

THE ANGER WORKBOOK



*Understanding the anger you carry —
and the anger you live with.*

—
For the person who gets angry,
and the person who is always
on the receiving end.



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A note from me to you

If anger is the thing you carry, none of this is written to shame you. And if anger is the thing that lands on you, none of it is written to ask you to absorb more.

You're both here for a reason. Not because these two experiences are the same—they aren't—but because there is something each of you can understand better by considering what it is like on the other side.

When we're the one who is angry, we often don't see what our anger is doing to the people around us. In the moment, we're usually focused on what is happening inside us. We may feel hurt, frustrated, threatened, misunderstood, or overwhelmed. The anger takes over, and we react before we have had a chance to think about what our reaction might do to someone else.

Then the anger passes, and we have to live with what happened. We may regret what we said or how we behaved. We may feel guilty. We may wonder why we reacted so strongly to something that, afterwards, seems much smaller than it felt at the time.

When we're the one the anger is directed towards, the experience is very different. A parent's anger. A partner's. A child's. You may have learned to pay close attention to other people's moods. You notice the tone of their voice, their expression, the way they walk into a room. You may find yourself thinking carefully about what to say or do because you're trying to avoid another angry reaction.

And after enough of this, it can become difficult not to make the anger about you. You start asking yourself what you did wrong. You may believe that if you were more careful, more understanding, or simply did things differently, perhaps the anger wouldn't happen.

Neither experience is simple.

If you carry the anger, you may be struggling with something inside you that you don't fully understand yet. If you receive the anger, you may have spent years trying to understand someone else while losing touch with what their anger has been doing to you.

Anger is a human emotion. We all feel it. But what we do with it matters.

Anger can tell us that something is wrong. We may be hurt, frightened, frustrated, misunderstood, or feel that something important has been taken away from us. Sometimes there is something underneath the anger: shame, helplessness, or a need that has gone unmet for a long time.

Understanding what is underneath anger can help us understand why it is there. But understanding it is not the same as excusing what someone does with it.

If you are the one carrying the anger, you are responsible for what you do with it. Your feelings may have a reason, but that reason does not give you permission to hurt someone else.

And if you are the one receiving someone else's anger, understanding what may be underneath their reaction does not mean you have to accept being hurt by it. You can have compassion for what someone is carrying and still recognise that their behaviour is not okay.

I know something about both sides of this myself.

I grew up with a father who struggled with alcoholism and bipolar disorder, and home could be frightening and unpredictable. I learned very early to watch closely. I listened for the sound of the door and paid attention to his mood before I knew what kind of evening it was going to be. I learned to make myself small and useful. I tried to manage his mood and prevent things from getting worse. That kind of childhood can teach you to believe that someone else's anger is your responsibility. It took me a long time to understand that it never was. My mother's anger was different, but I learned to pay attention to that too. Later, in a relationship of my own, I found myself doing much of the same thing again.

I've also been the person who was angry. There were times, particularly when I was younger, when my reaction was much bigger than what was actually happening. Someone might make a suggestion or ask me something in a particular way, and I would feel an anger that seemed far greater than the situation warranted and for a long time, I didn't understand why.

Eventually I began to see that I wasn't always responding to what the other person was actually saying. A suggestion could feel like a criticism. A question could feel like an accusation. Being corrected could feel like being told that I had done something wrong. Those meanings weren't necessarily coming from the person in front of me. They were connected to much earlier experiences. Underneath the anger there was often something else. Hurt. Fear. Shame. Sometimes a need that I didn't know how to express.

Sometimes our reaction is much bigger than what is actually happening in the moment. Often, that reaction has less to do with what is happening now than we realise.

If you carry the anger, you may already have plenty of understanding for the person you have hurt. You may think about what they must have felt, what you wish you had done differently, and how much you regret your behaviour.

What you may not have is much compassion for yourself. Instead, shame can take over. You may tell yourself that because you have caused harm, you are a bad person. You may believe that being kind to yourself would mean making excuses for what you have done, it doesn't.

Self-compassion does not mean pretending that the harm didn't happen. It doesn't mean avoiding responsibility or deciding that your behaviour was acceptable. It means being able to say, I caused harm, without also saying, and therefore I am worthless.

Those are two very different statements. The first allows you to take responsibility and make changes. The second keeps you stuck in shame.

If you're the one the anger lands on, self-compassion can look different. You may already spend a great deal of time thinking about the other person. You understand their stress. You know what they have been through. You think about their childhood, their pressures, their reasons for reacting the way they do. You may even find yourself doing this while you are still upset. What can be much harder is turning that same understanding towards yourself.

You may not notice how tense you have become. How carefully you are choosing your words. How much energy you are spending watching the other person's mood. You may have become so used to managing the situation that you no longer stop to ask yourself what you need.

Self-compassion means noticing that too. It means recognising that what is happening to you matters, even when you understand why the other person is behaving the way they are. This is why self-compassion runs through this book. Not because compassion means avoiding responsibility or accepting

behaviour that hurts us, but because shame and self-criticism rarely help us understand what is happening or change it.

There are three parts to self-compassion. The psychologist Kristin Neff, whose research shaped most of what we now understand about it, calls them self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-kindness is the tone you use with yourself when something has gone wrong. Most of us speak to ourselves at those moments in a way we would never speak to anyone we cared about.

Common humanity is remembering that you are not the only one. Whatever has happened in your relationship, and whatever you have done or had done to you, other people are living something like it right now. Shame tells us we are the exception. We almost never are.

Mindfulness, here, means being present with what is actually happening rather than deciding in advance what it is. It means slowing everything down enough to find out, and not judging what you find while you are still finding it. The breath is usually the quickest way to do that, and the easiest thing to forget in the moment.

If you carry anger, you need compassion for yourself as well as accountability for your actions.

If you receive anger, you need compassion for yourself as well as understanding for the person who is angry.

And if you have been on both sides, as I have, you may need to learn both at the same time.

Whichever side of anger you recognise yourself in, I want you to know that your experience matters. There is usually more going on than what we see on the surface, and understanding that can change the way we respond—to ourselves and to each other.

Before you begin

This workbook is written for two people.

You may be the one who carries anger you can't always stop in time, watched it arrive faster than you could stop it, heard yourself say things you didn't mean, and then had to live alongside the wreckage of them. Who carries a shame about what you rarely admit to anyone.

Or you may be the one anger lands on. A parent's, a partner's, a child's. Who has learned to read a room before entering it, and who has come to feel that you're somehow the problem, because you so often seem to be the cause.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling.

Because this book is written for two readers, some passages are marked for the person who carries anger, and some for the person on the receiving end. The exercises are marked the same way, and some are for both.

Work through the ones meant for you, but read the others too. Seeing the experience from the other side is much of the point.

A note before you begin, anger sits close to some tender things, old hurt, fear, shame. If something feels like too much, set it down and come back when you're ready.

Before you go any further

Some of what this book describes is difficult. Some of it is not safe, and the difference between those two matters more than anything else in these pages.

If there is violence in your relationship, or the threat of it. If you are afraid for your safety, or your children's. If anger is being used to control where you go, what you spend, or who you see. That is abuse, and it is not something to be worked through with a workbook.

Section 8 speaks to this directly, and you do not need to read the rest of the book first. Please go there now.

And if you recognise yourself there later rather than now, which happens often, the same thing applies. Go at whatever point you recognise it.

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SECTION 1

What anger actually is

Understanding what anger is trying to tell us

Many of us grew up learning how to cope with anger without ever learning much about what anger actually is. We may have learned that anger is dangerous, shameful, or something that needs to be controlled. Perhaps it wasn't safe to show anger, or even to feel it.

For others, anger may have been the only emotion that got a response. Sadness was ignored. Fear was dismissed. Asking for something didn't work. But anger got people's attention, so we developed different ways of coping with it. We learned to push it down, express it loudly, avoid it, or turn it towards ourselves. Sometimes we learned several of these ways, depending on the situation and who we were with.

Anger is a normal human emotion. Feeling angry does not mean that something is wrong with you. But what we do with our anger matters, especially when another person is involved.

What anger is for

At its root, anger is a signal that something is wrong, and it often arrives before we have had time to think about what is happening. Sometimes it signals danger. Anger and fear are closely connected, and both can arise when we feel threatened. Fear may prepare us to get away from something. Anger can prepare us to face it or protect ourselves.

That is why anger can feel so physical. Your heart may beat faster. Your muscles may tighten. You may feel hot, restless, or ready to act. Your body is preparing you to respond. At other times, anger tells you that a boundary has been crossed. You may suddenly realise that someone is speaking to you in a way that isn't okay, that you are being treated unfairly, or that something has happened that you don't accept. Anger can help you recognise that something matters. It can also give you the energy to do something about it.

Standing up for yourself isn't always comfortable. Saying no. Saying, "That isn't acceptable to me." Saying, "I don't want this to happen again." These things can be difficult, particularly if you grew up learning that other people's feelings mattered more than your own. You may have learned to distrust your anger because you were afraid of becoming like someone else who used anger to hurt people. Or perhaps being angry was treated as evidence that you were difficult, selfish, or unlovable.

But there is a difference between feeling anger and using anger to hurt someone. You can feel angry and still speak respectfully. Anger can be present while you set a boundary without shouting. You can also decide to leave a situation rather than allowing it to escalate.

This is the relationship with anger I want to explore in this book. Not getting rid of anger. Not acting on every angry feeling. Learning to recognise what the anger is telling you and deciding what you want to do with it.

Learning another way to respond

Many of us learned only two ways of dealing with anger: hold it in or let it out.

