

The **Anger** **HABIT**TM **in** **RELATIONSHIPS**

**Advice and exercises on
dealing with:**

- ♦ **Angry partners**
- ♦ **Criticism**
- ♦ **Constant arguing**
- ♦ **Habitual unhappiness**
- ♦ **And more**

**A
Communication
Handbook for
Relationships,
Marriages
and Partnerships**

Carl Semmelroth, PhD

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To Will Crichton (1928–2002)
Philosopher, Poet, Teacher, and Friend

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: How to Use This Book	xiii
Chapter 1: Anger Is about Control	1
Chapter 2: Transaction and Interaction in Relationships ...	9
Exercise 2A: Finding Obligations that Are Not Real	
Obligations in Your Relationship	12
Exercise 2B: Increasing Interactive Conversation with	
Your Partner	17
Practice Record For Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3: Criticism Keeps Anger Warm and	
Relationships Cold	23
Exercise 3A: Turning Judgmental Thinking into Factual	
Thinking	27
Practice Record For Chapter 3	33
Chapter 4: Imaginary and Real Relationships	35
Exercise 4A: Examine Your Most Important Relationship,	
Imaginary and Real	39
Exercise 4B: Substituting Good Actions for Good Intentions ..	43
Practice Record For Chapter 4	46

Chapter 5: You Are Not Your Partner's Disciplinarian	47
Exercise 5A: Recognizing that Angry Feelings in Your Body Are Different from Angry Thoughts	51
Exercise 5B: What Does Your Angry Partner Want?	53
Exercise 5C: What Does Your Anger Want?	55
Practice Record For Chapter 5	59
Chapter 6: Self-Induced Unhappiness in Relationships	61
Exercise 6A: Getting Rid of Habitual Unhappiness	66
Exercise 6B: Shortening Your Laundry List of Hurts that Make You Unhappy	70
Practice Record For Chapter 6	75
Chapter 7: Dealing with Hot Anger	77
Exercise 7A: Dumb Things You Have Done When You Were Angry with Your Partner	80
Exercise 7B: Learning that Waiting Makes it Easier to Resolve Problems	83
Exercise 7C: Identifying the Slogans that Inflamm Your Anger	86
Practice Record For Chapter 7	89
Chapter 8: Replacing Self-Importance with Gratitude	91
Exercise 8A: Identifying My Self-Importance in My Major Relationships	95
Exercise 8B: Cultivating Gratitude in My Relationships . . .	100
Practice Record For Chapter 8	104

Chapter 9: Substituting Respect and Individuality for Anger and Secrecy	105
Exercise 9A: Ending Your Sneak Attempts at Individuality	110
Exercise 9B: Building Respect for One Another	115
Practice Record For Chapter 9	119
Chapter 10: Restoring Communication in Relationships ..	121
Exercise 10A: Replacing Argument Starters with Communication Starters	126
Exercise 10B: Understanding Why You Fight and How You Can Avoid Fighting	131
Practice Record For Chapter 10	138
Index	141
About the Author	145

Acknowledgments

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Finally, the dedication of this book to the Canadian philosopher Will Crichton is a small token of the large influence he has had on my thinking and my life going back to Ann Arbor days in the late 1950s. His philosophical system, presented in *Foundations for a New Civilization* is rich with implications for the foundations and fabric of psychology. His view of feelings as being sensations of our tendencies to behave in certain ways is the view taken of anger in this book as well as elsewhere in my writings. Will's death was a painful loss to me, as well as to my family. We miss him.

Introduction

How to Use

This Book

You need not have an awful relationship in order to benefit from at least some of the chapters in this book. It is intended for all partnerships.

The book's design makes it possible to use chapters independently. All readers do need to start with chapter 1. Then skip to those topics that concern your particular situation. If you are a therapist or workshop leader, you can easily design your own curriculum using chapters that fit the particular needs of your clients.

Making significant changes in relationships is even more difficult than changing individual behaviors. Our relationships are the parts of us that are the least in our control. Therefore, changing them requires commitments to doing things differently for a while before the changes we have made bear the fruits of satisfaction, increased calmness, and increased communication. Yes, it takes two to tango. But partners will never tango if each person waits for their partner to learn first.

