all of us
will experience it from time to time, whether we express it or not. So,
in addition to the steps above, you'll want to be prepared before anger
comes: (13) Remember that you are responsible for your own feelings. You
can choose your emotional responses by the way you look at situations.
As psychologists Gary McKay and Don Dinkmeyer put it How you feel is
up to you. (14) Remember that anger and aggression are the same thing!
Anger is a feeling. Aggression is a style of behavior. Anger can be expressed
assertively - aggression is not the only alternative. (15) Get to know
yourself. Recognize the attitudes, environments, events, and behaviors
which trigger your anger. As one wise person suggested, "Find your own
buttons, so you'll know when they're pushed!" (16) Take some time to
examine the role anger is playing in your life. Make notes in your log
about what sets you up to get angry and what you'd like to do about
it. (17) Reason with yourself. (Another good idea from the Williams
Collection.) Recognize that your response will not change the other
person, you can only change yourself. (18) Deflect your cynical thoughts.
Williams suggest thought stopping, distraction, meditation. (19) Don't set
yourself up to get angry! If your temperature rises when you must
wait in a slow line (at the bank, in traffic), find alternate ways to
accomplish those tasks (bank by mail, find an other route to work, use
the time for problem solving) (20) learn to relax. Develop the skill of
relaxing yourself and learn to apply it when your anger is triggered. You
may wish to make this a step further by ~~desensitizing~~ desensitizing yourself
for handling your anger - invoking situations (21) Develop several coping strategies
physical exertion, "stress inoculation" statements, working out resolution
within yourself, and other procedures, such as those suggested by the
Williams and those we've noted in the box at the end of this chapter
(22) ~~Save~~ Save your anger for when it's important. Focus instead on
maintaining good relationships with others (23) Develop and practice
assertive ways to express your anger, so these methods will be available
to you when you need them. Follow the principles you've learned in
this book: be spontaneous when you can; don't allow resentment to build

State your anger directly; avoid sarcasm and innuendo; use honest, expressive language, let your posture, facial expression, gestures, voice tone convey your feelings; avoid name-calling, put-downs, physical attacks or one-upmanship, hostility; work toward resolution. Now you've developed a healthy foundation for dealing with angry feelings. Go on to the following section and get ready to handle your anger when it comes. Respond assertively when you get angry (24) Take a few moments to consider if this situation is really worth your time and energy and the possible consequences of expressing yourself. (25) Take a few more moments to decide if this situation is one you wish to work out with the other person, or one you will resolve within yourself. (26) Apply the coping strategies you developed in step 21 above and those listed at the end of the chapter if you decide to take action (27) Make some verbal expression of concern (assertively). ~~Consider~~ (28) (Schedule) time for working things out. If you are able to do so spontaneously, fine; if not, arrange a time (with the other person or with yourself) to deal with the issue later. (29) State your feelings directly. Use the assertive style you have learned in this (see #23 above), with appropriate nonverbal cues (if you are ~~genuinely~~ genuinely angry, a smile is inappropriate!). (30) Stick to specifics and to the present situation. Avoid generalizing. Don't dig up the entire history of the relationship! (31) Work toward resolution of the problem. Ultimately you'll only resolve your anger when you've done everything possible to resolve its cause. (I've gotta say something!) Here are a few verbal expressions others have found useful for expressing anger: "I'm very angry." "I'm getting really mad!" "I strongly disagree with you." "I get damn mad when you say that." "I'm very disturbed by this whole thing." "Stop bothering me." "That's not fair." "Don't do that." "That really pisses me off." "You have no right to do that." "I really don't like that." "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" When someone else is angry with you. Okay, now you know how to deal with your own anger. But one of the most important needs expressed by assertiveness trainers is for ways to deal with the anger of others. What can you do when someone is furious and directing their full hostility at you? Try these steps:

Allow the angry person to vent the strong feelings.
Respond only with acceptance at first ("I can see that you're really upset about this.")

Take a deep breath, and try to stay as calm as possible
Offer to discuss a solution later - giving the person time to cool off ("I think we both need some time to think about this. I'd like to talk with you about it... in an hour / ... tomorrow / ... next week.")

Take another deep breath
Arrange a specific time to pursue the matter
Keep in mind that no immediate solution is likely
~~Follow~~ Follow the conflict resolution strategies described below when you

meet to follow up. Constructive Resolution of Conflict - How can we improve the process of resolving angry conflict between people or groups? Most of the principles are parallel to the methods of assertiveness training presented throughout this book, and many overlap our discussion earlier in this chapter of ways to deal with anger. Conflict is more easily resolved when both parties want to work things out, of course. Here is a set of proven guidelines for those who are willing to try: ~~set~~

Act honestly and directly toward one another
Face the problem openly, rather than avoiding or hiding from it
Avoid personal attacks; stick to the issues
Emphasize points of agreement as a foundation for discussion
of points of argument
Employ a "rephrasing" style of communication, to be sure you understand each other. ("Let me see if I understand you correctly. Do you mean...")
Accept responsibility for your own feelings ("I am angry!") not ("You made me mad!")

Avoid a "win-lose" position. The attitude that "I am going to win, and you are going to lose" will more likely result in both losing. If you stay flexible, both can win - at least in part.

Gain the same information about the situation. Because perceptions so often differ, it helps to make everything explicit.

Develop goals which are basically compatible. If we both want to preserve the relationship more than to win, we have a better chance!

Clarify the actual needs of both parties in the situation. I probably don't need to win. I do need to gain some specific outcome (behavior change by you, more money), and to retain my self-respect.

Seek solutions rather than deciding who is to blame
Agree upon some means of negotiation or ~~exchange~~ exchange. I probably would agree to give on some points if you would give on some!

Negotiate towards a mutually acceptable compromise or simply agree to disagree

Almost everybody has trouble with anger, and there are no easy answers for dealing with this complex emotion. Let us summarize this discussion by respecting four key guidelines:

- Minimize the anger in your life
- Cope before you get angry
- Be assertive if you get angry
- Work to resolve conflict when it occurs