Holding it in can mean swallowing what you want to say because you're afraid of being wrong, hurting someone, causing conflict, or being seen as too much. Letting it out without stopping to understand what is happening can take things in the opposite direction. The anger may come out more strongly than you intended. You might shout, criticise, blame, or say things you later regret.

There is another option.

We can recognise that we are angry without immediately acting on it. That might mean saying what isn't okay, asking for what we need, or setting a boundary. We might need to take some time before responding, or decide that a conversation needs to stop because it has become harmful. The anger is still there. What changes is what we do with it.

There were times when I held back from standing up for myself because I was afraid of hurting someone, or of discovering that I was the one who was wrong. Looking back, I can see that I didn't need to swallow my anger, and I didn't need to direct it at someone else either. I needed to trust myself enough to say what I was feeling and what I needed.

I have also learned that anger can help me when someone else's anger is directed at me. It can tell me that I don't have to stay in a conversation that has become hurtful. I can say no. I can walk away. And I can learn that walking away does not mean I have done something wrong. That last part took me longer to learn than the walking away did.

The anger we turn towards ourselves

There is another way anger can show up, and it can be easy to miss because nobody else may see it. Sometimes we turn the anger towards ourselves. We replay the conversation. We go over what we said and what we should have said. We call ourselves stupid, difficult, selfish, too much, or any number of things we would never say to someone else. The anger that we couldn't express towards another person can become self-criticism instead. This matters because we may think we are simply reflecting on what happened, when actually we are attacking ourselves.

Self-compassion asks us to notice that difference. It doesn't mean deciding that we did everything right. It means being able to look honestly at our behaviour without turning it into a judgement about our entire worth as a person.

What if you're right?

There may be a thought sitting alongside all of this.

But what if I'm right? What if what happened really was unfair? What if someone genuinely crossed a line? What if your anger is completely justified?

You may well be right. I'm not going to try to talk you out of that. Sometimes people do treat us unfairly. Someone may genuinely have been unkind or disrespectful. A boundary may really have been crossed. But being right about what happened doesn't answer every question.

You can be right about the problem and still respond in a way that causes harm. You can have a legitimate reason to be angry and still say something that damages a relationship. You can win an argument and still end up further away from the person you wanted to understand you. These are separate things. Being

right tells you that you had a reason to be angry. It doesn't tell you what to do with that anger. And if you find yourself being right about the same problem again and again, but nothing changes, it may be worth asking whether the way you're expressing the anger is actually helping.

There is something else that can make this difficult. When you're very angry, you can feel completely certain that you're right. Not I think I'm right, but I know I'm right. That certainty is part of the experience of being highly activated. It can happen whether or not your interpretation of the situation is accurate. So feeling certain doesn't prove that you're right. It doesn't prove that you're wrong either. It simply means that, in that moment, you feel very certain.

If you're reading this from the other side, your experience may be very different. You may have been told so often that you're too sensitive, that you're overreacting, or that you always make things difficult, that you've stopped trusting your own judgement. You may question yourself even when something genuinely isn't okay. If that's where you find yourself, your anger is information too. You don't have to dismiss it simply because someone else tells you that you shouldn't feel it.

When anger is bigger than the moment

Sometimes anger is a fairly direct response to what is happening. Something happens, you recognise that it isn't okay, and you feel angry. But sometimes your reaction is much bigger than what is happening in front of you. That is the anger I want us to understand more carefully. It may be the anger that damages the people you love. Or, on the other side, it may be the tension and fear that begin before anything has actually happened. The watching, anticipating, and preparing for someone else's reaction.

In both cases, the response is larger than the present situation. That doesn't automatically mean that you're wrong or that the situation isn't serious. There are other things that can make anger more intense too. You're more likely to react strongly when you're exhausted, in pain, unwell, or under significant stress. Alcohol and other substances can also affect how you respond. And there are times when anger is an appropriate response to something that genuinely should not be tolerated. That is different from a pattern where the intensity of the reaction repeatedly seems much greater than what is happening in the moment.

What's underneath it

One of the most useful things I've learned about anger is that it is often not the first emotion we experience. Something more vulnerable may have happened first, often so quickly that we don't notice it. It might be hurt — feeling dismissed, rejected, let down, or wounded in some way. It might be fear, perhaps around losing something important, being rejected, losing control, or being hurt. Shame can be underneath it too. That feeling of being exposed, judged, or somehow not good enough. Sometimes it is helplessness. We want something to change and don't know how to make that happen. And sometimes there is a need underneath the anger that hasn't been met: for respect, closeness, rest, recognition, or safety.

These feelings can leave us feeling vulnerable, and anger can feel much easier to tolerate. It can give us a sense of strength or control when what we were feeling underneath it was much more difficult. It can feel easier to be furious than to be frightened. None of this usually happens consciously. The shift from hurt to anger can happen very quickly. By the time you recognise that you're angry, the feeling underneath it may

already be difficult to see. That doesn't mean the anger isn't real. It means there may be more to understand.

Why this matters for both of you

If you're the one carrying the anger, your anger is information. It isn't something you have to obey, and it isn't something you have to be ashamed of. It is something you can become curious about. Instead of asking only, What am I angry about?, it can be useful to ask, What was I feeling just before the anger came? That question can help you understand your reactions differently.

If you're the one receiving the anger, understanding what may be underneath another person's reaction can also be useful. Their anger may have more to do with what is happening inside them than with the truth about you. That doesn't make their behaviour acceptable. It doesn't mean you have to absorb it, excuse it, or stay where you are being hurt. But it may help you separate their reaction from your worth. Both experiences matter, but they are not the same experience. One person is trying to understand what happens inside when anger takes over. The other may be trying to understand what belongs to them and what belongs to the person who is angry with them.

Understanding the anger is not the same as accepting the behaviour. And understanding where someone else's anger comes from does not mean taking responsibility for it.

Exercise 1 Swallowed, thrown, or spoken

For both of you - Most of us have a default. Not a choice we make, but the thing that tends to happen before we've decided anything.

Think back over the last few weeks, to the moments when something in you rose up. It doesn't need to have been a large moment. A tone you didn't like, a request that felt unfair, being interrupted, being overlooked.

What tended to happen next?

Did it get swallowed, pushed down, talked yourself out of, stored away, explained to yourself as not worth making a fuss about?

Did it come out with more force than the moment called for, in volume, in words, in a hardening or a silence meant to be felt?

Or was there anything that got spoken clearly, at the time, without heat, and without being taken back afterwards?

Most of us do all three, in different proportions and with different people. So notice the proportions. And notice whether they change depending on who is in the room.

One thing worth adding - If you found a moment where it was spoken, however small, stay with that one a little longer. What was different about it? What made it possible that time?

Those are the moments this book is trying to give you more of, and they're much easier to build on than the ones that went wrong.

SECTION 2

Where these reactions were learned

Both of you brought something into this that was formed long before you met

This section is for both of you.

Whether you are the one who carries the anger or the one who finds yourself on the receiving end of it, you didn't arrive in your relationships with a completely blank slate.

Long before we have adult relationships, we are learning what relationships feel like. We are learning what happens when we are upset, when we say no, when we make a mistake, when someone is disappointed in us, and when we need comfort.

Much of that learning happens through the nervous system. That may sound quite technical, but it is actually very simple. Our nervous system is constantly taking in information about whether we are safe, whether we need to protect ourselves, and what we need to do to cope with what is happening around us. When something happens repeatedly, especially when we are young, our nervous system learns from it.

Imagine a child who regularly hears a parent's voice change before an angry outburst. The child may begin to notice that change immediately: the tone, the silence beforehand, the footsteps, the sound of a door closing. The body starts preparing before the child has consciously worked out what is happening. The stomach tightens. The heart beats faster. The child becomes very still or starts trying to make things right. That response can become familiar. Years later, the adult may still find their body reacting to a particular tone of voice before they have had time to think about what was actually said.

This is one of the reasons our reactions can sometimes seem confusing. We may know, intellectually, that we are no longer that child and that the situation is different. Our nervous system may not have caught up yet.

Trauma isn't always what we think it is

There is a word that often carries a lot of weight, and I want to make it a little easier to understand.

Trauma.

Many of us hear that word and immediately think of something extreme: war, assault, a serious accident, or another experience that is obviously overwhelming. If our childhood didn't look like that, we may assume trauma has nothing to do with us.

But trauma isn't only about how dramatic an event looks from the outside. It also has to do with what the experience was like for us internally, and whether we had enough safety and support to process what happened. A child who becomes frightened and is comforted by a safe adult has a very different experience from a child who becomes frightened and has to manage that fear alone.

When we are young, we don't have the emotional or physical capacity of an adult. We depend on the adults around us to help us understand what is happening and to help our nervous system settle

afterwards. When that doesn't happen, our nervous system may stay prepared for something similar to happen again. And we adapt.

The large and the small of it

There are childhood experiences that most of us would immediately recognise as harmful. Violence in the home. Abuse. The death of a parent. A serious accident or illness. Growing up around addiction, or around a parent whose moods made home frightening or unpredictable. These experiences can have a profound effect on a developing nervous system.

But there is another kind of experience that is quieter and much harder to identify. Perhaps your feelings were treated as inconvenient, so you learned not to show very much. Maybe you were regularly told that you were too sensitive. You may have had a parent who loved you but was emotionally unavailable, leaving you unsure whether it was safe to need comfort or ask for help. Perhaps you were corrected far more often than you were praised, so you became very good at finding fault with yourself before anyone else could. You may have learned that keeping everyone happy was safer than expressing what you actually felt. Or perhaps you were loved by a parent who couldn't tolerate your anger, so you learned that being a good child meant keeping that part of yourself quiet.