Many exercises are supplied to help you apply what is being learned about relationships in general to your particular relationships. We strongly suggest that you keep a private notebook handy while working through the exercises. The more you actively respond and apply the material, the more likely you are to make lasting changes.

Chapter 1

Anger Is about

Control

Alice and John, unhappily married for many years, are veterans of marriage counseling and weekend relationship workshops. On a beautiful Saturday morning, John gets up thinking how great it would be to play golf. Alice interrupts his thoughts with the comment, "It's going to be a beautiful day." John wonders what Alice has in mind for him to do. Maybe clean the gutters? His mood turns to irritation.

This seemingly innocent beginning to a summer weekend is the prelude to yet another weekend of anger and bitter feelings. Breakfast will not be complete before a sullen John will criticize Alice, and then a hurt Alice will become silent. After many years of honest effort to improve their relationship, Alice and John feel even more isolated from each other than before. Anger, bitterness, and hurt are their frequent companions. But they both remember how it was in the beginning of their marriage, and they bravely maintain a painful search to regain their lost intimacy.

Neither Alice nor John realizes the destructive role that anger plays in their relationship. Neither recognizes the extent to which they depend on anger in their lives. They have been “taught” that it is healthy to express anger. They assume that other people must be good at “working through” their angry differences, even though they have never been able to do so. No one has explained to them what anger really is, how it works, and how destructive it is.

Unfortunately, they will not find peace and happiness with each other while maintaining their anger. At this point they have no notion that they are each responsible for the anger and bitterness they experience. They continue to assume, like most people, that their spouses “make” them angry.

Anger in marriages and relationships is all too common. We all know the odds of staying married are about the same as winning a coin flip. Statistically, a happy, satisfying relationship is even less of a possibility. We can no longer afford the fiction that the biggest anger problem is that people don’t express anger in a healthy way. The biggest anger problem is that there is too much of it and it is expressed all the time.

But haven’t people always been angry? Three generations ago, when most people stayed married, anger was probably as pervasive as it is now. What is the difference between then and now that results in relationships ending while they mostly survived in our grandparents’ time? The answer is that three generations ago anger made little difference in relationships because men were expected to control relationships anyway.

In order to understand this change, we need to understand what anger is and why we get angry. The feeling of anger is your awareness of your body preparing to physically attack someone. When we feel angry often, it means that we automatically,

through habit, choose threatening others as a way to solve our problems. It means that we tend to solve all our problems by getting control over others.

Anger is preparation to control by threatening to attack others.

Verbal threats and angry facial expressions often cause others to change their behaviors. Others act to avoid our angry expressions. Because they produce immediate changes in the behaviors of others, our angry expressions are rewarded and easily become habitual. Using control gained through anger can become a favorite method to solve problems.

It is important to realize that seeking more control by becoming angry is a method we use to solve problems. When it becomes our favorite method for dealing with most problems, we have the Anger Habit or the Control Habit. When we use anger to solve most problems we experience in a particular area of our lives, we have a Relationship Anger Habit or a Work Anger Habit or a Parenting Anger Habit. For example, an otherwise mild-mannered person may have only one way of dealing with relationship problems—seeking dominance in the relationship, or at least finding out who is dominant. Then the dominant person gets to call the shots. This is the wolf-pack solution to all relationship problems. The “top dog” threatens, and the others fall in line.

We need to understand what anger is and why we get angry.

Anger is about solving problems of a certain kind by gaining control.

Now we can see why marriages and relationships in general are in such trouble today. The serious introduction of an expectation of

equality in relationships has changed anger from a useful tool for male-dominated or male-role-dominated relationships into a poison for equality-based relationships. Yes, both men and women used to try for control in relationships. Women used threats—such as withdrawal of affection, hurt feelings, and inattention to servile tasks—in a struggle for control with their husbands. However, men held the trump cards: economic and legal status that allowed men total control over the welfare of other members of the family. As undesirable as male domination was, it preserved the marriage, just as alpha individuals (established dominant individuals) preserve a group of wolves or chimpanzees. Unlike marriages, wolf packs stay together. Men used to hold the biggest stick in battles for control, therefore anger didn't end relationships.