None of these experiences necessarily looks dramatic.

You may even look back and describe your childhood as fine. But a childhood doesn't have to be obviously traumatic for it to shape the way your nervous system responds to relationships. The question isn't whether your childhood was bad enough. The question is what you learned from it.

If you learned to use anger

For some of us, anger became a way of protecting ourselves. Perhaps you were often criticised, controlled, humiliated, or made to feel powerless. If there was no safe way to object, anger may have been one of the few ways you could feel strong. Perhaps anger was the emotion that got a response. Sadness didn't change anything. Fear was dismissed. Quiet requests went unheard. But anger made the adults around you pay attention. If that happened often enough, your nervous system could learn that anger works. You don't consciously decide this as a child. Your body simply learns from experience. If raising your voice was followed by someone finally listening, your system may have connected the two: I have to get louder before I will be heard.

That learning can stay with us.

Years later, a relatively ordinary disagreement may trigger a response that feels much bigger than the situation itself. You may not realise that your nervous system has interpreted the disagreement as another moment in which you are being ignored, controlled, criticised, or dismissed. Underneath the anger may be the old feeling of not being heard.

There is another way this can happen, and it looks quite different from the outside. Sometimes anger didn't work at all. There was no room for it. Being angry as a child might have meant punishment, or a withdrawal of affection, or making a frightening situation worse, so the anger had nowhere to go. That doesn't mean it went away. It waited. And years later it can arrive somewhere else entirely, in a situation

that has very little to do with where it began. This is often what is happening when a reaction is far bigger than the moment that set it off. Some of it belongs to now. A good deal of it is much older.

That is nearer to what happened to me. There was never any space for my anger growing up, so none of it was expressed, and what came out years later in my own relationships had been waiting a very long time. It never felt like losing control. It felt like defending myself. Something was finally being said, and for a moment it seemed as though I was being heard at last. There was a power in it I didn't have anywhere else. None of that was a decision, my nervous system had learned it long before. And in those brief moments it did feel like it worked. The price came afterwards, and it was high. Shame first, then the loneliness, which lasted longer. Someone going quiet because they are alarmed isn't the same as someone listening. I was no more heard at the end of it than I had been at the start.

If you learned to protect yourself from anger

The learning can go in the opposite direction. Perhaps anger in your childhood was frightening. You learned to watch for changes in mood, listen carefully to someone's tone of voice, and notice the smallest signs that an outburst might be coming. You may have learned not to argue. Not to say no, not to make things worse, or to stand up for yourself. You may have become very good at apologising, explaining, smoothing things over, or making yourself smaller when someone was angry. That can become a way of staying safe.

My mother's angry outbursts towards me could sometimes be terrifying when I was growing up. I learned that the safest thing was to shut down. I didn't stand up for myself. I became very good at going quiet and getting through the moment. At the time, that response made sense. I was a child, and I couldn't change what was happening. My nervous system found a way to protect me. The difficulty was that the response didn't disappear when I grew up.

I carried it into later relationships. When someone became angry with me, my instinct was still to shut down rather than speak up for myself. I could understand what was happening intellectually, but my body already knew what it had learned to do. It took me a long time to recognise that I wasn't simply being passive or lacking confidence. Somewhere along the way, I had developed a belief I wasn't even aware of: that I didn't really have the right to stand up for myself. Other people's feelings seemed to matter more than mine, and keeping the peace felt safer than saying what I needed or what wasn't okay. That distinction mattered, because once I understood the response, I could begin to change it.

Why these two patterns can meet each other

Both of those were true of me, which is more common than it sounds. This is where the two sides of anger can become particularly complicated.

Imagine one person who learned, early in life, that being heard required becoming louder. Now imagine another who learned that another person's anger meant danger and that staying quiet was the safest response. Those two nervous systems can meet in an adult relationship and very quickly activate each other. One person becomes frustrated because they don't feel heard and gets louder. The other hears the raised voice and begins to shut down. The first person experiences the shutting down as further evidence that they aren't being listened to, so they become even more forceful. The second experiences the increased anger as confirmation that it isn't safe to speak, so they withdraw further. Neither person

necessarily understands what is happening in that moment. Both are responding to what their nervous systems have learned.

This doesn't mean the behaviour is acceptable. It doesn't mean the person who becomes angry is not responsible for how they behave, and it doesn't mean the person receiving the anger has to tolerate it. It does mean that there may be more happening between you than the argument you are having.

What we learned to do

As children, we adapt to what we experience. For some of us, anger became a way of feeling powerful when we had felt powerless. For others, staying quiet became the safest option when someone else's anger felt frightening. Some of us became very good at keeping everyone happy, watching for what others needed and adjusting ourselves accordingly. Others learned to be careful and controlled, checking everything they said or did in the hope of avoiding criticism. And for some of us, there simply wasn't much room for our needs. We learned not to ask for very much, not to expect comfort, and not to make ourselves too difficult to deal with.

These responses aren't character flaws. They were ways of coping with the circumstances we were in. The difficulty is that what helped us cope then may not be what we need now.

Why it still happens

Our nervous system doesn't automatically update itself every time our circumstances change. We may understand perfectly well that our partner isn't our parent, that a question isn't an accusation, or that someone's disappointment doesn't mean we're in danger. And yet our body can still respond as though something much more serious is happening.

A history of criticism can make an ordinary suggestion feel like a correction. Growing up around unpredictable anger can leave us watching closely for changes in someone's tone, even when nothing dangerous is happening.

The same thing can happen when we learned that being heard required becoming louder. A simple disagreement may start to feel like another situation in which we are being ignored, dismissed, or controlled, and the urge to push harder can arrive before we've had time to think. Our present circumstances may be completely different from what we experienced growing up. Our nervous system, however, is working from what it learned.

What this doesn't mean

I want to be careful here, because this kind of understanding can easily be misunderstood.

I'm not telling you that you have trauma. You don't need to decide whether your childhood was difficult enough to deserve that word. You don't need to compare your experiences with anyone else's. The more useful question is whether something you learned earlier in life is still influencing the way you respond now.

And there is another important distinction. Understanding a reaction doesn't excuse behaviour. If you are the one carrying anger, knowing where it comes from doesn't make it okay to frighten or hurt someone. If

you are the one receiving anger, understanding why the other person behaves this way doesn't mean you have to accept it. Compassion and responsibility need to exist together. We can understand why a pattern developed and still decide that the pattern needs to change. In fact, understanding is often what makes change possible. If a response was learned, it can be understood. And once we begin to understand it, we have more opportunity to respond differently.

Before you go on

If something in this section has felt familiar, you may notice a reaction as you read. Perhaps you feel sadness about something you had never really thought about before or you feel angry, or you find yourself thinking, It wasn't that bad. Maybe you feel very little at all.

There isn't a right response. What can be useful is to think about the child you once were with a little more curiosity. Imagine a child who has learned to watch the adults around them before saying anything; a child who has discovered that being useful keeps the peace or who has learned that showing anger makes things worse, so they keep it inside.

We often understand those children more easily than we understand ourselves as adults. We can see that a child was trying to cope with what was happening around them. Yet when we see the same response in ourselves years later, we may call it weakness, overreacting, passivity, being difficult, or having an anger problem.

It can be helpful to pause there.

When the old reaction shows up, rather than immediately judging yourself for it, see if you can recognise what your nervous system learned. This makes sense. I learned to do this for a reason. That doesn't mean you have to keep doing it. It simply gives you somewhere different to begin. Because once we can understand the protection, we can start asking a different question:

Is this response still helping me now?

That is where change begins.

Exercise 2 What anger meant in the home you grew up in

For both of you

Long before any current relationship, most of us learned something about anger in childhood. It shapes how we handle it now, whether we erupt, suppress, fear it, or freeze in its presence.

How was anger expressed in the home you grew up in? Was it loud, or silent? Frightening, or absent altogether?

What did you learn anger meant? What did you learn to do when someone else became angry? And what did you learn to do with your own?

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you'd be with someone you love.

SECTION 3

For the person who carries anger

What's underneath it, and what it costs

This section is written for you if anger is the thing you carry. If it's the thing that lands on you, there's something here for you too. Not so that you'll excuse it, and not because understanding it is your job, but because seeing what drives it can loosen the belief that it's a verdict on you.

If this is your section, you may already know how lonely it can be.

Anger that arrives faster than you can catch it. Words that are out of your mouth before you have decided to say them. And then the aftermath, which might be an apology, or silence, or simply another moment added to the list of things you wish you could take back.

You may love the people your anger lands on. That is often what makes it so painful. And there is usually a private shame that goes with it, something you rarely let anyone see. A sense that there is something wrong with you, something you ought to be able to control and can't.

Most of what gets offered to people in this position comes in two forms. Either the anger is explained away, or you are condemned for it. Neither helps very much. Being excused changes nothing, and being condemned tends to produce more of the same. There is a third possibility, which is to understand it. Not instead of taking responsibility. Alongside it.

In my early relationships I was the one who carried the anger, and I know the aftermath from the inside. The wanting to take it back. Apologising and not quite believing my own apology, even while I was making it.

There was something else I didn't understand for a long time. A good deal of my anger never reached anyone else at all. It turned round and came back at me, and I was harder on myself than I ever was on anyone.

What your anger is protecting

Anger that is frequent, or intense, or difficult to stop once it has started, is almost always sitting on top of something else.

Often it is guarding a hurt much older than the relationship you are in now. Something in the present presses on that hurt without meaning to, and the anger arrives to stop anyone getting any closer to it.

Sometimes it is shame. Being criticised, exposed, or found wanting can feel close to unbearable, and anger pushes that feeling away faster than anything else available.

Sometimes it is helplessness. When something matters a great deal and you have no control over it, anger at least gives you back the sensation of power, even when nothing actually changes.

And sometimes there is a need underneath it that has gone unspoken for so long that it can no longer come out as a request. It comes out as fury instead.

None of this means the anger isn't real. It means the anger isn't the whole of what is happening. It is the part loud enough to be heard over everything else.

How fast it happens

At full intensity, anger is not really a thinking state. It is a nervous system state.

When anger floods the body, the parts of the brain that handle reflection, perspective and impulse control go partly offline. This is sometimes called flooding. It is physiological. It is not a failure of character.

This is why understanding on its own is often not enough. You can see your anger clearly on a calm afternoon and still be swept away by it that same evening, because by the evening the part of you that does the understanding has temporarily lost the floor.

Knowing that changes what the work actually is. It isn't only about understanding your anger. It is about learning to recognise the early physical signs, the heat, the tightening, the narrowing of your attention, and doing something at that point, before the thinking part of you goes offline.

Where yours may have begun

The previous section described two ways a nervous system can learn anger early. One where anger worked, and getting louder was the only thing that brought a response. One where it had nowhere to go at all, and waited. Either of those can still be running now.

Whichever is nearer to your own, the disproportion is the clue. When your reaction is bigger than the moment warranted, the extra part is usually the past arriving in the present.

That doesn't excuse the impact on anyone. But something that was learned can be understood, and something that is understood can begin to change.

What it has cost

Part of what keeps anger in place is that we don't let ourselves look directly at what it takes from us.

Some of that cost belongs to the people you love. They may have learned to be careful around you, to manage you, to keep parts of themselves out of sight. Some of it has gone into the relationship itself, where closeness gets harder as safety wears away. And some of it is yours. The shame. The isolation. The distance between the person you mean to be and the person your anger sometimes turns you into.

Looking at that honestly is not the same as drowning in shame. Shame says there is something wrong with me, and it tends to produce more of the behaviour it is condemning. What is needed here is closer to honest responsibility: this has caused harm, and I want to understand it well enough to change it.

The thing that keeps it going

Shame deserves a closer look, because it isn't only uncomfortable. It is one of the things driving the whole problem.

There is a distinction worth holding onto here. Guilt is the feeling that I have done something bad. Shame is the feeling that I am bad. Guilt is useful, because it points at behaviour, and behaviour can change. Shame points at you, and there is nothing to be done with a verdict except carry it.

Shame is also close to unbearable, so a nervous system doesn't stay in it. It looks for something else to do, and very often what it finds is anger.

You may recognise the sequence. Something happens that makes you feel small, or wrong, or found out. A criticism. A look. A mistake someone noticed. For about half a second the feeling is intolerable. Then it converts, and what is in the room is no longer a person who feels ashamed but a person who is furious, and the fury goes to whoever is nearest.

Which produces something to be ashamed of. Which produces more shame. Which needs somewhere to go. You have probably been round that loop more times than you can count.

The belief that you are the only one

There is one more thing shame does, and it may be the most isolating of all. It tells you that you are the only one.

That other people manage. That their irritation stays in proportion, comes out reasonably, and doesn't leave someone quiet at the other end of the table. That whatever is wrong with you is particular to you, and that if anyone saw the whole of it, they would think rather less of you than they do.

It is worth knowing how untrue that is.

What you are describing is one of the most common difficulties there is. The particular shape of yours belongs to you, but the pattern underneath it, something unbearable arriving and anger stepping in front of it, happens to an enormous number of people who look entirely composed from the outside. Almost none of them say so, and that silence is exactly why you believe you are alone in it.

This is common humanity, the second of the three parts of self-compassion, doing one of its quieter jobs. Not reassurance, and not a way of making the harm smaller. Simply the accurate information that you are not the exception you have taken yourself to be.

It matters more than it might sound. A difficulty you believe is uniquely yours feels like a verdict on your character. The same difficulty, understood as something human that a great many people are quietly working on, is simply a thing to work on. Nothing about the harm changes. What changes is whether you face it as a defective person or as a person.

Why self-compassion belongs here

If you have been reading these pages and feeling yourself sink, it is worth recognising what is actually happening. That sinking is not remorse doing its work. It is shame, and shame makes the next episode more likely rather than less.

Which is why self-compassion isn't a kindness added at the end, once the real work is done. For you, it is what makes the work possible at all. It is what allows you to look directly at what your anger has done and stay in the room while you look.

It is easily misheard, so it is worth saying what it isn't. It doesn't mean deciding the harm was smaller than it was. It doesn't mean forgiving yourself on a schedule, or before anything has changed, or instead of anything changing. Nobody is asking you to feel good about it.

It means being able to say this caused harm without also saying and therefore I am worthless. Those two feel like one sentence. They are not. The first is true and useful. The second is neither, and it is the one that sends you round the loop again.

It also means holding two things that don't sit easily together: that you have done real damage, and that you were not born like this. Both are true. Shame will push you to choose one of them. You don't have to.

In practice it is smaller than you might expect.

You notice the sinking as it starts, and you name it. This is shame. This is the thing that makes it worse.

At two in the morning, thinking about something you did, the thought stays a thought about that thing rather than becoming a judgement on your entire character.

And there is the sentence you say to yourself after you have apologised, once the other person has gone back to what they were doing. That one matters more than the apology, because it decides whether tomorrow is any different. Self-kindness is not an abstraction when it comes down to that one sentence. It is the difference between a night that closes the episode and a night that loads the next one.

None of this is soft. Sitting with harm you have caused, without the relief of either excusing it or punishing yourself for it, is one of the harder things a person can do. It is harder than self-punishment, which at least feels like something is being paid off. But it is the version that changes anything.

What changed, for me

It wasn't learning to control it.

Underneath my anger was a wound whose whole job was to keep people at a distance, and particularly the people who loved me, because those were the ones who could actually hurt me. Anger did that job very well. Nobody comes close to someone who might go off.

So the work was never really about managing the anger. It was about turning towards the wound the anger had been standing in front of, and taking care of it myself.

Once that wound had somewhere to go and someone attending to it, it no longer needed a guard on the door.

Exercise 3 What's underneath your anger

For the person who carries anger - *Think of a recent time your anger arrived with more force than the situation called for.*

Replay it slowly. What happened just before the anger came? Not the trigger itself, but the feeling, the half-second of something else before the anger took over.

Was there hurt there? Fear? A sense of being disrespected, dismissed, or made small? Helplessness? A need that wasn't being met?

Exercise 4 Your early warning signs

For the person who carries anger - Anger rarely goes from nought to full intensity with no warning. There are almost always early physical signs, but most of us have never learned to notice them.

Think back through recent episodes. What happens in your body in the moments before anger takes over? Heat in the face or chest? A tightening of the jaw or hands? A change in your breathing? A narrowing of your attention?

Where, specifically, do you feel it first?

Exercise 5 Staying with the first minute

For the person who carries anger

This one is a practice rather than a set of questions, and it's what the rest of this section has been building towards.

Start small, and start calm

Do not attempt this in the middle of something. A skill tried for the first time at full flood won't work, and you'll conclude, wrongly, that it doesn't work at all. Practise on small irritations. The slow queue. The message that annoys you. Something at two out of ten, not eight.

Notice

The moment you catch the first flicker of it, stop what you're doing and turn your attention inward. Not to the person, and not to the situation. To the body.

Locate it

Where is it, exactly? Chest, throat, jaw, stomach, hands, behind the eyes. Is it hot, tight, fizzing, heavy? Does it have edges, or does it spread? Is it moving?

Name it, in the plainest words you have

Heat in my chest. Tightness across the jaw. Something rising. It doesn't need to sound like anything. The naming is what matters, because a sensation being described is a sensation being observed, and observing is done by the part of you that anger usually pushes offline. Describe it, rather than ruling on it. This is being present, and it only works while you are still finding out.

Breathe, and let it be there

Slow the out-breath, and make it longer than the in-breath. You aren't breathing it away. You're staying in the room with it while it does whatever it does. A surge of anger that's left alone, and not fed by the story running alongside it, will usually begin to shift within a few minutes.

Notice what happens

It may build first. It may move. It may soften. It may not do much at all today. Any of those is a successful attempt, because what's being practised is staying, not achieving a particular result.

Afterwards

Write down what you found. Over a few weeks you'll begin to recognise your own opening signal, the one that always arrives first. That one is worth knowing, because it's the earliest point at which you still have a choice.

Exercise 6 What it has taken

For the person who carries anger - *This one asks for courage. With honesty, and without collapsing into shame, what has your anger taken?*

What has it taken from the people you love, in safety, in closeness, in the ways they may now manage themselves around you? What has it done to the relationship? And what has it taken from you?

A gentle reminder - *Naming this isn't the same as putting yourself on trial. If you notice the writing turning into a case against yourself, stop. Honest reckoning has a steadiness to it. Self-punishment has a heat. It's the first one you're after.*

SECTION 4

For the person on the receiving end

It isn't the verdict on you that it feels like

This section is written for you if you live with someone else's anger. If anger is the thing you carry, there's something here for you too. Not so that you'll feel worse, which helps nobody, but because none of us can see our own anger from the inside. This is what it looks like from the other side.

If you're reading this section as your own, you may be tired in a way that sleep doesn't reach.

There's a kind of listening you've learned to do. The car in the drive, and something in you already reading the sound of the door. The pause before you answer a question, running the answer through once to see how it might land.