What could women who were in angry adversarial relationships do? They had fewer options for avoiding their husbands' anger-enforced control than their children had. Their major coping mechanisms were covert counterattack techniques, such as displays of unhappiness and hurt feelings or living in submissive "love my master who takes care of me" relationships.

Women today, by and large, expect to be equal partners in relationships. Equality in relationships is incompatible with control by either member. Because anger is about control, not equality, relationships cannot easily survive anger.

Equality in loving relationships requires voluntary association.

We are in the middle of an important revolution. Just as humankind has struggled to build political institutions that free individuals, today's couples are struggling to build the cultural institutions of marriage and couple relationships on a foundation of freedom. As we substitute voluntary association for controlled association, we struggle to leave behind the ugly trappings of con-

trol that made marriage work when it was a male-controlled institution. The simple fact is that loving and intimate relationships between equals must be voluntary.

Anger means attempts to control, and this erases equality. One person in control requires that another must forgo control of his or her own behavior. Equality is driven out. Freedom is driven out. And those things that can only be given freely—love and intimacy—are driven out.

It isn't a matter of learning to express anger "appropriately." There can be no appropriate use of attempted control among equals, except when it is justified by a broken promise or agreement. And when broken promises and agreements occur in relationships, it is the breaking of those agreements, not anger, that troubles the relationship. When one person is unfaithful in a relationship that has agreed on monogamy, anger is an attempt to enforce the broken contract. It would be perverse to think of the partner's angry response as inappropriate, assuming it falls somewhat short of homicide. But is anger necessary and natural?

The need to express anger lies in the idea that unexpressed anger will build up and explode. Confronting and communicating are often recommended as ways to avoid this problem. If you were a hydraulic machine, and anger was a hydraulic liquid that built up pressure when it had no place to go, then, yes, you would need to find some way to "let off" the pressure. But anger is not like pressure in a steam engine or hydraulic liquid in a hose. Anger is a set of behaviors. And unfortunately, many of those behaviors are habits.

Ask yourself: Do other sets of behavior—such as being pleasant to people or acting in a loving way toward people or laughing with others—build up like steam when you don't perform them for a while? Aren't you even less likely to be pleasant to others if you haven't been pleasant for a while? Doesn't it really work the other way around? That is, if you express love often or joy often or laugh a lot, aren't you

even more likely to keep on doing so in the future? Anger works that way too. The more you do it, the more likely you are to do it.

Expressing anger doesn't decrease anger; quite the contrary, it increases it.

Sometimes people smother their anger. This amounts to acting and feeling like someone who is subordinate to and less important than others. Often, people who smother anger are treated so badly that they break out of the submissive stance and "let someone have it." In the short run, this can be good for a relationship. It sets the other person back on their heels and for a time there is an understanding that "you don't tread on me." However, in the long run, these explosions, or "expressions," perpetuate the feeling that the relationship is basically adversarial and one has to have good fighting skills to maintain it. This adversarial attitude will eventually drive out any feeling of voluntary living and loving together.

Feeling angry means that you, through habit, have chosen attack and control as your problem-solving tool. Having a problem with your anger means that you use attack and control to solve many problems in your life. Choosing other ways to solve problems does not require smothering anger or expressing anger. It just means you no longer automatically reach for that one tool, attack, to solve your problems.

This book teaches alternative ways for solving problems that arise in relationships, ways that do not require attacking or preparing to attack your partner. If love and intimacy are going to be preserved in your relationships, then the relationship must feel free to both of you. Love and intimacy cannot be lassoed and tied up. Force kills them. Control kills them. Anger kills them.

This book guides you through the learning of new habits for the solution of problems that you commonly "solve" with anger. Learning alternatives to anger, other than smothering it or express-

ing it, reduces its presence in your relationships and helps preserve the sense of freedom and equality necessary for continued loving and caring.

Your reward for working to reduce anger in your relationships is much greater than just reducing “blowups” or even stopping the destructive and irrational behaviors that accompany anger. These are worthy, important, and satisfying goals of anger management.

But this book guides you toward much more than the management or control of your anger.