There are subjects you no longer raise. Not because anything was ever agreed, but because each of them cost something once, and then again, and eventually it became simpler not to. Money, perhaps. A particular person. Something from years ago that was never finished. The list grows quietly, and one day you notice how much of your own life has become unmentionable in your own home.

Most of what goes on that list is you. What you'd like. What you need. What something did to you when it happened. Each one carries a risk attached, so each one gets set aside, and setting things aside becomes so practised that you stop noticing you're doing it.

Eventually it's easier not to want things at all than to want them and have nowhere to put it.

Walking on eggshells is the phrase most of us reach for, and it's accurate as far as it goes. But it undersells the effort. Eggshells are something you step around. This is closer to running a continuous calculation, all evening, about what can be said and what cannot, and adjusting your face while you do it.

You become an expert in someone else's weather.

But the exhaustion isn't really the hardest part.

The hardest part isn't knowing. Not being able to tell, from one day to the next, which version of them is going to walk through the door. The same sentence that passed without comment on Tuesday brings the room down on Thursday, and there's no way to work out the rule, because there isn't one.

Living without a rule is frightening in a way that's difficult to explain to anyone who hasn't done it. It isn't that something terrible is happening. It's that something might, and there's no way of knowing when, and so some part of you never fully sits down.

And then there's the loneliness of it.

Because the person it's coming from is usually the person you love. The one you assumed loved you. The one who was supposed to be the answer to being alone in the world, and who has somehow become the reason you feel more alone in that house than you'd feel by yourself in it.

That's a strange and disorienting thing to hold, and most of us hold it without telling anyone.

There may be something else too, which is harder still to say.

A suspicion that you don't quite have the right to call this a problem. No one has hit you. Nothing has happened that you could describe to a friend without it sounding smaller than it is. From the outside it's only someone with a temper, and other people seem to manage.

So you've probably told yourself, more than once, that you're making too much of it.

You're not.

And you are far less alone in it than the silence around you suggests. Homes like yours are not unusual. They are simply not talked about, because what happens in them is hard to describe without it sounding smaller than it is, so most people don't try. This is common humanity, and it belongs to you as much as to anyone. Not a consolation, and not a reason to put up with anything. Simply the fact that a great many people are sitting in this tonight, each of them believing they are the only one.

And over time, something quietly erosive happens. Because the anger lands on you, again and again, it becomes very hard not to take it as information about you. To conclude that you're too sensitive, too difficult, too much. That if you were somehow different, it wouldn't keep happening.

I've been on this side of it too, twice, in the same house.

My father's anger was mostly aimed past me, at my mother. What I learned from that was to watch. To predict. To try to manage something that was never mine to manage, and to believe that if I read the signs well enough, I could keep the night from going wrong.

My mother's anger came at me. That taught me something different, and it went in deeper. Not that the house was dangerous, but that I was the reason.

It was years before I understood that she was on the receiving end herself, and that what reached me had travelled a long way before it got there.

Later, in a relationship of my own, I found myself doing all of it again without recognising what I was doing. The reading of moods. The subjects that quietly disappeared. The hours spent managing something that was never mine.

What I remember isn't really the anger. It's how alone I felt, standing next to someone I had assumed loved me.

And how reliably he could leave me feeling small, and wrong.

Small, and wrong. That's often exactly how it feels, and it's worth naming plainly, because those two feelings do more damage over years than any single episode does.

The next part is easy to say and very hard to believe, and I'd ask you to stay with it anyway.

Their anger isn't the truth about you.

It's information about them.

This doesn't mean you're perfect, or that you never contribute to a difficult dynamic. None of us are, and most of us do.

But the intensity of someone's anger is a measure of what's happening inside them, their history, their pain, their nervous system, their unmet needs, far more than it's a measure of your worth.

What you're actually asking for

Something worth being plain about, since it may be the reason you picked this book up at all.

A great deal of what follows is about wounds, and histories, and what sits underneath anger. Somewhere in that, it can start to feel as though the point is being quietly moved. As though the problem were becoming something to be understood rather than something to be stopped.

It's not.

Their anger doesn't have to disappear. Anger is a normal human emotion and nobody stops having it. But it does have to stop landing on you.

Those are two different things, and it's only the second one that has to change.

You aren't asking for too much. You're asking for the ordinary minimum.

What happens to you over time

Living on the receiving end of chronic anger shapes a person.

Hypervigilance is the most common of it. Always slightly braced, always monitoring, unable to relax fully even in a calm hour, because calm hasn't proved reliable.

Then the shrinking. Needs, opinions and feelings suppressed, not from weakness but because expressing them has too often carried a cost.

Something subtler happens to your own reactions. So much practice at managing another person's state that you no longer reliably know what you feel yourself. Asked directly, you find you have to work it out rather than simply know.

And underneath all of it, a low, persistent sense of being the problem, because you're so often cast as the cause.

These aren't signs of weakness. They're the natural adaptations of someone who has been doing something genuinely difficult, often for a long time, often without anyone noticing.

The understanding you keep giving away

You are not short of compassion. That is worth saying plainly, because a section about what has happened to you can start to read as though something is missing in you.

Nothing is missing. You already do this, fluently, and mostly without noticing. After a difficult evening you find yourself thinking about how tired they have been, the pressure they are under, what their own childhood was like. That reaching happens on its own. You have had years of practice.

What you may never do is turn any of it the other way.

You may not notice that you have been braced since five o'clock. That you ate standing up. That you spent the whole evening managing someone else's mood and never once asked what you needed. About someone else, those things register instantly. About yourself, they do not register at all.

Self-kindness is that same attention, pointed at you. Not a new skill you have to learn. The one you already have, used on the person who has been left out of it.

It is harder than it sounds, and the reason matters. When you have spent years treating your own needs as the thing that can wait, attending to them feels self-indulgent, or like a complaint, or like taking your eye off the thing that actually needs watching. It is none of those. Noticing that you are exhausted is not an accusation against anyone. It is information about you, and you are allowed to have information about you.

There is a practical reason for it too, if the gentler one does not land. Staying steady when the atmosphere shifts, knowing what is yours and what is not, deciding what you will and will not absorb: all of it depends on knowing what is happening in you. That is difficult to do when you have stopped checking.

What's yours, and what's not

One of the most important things you can begin to sort out is the line between what's yours to hold and what's not.

You're responsible for your own behaviour, your tone, your choices, your side of any genuine conflict. That part is yours, and looking at it honestly is healthy.

You aren't responsible for managing another adult's emotions. You aren't responsible for preventing their anger by being perfect. You aren't responsible for the way they choose to express what they feel.

This distinction matters enormously, because chronic exposure to anger tends to blur it, until you're holding responsibility for the whole relationship, including the parts that were never yours.

You can care about why someone is angry without accepting that their anger is your fault, or your job to fix.

Understanding isn't the same as excusing

This workbook will help you understand what may be happening inside the person whose anger you live with.

That understanding can be genuinely useful, it can lessen the sting, loosen the belief that it's all about you, and help you respond from a steadier place.

But understanding someone's anger isn't the same as excusing it, and it's certainly not the same as being required to endure it.

Compassion for another person never cancels your right to safety, dignity, and a relationship in which you aren't afraid. Hold both, understanding for them, and care for yourself. If you can only hold one, let it be care for yourself.

Exercise 7 What their anger has taught you to believe

For the person on the receiving end - Over time, being on the receiving end of anger tends to install certain beliefs, about yourself, and about what you're allowed.

What have you come to believe about yourself in this relationship? That you're too sensitive? Too much? The cause of the trouble? That your needs are a burden?

Where might those beliefs have come from, and whose voice do they sound like?

A gentle reminder - Seeing these beliefs in your own handwriting can be harder than thinking them, which is worth knowing before you start. You aren't writing down what's true about you. You're writing down what you were taught, and those are very different things.

Exercise 8 Sorting what's yours from what's not

For the person on the receiving end - This exercise is about drawing a line that chronic anger tends to blur.

Think about the dynamic in your relationship. What in it is genuinely yours, your own behaviour, your tone, your side of a real conflict, that you can honestly take responsibility for?

And what have you been carrying that isn't actually yours, responsibility for managing their moods, for preventing their anger, for the way they choose to express it?

Exercise 9 Coming back into your own body

For the person on the receiving end

You've spent a long time reading someone else's body. The tone, the set of the shoulders, the quality of a silence. This is about turning some of that attention, which is considerable and well trained, back towards your own.

First, in a quiet moment

Sitting somewhere ordinary, with nothing happening, take a slow scan downwards. Jaw. Throat. Shoulders. Chest. Stomach. Hands. Notice what's being held. Many of us discover we're braced in a room where there's nothing whatever to brace against.

Then, when something begins

The next time you feel the atmosphere shift, before you do anything about it, take one moment to notice what your own body did first. Did you hold your breath? Did the shoulders come up? Did something go still, or cold, or far away?

Name it without changing it

I'm holding my breath. My shoulders are up around my ears. Naming is enough. You don't have to relax, and trying to relax on command usually does the opposite. You also don't have to decide whether any of it is warranted. Being present means finding out what is there before you rule on it.

Then one question

What's my body trying to do for me right now?

It isn't malfunctioning. It's protecting you, by the method it learned a long time ago. Even where the method no longer fits the situation, there was never anything behind it but care.

Afterwards

If you find you've no idea what you feel, that isn't a failure of the exercise. It's the most useful answer it can give you, and it tells you exactly where to begin.

Exercise 10 Coming back to your own signal

For the person on the receiving end - When you've spent a long time managing someone else's feelings, your own can become faint. This exercise is a small step back towards them.

In a recent difficult moment, what did you feel, underneath the management, underneath the scanning? Not what you did to keep the peace, but what was actually happening in you?

If it's hard to find, that itself is information. What would it take to begin listening to your own reactions again?

SECTION 5

The cycle between you

How the two roles lock together

This section is for both of you. It describes the pattern you're caught in together, and the pattern, not either person alone, is usually what needs to change.

When anger has become a recurring feature of a relationship, it's rarely just one person's anger sitting in isolation.

It's a cycle, a loop in which each person's response feeds the other's, until the whole thing runs almost on its own.

Seeing the cycle, rather than only the other person, is one of the most freeing shifts available to either of you. Because a cycle has more than one point of entry.

And that means more than one place where it can begin to change.

How the loop tends to turn

It often runs something like this.

Something happens, a comment, a tone, a disappointment, a moment of feeling unseen. In whichever of you is angry, a vulnerable feeling is touched, hurt, shame, fear, helplessness. Too fast to notice, it converts to anger.

The anger comes out, in words, in volume, in a hardening or a withdrawal.

In the other, this lands as threat, and a nervous system responds the way it has learned to. Bracing, placating, defending, or going quiet and absent.

And that response, in turn, often confirms something for the one who is angry. The placating can feel like distance. The defending can feel like attack.

The withdrawal can feel like abandonment, touching the very wound the anger was protecting in the first place.

So the anger renews. And the cycle turns again.

Mine ran like this. He would be angry. I'd shut down, because shutting down was the only thing I knew how to do. My going quiet would land on him as rejection, which was the thing he could least bear. So the anger would come back, and it would come back larger.

Underneath it, on both sides, an old sentence.

Mine was: I'm in trouble again.

His was: I'm being rejected again.

Neither of us was anywhere near the present. We were two children, decades apart, each confirming for the other exactly what they had always most feared.

Notice that no one in this loop is simply choosing it.

Each person is responding, more or less automatically, to the other, and to something much older than the other. Two nervous systems, each shaped by its own history, are setting each other off.

The cycle is older than the two of you

I described earlier a house in which my father's anger went at my mother, and my mother's came at me. It was a long time before I understood what I had actually been watching. Not two difficult people, but one cycle, travelling.

She was on the receiving end. And then she was not. Whatever reached me had already passed through her, and had been passing through somebody before that.

That dismantles the most persuasive story either of you can tell about the other. That one of you is the angry one, and the other is not.

Almost nobody is only one thing. The person who carries anger at home has very often spent childhood on the receiving end of somebody else's. And the person absorbing it now has, in some other room or some other year, been the one who couldn't hold it in.

You aren't two categories of person. You're two people running two sets of instructions that were written a long time ago, by other people, for other rooms.

What each position hides

From inside the anger, it's very hard to see the impact. When we're angry, we're responding to an internal pressure that feels, in the moment, entirely justified by the situation.

The fear or hurt on the other person's face often doesn't register, or registers only later, as remorse.

From the receiving end, it's very hard to see that the anger isn't fundamentally about you. It lands on you, so it feels like it's about you. The history and pain driving it aren't visible from the outside.

This is exactly why seeing it from the other side matters so much. Each of you is holding the piece the other position hides.

Where compassion goes here

Everywhere else in this book compassion has been pointed inward first, because for both of you that's the harder direction and the one that has been running dry.

This is the section where it can turn the other way.

Not as absolution, and not as an instruction to feel warmly towards someone who has hurt you. Something narrower and more useful than either.

It's the recognition that the person opposite you was also small once, also had no say in what was happening around them, and also built something to survive it. What they built is now landing on you, and

that's a real problem that has to change. But they didn't choose the blueprint any more than you chose yours.

Held alongside each other, those two facts do something that neither does alone. They make it possible to want the behaviour to change without needing the person to be a villain, which is the only position from which anything actually shifts.

And if you can't reach it, leave it. Compassion for someone whose anger frightens you isn't a requirement, and it isn't the price of admission to the rest of this book. Some of it arrives only later, and at a distance, and some of it never arrives at all. Your own safety and your own steadiness come first. If you can hold only one of the two, hold that one.

The cycle is the thing to change, not the person

There's something quietly hopeful in understanding it this way.

If the problem is one person's defective character, there isn't much to be done but blame and wait.

But if the problem is a cycle, a learned, repeating pattern between two nervous systems, then it can be interrupted. And it can be interrupted from either side.

When the one who is angry learns to catch the escalation early, the cycle changes. When the other steps out of the automatic role, stops absorbing, and responds from steadiness rather than fear, it changes too.

Neither of you has to do it perfectly. A cycle only needs to be interrupted often enough to begin loosening its grip.

Exercise 11 Mapping your cycle together

For both of you - If it feels safe to, this exercise can be done separately and then shared. If sharing isn't safe or possible, doing it alone is still valuable.

Think of a recent recurring conflict. Try to map the loop, step by step. What tends to start it? What does the one who is angry feel, just before it arrives? How does it come out? How does the other respond? And how does that response feed the next turn?

Finding the entry points - Once you can see the loop, look for the points where it could be interrupted. Where could the one who is angry catch it earlier? Where could the other step out of the usual role?

SECTION 6

What helps

For both of you

Understanding anger is the beginning. But understanding alone, as anyone who has tried to change a deep pattern knows, is rarely enough on its own.

What follows isn't a set of techniques to be applied perfectly. It's a set of directions, some marked for the one who carries the anger, some for the one who receives it, and some for both. Take what fits.

Leave what doesn't. Return to it over time.

For the person who carries anger

Learn the early signs, and gently turn your attention towards what the anger may be protecting. The single most practical skill is catching the escalation before the flooding takes over.

When you notice the first physical signs, the heat, the tightening, that's the moment to pause. To step away. To say I need a few minutes rather than continuing into the flood. A genuine pause isn't avoidance.

It's what allows the thinking part of you to stay in the room.

Get curious about what's underneath. In calmer moments, build the habit of asking what the anger was carrying.

Over time, this loosens its grip, because a hurt that's felt and named doesn't have to convert to anger to be heard.

An example of what that looks like. An evening when the anger came out over an unwashed pan. Sitting with it the next morning, the question isn't why the pan mattered, because it did not. The question is what was happening in the half-second before.

Perhaps: I had asked three times. Under that: nothing I say makes any difference in this house. And under that, which is usually where it actually lives: I don't matter to her.

That last sentence is what the anger was carrying. The pan was only what it arrived in.

This was the slowest of all of them for me, and it's worth saying why, because if it's slow for you it doesn't mean nothing is happening.

My anger was so well defended that for a long time all I could see were the reasons I was justified. Every one of them was true. Not one of them was the point.

What eventually moved it was turning towards the shame that arrived afterwards, rather than away from it. That's the exact opposite of what shame asks of you, which is why it takes as long as it does.

I knew things had to change. And underneath that, more honestly, I knew I didn't want to go on carrying the pain the anger had been defending.

Tend to the conditions. Anger has a much shorter fuse when you're exhausted, depleted, or running on empty. Rest, recovery, and the basic care of your nervous system aren't separate from anger work. They're part of it.

You'll already know your own version. Four hours of sleep. The third day of a headache. Skipping lunch and going straight into a difficult afternoon. Two drinks. On those days the fuse is measurably shorter, and none of it's a failure of character. Treating rest and food and recovery as part of the anger work, rather than as something separate from it, is one of the most reliable changes available to you.

Repair when you can. You won't get this perfectly. What matters almost as much as not erupting is what you do afterwards, the honest acknowledgement, the repair, the taking of responsibility without collapsing into shame.

Repair, done genuinely and repeatedly, rebuilds the safety that anger erodes.

It's worth being specific about what repair actually sounds like, because most of us were only ever taught apology, and the two aren't the same.

I'm sorry, I was tired, you know how I get.

That isn't repair. It explains, and it asks to be excused, and it puts the other person in the position of having to reassure you.

What I said last night was unfair, and I could see it land. You didn't deserve it. I've been thinking about what was actually going on in me, and I'd like to tell you, if you want to hear it.

Named. No excuse attached. The impact acknowledged. And nothing asked of them in return.

After I blew up there was always remorse, and for a long time that's where it stopped. Remorse, and then nothing, until the next time.

What changed was what I did with the shame that came with it. Rather than trying to get away from it, I'd turn back towards it and tend to it. Reminding myself there was a wound underneath, and that it needed my acceptance rather than my disgust.

And then one day something released. I didn't need to defend, and I didn't need to shut down.

The apology changed along with it. For years mine had been a way of de-escalating, of making it stop, and it came from a sense that I wasn't good enough and probably in the wrong anyway.

Apologising from a place of strength is a different act altogether. It comes from knowing that I can apologise, and that it costs me nothing I need to keep.

It's enormously freeing.

For the person on the receiving end

Tend to your own nervous system first. You can't respond from steadiness when you're flooded yourself.

Your own grounding, your own capacity to stay regulated, or to remove yourself when you cannot, comes before anything you try to do for the relationship.

In practice this is small and unglamorous. Both feet flat on the floor. A hand somewhere solid. An out-breath made longer than the in-breath. Going to the kitchen for a glass of water. None of it looks like much, and all of it is the difference between responding and reacting.

I remember sitting in a car with someone shouting at me, and telling myself, without saying a word of it out loud, to breathe. To stay in my body. Not to fix anything and not to answer. Only to stay regulated enough to recognise that what was happening inside me was my own wound, and that it was mine to tend to.

That was all it was. Breathing, in a car, while someone shouted. It looks like nothing from the outside, and it was the beginning of everything changing.

Step out of the automatic role. The cycle runs on your habitual response as much as on their anger.

Where it's safe, experiment with responding differently, not placating, not defending, but staying steady, naming calmly what's happening, declining to absorb what isn't yours.