Anger reduces your sense of freedom. It makes communication difficult, if not impossible, and without communication, relationships wither on the vine. Anger impairs your intelligence. It leads your relationships into a perpetual desire to either control or to escape control. It takes you farther and farther from your desire, an intimate and loving connection with another human being.

The rewards for giving up the anger habit in your relationships are a calm mind, a sense of freedom, better communication with another person, release from the quest for power, and the comfort and vitality that come with a life that encourages each other, rather than a life bent on controlling each other.

Thirty years of counseling couples has taught me that civilization has not yet truly come to the family. Patterns of family interaction that individuals bring to marriage remain those based on adversarial living. The problems of adversaries are resolved only by power and control. Individuals enter their important relationships with the ideal of equality, but come to them equipped with weapons, armor, and the anger habit. Happy and lasting relationships require voluntary cooperation, freedom of association, respect for one another, and keeping of agreements; in other words, good relationships require civilized behavior in the home.

It is important for you to complete the exercises contained in each chapter in order to achieve these goals. Just understanding

your anger habit will not change it. It takes practice to develop a new attitude—an attitude of problem solving in place of controlling and attacking. Examples of “answers” are included with every exercise as a guide for your own written responses. Sometimes it helps to get started by copying one of the examples and letting it become yours as you write.

It will also be helpful for you to find a friend, counselor, or family member with whom you can discuss issues that arise as you work through the lessons. If you are using the book in an anger management class or group, the group will supply the opportunity to discuss issues as they occur.

Finally, as you work through the chapters in this guidebook, you will find advice on how to keep a record of your successes at changing the way you deal with problems. Examples are provided, but you will need a diary or private notebook to keep a record of your progress. It is important to recognize and record your successes. They will help you sustain your efforts and serve as models for you to continue solving problems without resorting to the anger habit.

Chapter 2

Transaction and Interaction in Relationships

Sue's striking blue eyes glisten and then moisten as Tom's deep voice gets even deeper. She realizes that he's on his way to asking her to date exclusively for a while. She's thrilled, but a little surprised. Tom has made a big thing of his independence and has repeatedly cautioned her that he is not a "one-woman" man. He said he just wants to be friends and have someone to do things with. Sue doesn't hesitate to hug Tom and tell him she wants the same thing he does.

On a Wednesday, a month later, Sue sits at work but her mind is elsewhere. She hasn't heard from Tom since last Sunday. They usually talk every day. By this time in the week they usually have the weekend planned. Sue knows Tom doesn't like to be called at work, but she can't stand it anymore and dials his work number. Someone (female) answers, and after a long wait Tom picks up the phone.

“I’m sorry to call you at work, but I was worried.”

Tom speaks evenly but with unmistakable irritation, “What do you mean worried? I’m okay. I’ve just been busy.”

Sue sets her jaw and her voice goes cold and hard in a way that Tom has never heard before. “Sorry to bother you.” She hangs up carefully.

That evening Tom is waiting at Sue’s door when she gets home.

“What do you want?” she says. “I thought you were busy.”

“Oh come on, Sue. I’m sorry if I did something wrong, but I don’t see what the big deal is.”

The voice that Tom heard earlier on the phone comes back. With ice crystals dripping from every word, Sue says, “It’s okay, Tom. Don’t worry about it. I’m the one who is at fault. I should have known what you’re like. You told me, for cripes’ sake. I was stupid enough to think I meant something to you. But as you said right at the beginning, you just want someone to do things with.”

Sue and Tom battle for half the night but end up in each other’s arms. This is the first of countless fights they will have over the next several years. What happened to their good relationship?

Tom and Sue, like many couples, start out with a small—but important—misunderstanding. And, as the saying goes, a small mistake in the beginning is a large one in the end.

Tom and Sue began their relationship by mixing up their agreements with their expectations. When they said they would “go together,” they made an agreement. That agreement was exactly like a contract. Sue said she would not go out with other men in exchange for Tom’s agreement not to go out with other women. They set up an exclusive dating arrangement.

In the course of spending time together, Tom and Sue got into a rhythm. They went out almost every Friday and Saturday night.

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