Naming calmly means describing what's happening, rather than arguing about who is right.

I do want to talk about this, and I can't do it while you're shouting. I'm going to come back in twenty minutes.

This is too heated. I'm going to step outside for a bit.

Notice what isn't in those sentences. No defence. No apology. No counter-accusation. Nothing for the argument to catch hold of.

At first this felt like losing. I wanted to defend myself. Why can I not state my case, why am I the one who has to stay quiet.

And I did defend myself, for a while. What I came to see was that I didn't want to be that person, and that defending was missing the point in any case. It wasn't him. It was my wound.

That's easy to misread, so I want to be exact about it. It didn't mean his anger was acceptable, and it didn't make it mine to fix. It meant that what his anger set off in me belonged to me, and that I could do something about that part even on the days when I could do nothing about the rest.

That was the turn. Not answering him better, but recognising what had been touched in me, and tending to it.

And what came out of it wasn't the shutting down I had done all my life. It was something else entirely. I was standing by myself, at last, and I didn't need to run from it, because by then I knew that staying with myself was where the healing was.

Though if you asked me which of all of these has taken the longest, it would be that one. Not the anger. The shutting down.

It's such a safe place to go. There's a kind of control in it, a sense that nothing further can reach me. And it's desperately lonely, because what shutting down actually says is that I don't need anyone.

Which is the paradox of it. At the moment I say that, someone is exactly what I need.

Going quiet feels like protecting myself. It's much closer to abandoning myself, at precisely the point where I shouldn't be left on my own.

Hold onto your own reality. Chronic anger can make you doubt your own perceptions. Keeping contact with what you actually saw, felt, and experienced, through writing, through trusted people, protects something essential.

In practice, write things down close to the time. What was said. What you said. How it ended. Not to build a case against anyone, but because chronic anger has a way of rewriting the record afterwards, and a few lines written the same night are very hard to argue with later. Including by you.

Know the difference between difficult and unsafe. This is the most important one, and the final section returns to it. Working to understand someone's anger is appropriate when a relationship is difficult.

It isn't the right response when a relationship has become unsafe.

For both of you

Both of the parts above asked you to do the same thing, from opposite sides. One of you was asked to notice the heat arriving and pause before it takes over. The other was asked to feel the floor, lengthen the out-breath, and stay in your own body while the room changes. That is one practice rather than two, and it has a name. It is mindfulness, the third part of self-compassion.

Being present means staying with what is actually happening, rather than the version you had already settled on before you looked. The breath is the way in, because it slows things down enough for there to be something to see. Then the looking itself. What is happening in my body. What am I feeling underneath it. What am I believing right now, about myself or about them.

The part that makes it work is doing all of that without judging what turns up. Not deciding the anger is disgraceful before you have seen what it was carrying. Not deciding the hurt is an overreaction before you have let yourself feel it. Judgment arrives quickly for both of you, and it looks different on each side, shame on one and dismissal on the other. Either one closes the enquiry before it has started.

You are not trying to feel something different. You are trying to find out what is there.

Talk about the pattern when you're both calm, never in the heat of it. The conversation that changes a cycle almost never happens during the cycle.

It happens later, in a quiet moment, when both of you can look at the pattern together rather than at each other.

Opening it is the hard part, so it helps to have the first sentence ready.

Something happens between us that I don't think either of us wants. Would you be willing to look at it with me, not tonight, but sometime this week?

Notice that it names the pattern rather than the person, and that it asks rather than announces.

Agree on a way to pause.

It helps to agree, in advance and in calm, on a signal that either of you can call to stop an escalation. It can be a word, a phrase, a hand held up. Something as plain as saying pause, or I need twenty minutes, works perfectly well, and works better than something clever. What matters is that it's agreed beforehand, that

either of you can call it, that neither of you is allowed to be offended by it, and that it comes with a commitment to return, so that it doesn't quietly become a way of avoiding the conversation altogether.

Remember you're on the same side of the pattern. The cycle is the adversary, not each other. Every time you can turn together to face the pattern, rather than turning on one another, you weaken its hold.

In the moment, when an angry episode shows up

All the reflection above happens with some distance from the moment. But anger itself doesn't wait for a calm afternoon, it shows up in real time, often fast. Here are some shared steps to move through together, right when it's happening.

Notice it early, together if you can. One of you naming "I think we're starting to get heated" out loud is often enough to slow things down, before anyone's fully gripped by it.

Agree to pause before anything gets said that can't be unsaid. A short break isn't avoidance, it's making space for the part of you that reacts on instinct to settle before the part that can actually listen comes back online.

Separate from each other physically, briefly, if needed. A few minutes apart, with an agreement to come back, is far more useful than staying in the same room while neither of you can really hear the other.

Self-soothe before you try to resolve anything. A slower breath, a glass of water, stepping outside, anything that brings your body out of fight-or-flight before you attempt to talk it through.

Use that time alone to get curious with yourself. Quietly ask, what was I actually feeling? What was I believing, about myself or about them? This is often where you'll notice an old wound surfacing rather than just the thing that happened five minutes ago. Once you can see that clearly, ask one more question, how would I rather respond, in a way that's more in line with who I actually want to be in this?

Come back to it, don't let the pause become avoidance. Agree on roughly when you'll return to the conversation, so the break is a tool, not a way of disappearing from the issue entirely.

When you do return, lead with what's underneath, not just the complaint. This is where everything from the reflection work above gets used, naming the hurt or fear under the anger, rather than restating the grievance louder.

Remember you're on the same team, even mid-disagreement. The goal in the moment isn't to win, or to be the one who is right, it's to get back to understanding each other. The conflict is something you're both in, not something one of you is doing to the other.

Exercise 12 Your pause plan

For both of you - A pause is the most reliable circuit-breaker there is, but only if it's worked out in advance, in calm, rather than improvised in the heat.

If you carry the anger - What are your earliest warning signs? What words could you use to call a pause, I need a few minutes, and where could you go? What helps you actually settle, rather than stew?

If you're on the receiving end - What helps you stay grounded, or remove yourself, when anger begins? What's your own signal that you need to step away?

Exercise 13 What you each most need the other to understand

For both of you - *This is, in a sense, what the whole book has been building towards.*

If you carry the anger, what would you most want the other person to understand about what happens in you, what the anger is really protecting?

If you're on the receiving end, what would you most want the other person to understand about what it's like to be on the other side of it?

Before you share any of this - *Writing this down and handing it over are two separate decisions, and the second one deserves its own thought. Is the moment calm? Is the other person in a state to receive it? Would what you've written be safe in their hands? If the answer to any of those is no, or if you simply don't know, keep it. Something understood by you alone still changes the cycle. Nothing here requires an audience.*

SECTION 7

Exploring the origins of your reactions

If you want to go deeper

Before you begin

If you're working through this with the other person, reflect on these questions on your own first, and come together afterwards to share whatever you want to share.

When you do come together, listen with curiosity rather than correction. You aren't relitigating the argument. You're finding out what each of you was carrying into the room before it started.

If you're working through it alone, which many will be, none of this loses its value. Understanding your own history changes the cycle whether or not the other person ever reads a word of it.

The event and the meaning

Section 2 described how a nervous system learns its responses early and goes on running them long afterwards. This section asks a narrower question. Not what your anger is protecting, but how a small thing in the present becomes a large thing on its way in.

Two things happen in any difficult moment, and they're easy to mistake for one.

The event is what actually happened.

The meaning is what we made of it.

And the meaning isn't neutral. It comes from perception, and perception runs through a lens. Where there's an old wound behind that lens, the meaning arrives shaped by the wound rather than by the event.

Which is why two people can be in the same room, hear the same sentence, and come away with entirely different accounts of what just took place. Neither is lying. They weren't looking through the same lens.

Someone who was rarely listened to as a child looks through that lens and sees, in another person's distraction, evidence that they don't matter. Someone who was corrected constantly looks through theirs and sees, in a mild suggestion, evidence that they've got it wrong again.

The event was small. The lens was not.

And the reaction that follows is entirely accurate to the meaning. It's simply not accurate to the event.

So when someone close to you forgets something that mattered, the anger may seem to be about the forgetting. Look more closely and you may find something else underneath it.

I don't matter.

I'm not important.

I'm being taken for granted.

I can only rely on myself.

And when someone is angry with you, your strongest reaction may not be to the anger at all, but to what you took it to mean.

I've done something wrong.

I'm not good enough.

I'm going to be criticised.

I'm going to be rejected.

If you had never learned these meanings earlier in life, you wouldn't arrive at them so quickly now. They feel immediate because they're familiar, and familiar isn't the same as true.

Before the questions

What follows goes back some way, and it's worth knowing how to hold it before you start.

This isn't an investigation into what's wrong with you. There's no verdict at the end of it, and nothing here requires you to decide whether your childhood was bad enough to explain anything.

The question isn't who is to blame.

The question is where did I learn this, and does it still serve me now.

If you notice the writing turning into a case against yourself, or against your parents, stop for a moment. Both of those are the work going off course. What you're looking for is recognition, which feels quite different. Recognition has a kind of settling in it. Blame does not.

Go slowly, take it in pieces, and leave anything that's too much for today. There's no prize for finishing.

Questions for reflection

Rather than trying to answer everything, choose one recent disagreement or charged moment, and work your way through the following for that single moment.

There is an example of my own further on, one of my situations worked through these same steps. If you would rather see how it looks before you start, read that first.

Step 1. What actually happened?

Describe the situation as simply and plainly as you can, as though reporting it to someone who wasn't there.

Then draw two columns. In one, what happened. In the other, what you found yourself believing it meant.

Step 2. What happened inside me?

Before going anywhere near your thoughts, notice your body.

What's happening in it? Where do you feel the emotion? Tightness, heaviness, heat, shakiness, numbness, a racing heart, a knot in the stomach?

What does the body seem to be preparing you to do? Fight, withdraw, freeze, appease, protect yourself some other way?

Then, underneath the anger, what else was there? Hurt, fear, sadness, shame, loneliness, rejection, disappointment, helplessness, grief?

And what were you believing about yourself in that moment?

I'm not enough. I don't matter. I'm too much. I'm unlovable. I always get blamed. I have to handle everything myself.

Step 3. Does this feel familiar?

What's familiar about this experience? Have you felt this way before? How far back does the feeling seem to go? Can you remember an earlier time when something in you felt exactly like this?

Step 4. What did I learn growing up?

How was anger expressed in the home you grew up in? What happened when someone became angry? What happened when you were upset, or needed comfort?

Were your emotions welcomed, ignored, criticised, dismissed, or met with discomfort?

Looking back now, what do those experiences seem to have taught you? About yourself. About other people. About what relationships are. About whether feelings can safely be shown.

Step 5. How did I learn to protect myself?

When you felt hurt, afraid, criticised or alone as a child, what did you tend to do? Become angry. Go quiet. Try harder. Keep everyone happy. Leave the room. Shut down. Pretend everything was fine.

How did that help you at the time? It almost certainly did, or you wouldn't still be doing it.

And does it still serve you now?

Step 6. If my younger self were here

If the child who first learned these patterns had been standing in the room during that conflict, what would they have been feeling? What would they have needed?

And how would you have wanted to respond to them?

Leave this one until things have settled. It asks for a gentleness that's very hard to reach in the middle of anything.

Step 7. How would I see it now?

With everything the six steps before it have turned up, look at the moment again. Not who was right, and not who started it. What each of you was actually reacting to.

This is the step that closes the loop, because it's where the cycle becomes visible from the outside, in a moment you were inside of.

What you might actually do with this

Start small. One recent disagreement, and it doesn't need to be a major one. Write your way through the questions for that single moment. Writing rather than thinking slows the mind enough to notice what it would otherwise rush past.

Keep the two columns going. Seeing the event and the meaning side by side, in your own handwriting, creates space to question the meaning without dismissing the reality of what happened.

Write yourself a short history page. Separate from any current argument, set down how anger and emotional need were handled in the home you grew up in, and what you learned to do about it. Keep it somewhere safe. It becomes something to return to, rather than something to rediscover every time you're caught out.

Look for the pattern, not the incident. Across several situations you'll start to see the same beliefs, the same sensations, the same protective moves. The repetition tells you far more than any single conflict does.

Then choose one small thing to do differently the next time it arrives. Change rarely comes as transformation. It comes as one intentional response, made often enough that it starts to replace the automatic one.

There's no need to rush towards answers.

Sometimes becoming aware of the question is the whole of it, and awareness usually begins not with an explanation but with a willingness to listen.

How this looks worked through

I will use one of my own, because a real example is more use than a tidy one.

What actually happened

I had been asked to pick up milk on the way home, along with the rest of the shopping. It had been a productive day and I came through the door in a good mood. I said hello, and asked how his day had been. The first thing said to me was, did you get the milk.

I had forgotten it. What followed was a barrage. That all I cared about was myself, and then a list of everything else I had been getting wrong.

What happened inside me

Shame, immediately and completely. All I could think was, I do care, how could I've forgotten. My body went tense and I couldn't get a full breath. I didn't feel able to defend myself, and underneath that was a sense that there would be no point in trying.

I wanted to crawl under a rock.

Does this feel familiar

Exactly how I felt around my mother when she was angry with me. In trouble again. My fault again. The same unbridled shame.

What did I learn growing up

That I was selfish. That I didn't think. That everything was my fault, and that there was no room for my side of it.

How did I learn to protect myself

By shutting down. Going into my hole and agreeing that it was my fault, because agreeing ended it faster.

If my younger self were here

I'd want to hold her first, before saying anything. And then: you had every right to feel the way you did. That must have been so painful. It wasn't your fault. You were doing your best.

And then to ask her what she needed from me, which was reassurance. It was always reassurance.

How I see it now

I was triggered into shame by his anger. He was triggered by the assumption that I didn't care about him.

Two old wounds, meeting over a bottle of milk, and neither of us anywhere near the present.

SECTION 8

Finding the right level of support

Including knowing when anger has become something more serious

Anger that has become a recurring difficulty in a relationship is genuinely workable, often with the right understanding and support, and sometimes on your own.

But the right level of support varies, and there's one distinction in this territory that matters more than any other, so let me begin there.

First, the difference between difficult and unsafe

Everything in this workbook so far has assumed a relationship that's difficult, where anger causes real pain, but where both people are, fundamentally, trying, and where neither is frightened for their safety.

Some relationships aren't difficult but unsafe. And the response to that's different.

If anger in your relationship involves any of the following, this has moved beyond what a workbook addresses, and into the territory of abuse.

Physical violence, or the threat of it, including blocking your exit, breaking things, or any contact meant to frighten or hurt.

Fear for your physical safety, or that of your children.

Control, of your movements, your money, your contact with others, enforced through anger or its threat.

A pattern in which you're made to feel responsible for someone else's rage as a way of keeping you compliant.

If you recognise your relationship here, please understand, this isn't a dynamic to be solved by understanding the other person better, or by managing yourself more carefully. Your safety comes first.

If you're afraid for your safety, understanding the other person isn't the task. Reaching support is. A domestic violence service, a crisis line, or emergency services can help, and you don't need to have decided anything before you reach out.

What you can do on your own

For a relationship that's difficult rather than unsafe, self-directed work has real value.

The exercises in this workbook, understanding what anger is protecting, learning its early signs, mapping the cycle, sorting what's yours from what's not, are genuine and useful work, for either side.

Reading about anger, the nervous system, and the way early experience shapes both can be clarifying. And the practice of pausing, of repair, of tending your own regulation, is something you can begin practising straight away.

When therapy can help

Therapy is where the deeper work tends to happen, for either side, and sometimes for both together.

If anger is the thing you carry, therapy is particularly valuable when it's rooted in earlier experience, when it has resisted your own efforts to change it, or when shame about it has become its own heavy burden.

Approaches that treat the angry part of you as a protector, and turn towards what it's guarding, tend to change things more deeply than any attempt to suppress it.

Trauma-informed approaches matter when the roots reach back into a frightening or volatile childhood.

If anger is the thing that lands on you, therapy offers a place to rebuild contact with your own reality, to understand why you may have learned to absorb anger, and to strengthen the boundary between what's yours and what's not.

This is often work that connects to earlier experience too, many of us who end up on the receiving end of anger learned that role very young.

Couples or family therapy can be genuinely valuable when both people are willing to look at the cycle honestly.

It's appropriate for relationships that are difficult, but it isn't the right first step where there's abuse or fear, where individual safety and support come first.

When more support may be needed

Anger that's severe, or that comes alongside significant depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms, or difficulty with emotional regulation, may benefit from psychiatric assessment, particularly where it's bound up with a treatable underlying condition. Your GP is the right starting point.

And if you're the one it lands on, the toll of chronic exposure to anger, the anxiety, the depression, the wearing-down of self-worth, is itself worth taking to a professional, in its own right.

And a third possibility

Everything so far has divided things into two. Difficult, which can be worked on. Unsafe, which cannot. Those are the categories that matter most, because what each one asks of you is so different.

But there's a third thing, and it doesn't sit in either.

A relationship can be entirely workable and still not be one you want to stay in.

Sometimes two people aren't dangerous to each other and are simply not good for each other. The particular combination of what each of them carries produces something that neither would produce alone, and no amount of understanding dissolves it.

That needs saying, because a book like this can quietly imply that the goal is always repair, and that anyone who leaves hasn't understood well enough or tried long enough. Neither is true.

And it rarely runs in one direction. In a cycle, both people are being shaped and both are shaping. It's entirely possible to be on the receiving end of someone else's anger and also, honestly, not to have been

good for them. Seeing that isn't self-blame. It's usually the most accurate account available, and the least punishing, because it makes an ending something other than a verdict on either person.

Deciding you've done enough is a legitimate outcome of this work rather than a failure of it. So is deciding to stay and keep going. So is deciding that you don't know yet.

What matters is that the choice is yours, made with your eyes open, and not made out of a belief that you owe someone an unlimited amount of understanding. You do not.

A simple way to think about it

If there's fear or danger, reach out to a domestic violence service, a crisis line, or emergency services, first, and without waiting to be certain.

Begin with self-directed work if the relationship is difficult but not unsafe, and both people are, in their own ways, trying.

Consider individual therapy, for either side, if the patterns are rooted in earlier experience, if they've resisted your own efforts, or if shame or worn-down self-worth has become heavy.

Consider couples or family therapy if both people are willing to look honestly at the cycle, and the relationship is difficult rather than unsafe.

Seek psychiatric assessment if anger, or the toll of living with it, comes alongside significant depression, anxiety, or trauma symptoms.

One thing underneath all of it

Whatever level of support you settle on, something runs underneath all of these options and needs nobody else's agreement.

It's how you treat yourself while you do it.

Reaching out for help is close to impossible from a position of self-contempt, because contempt says you aren't worth the trouble. Booking the appointment, making the call, telling someone the truth about what happens at home, every one of those asks you to believe first that you're worth the effort of it.

Self-compassion isn't the gentle addition at the end of the work. On both sides of anger it's what makes the first step possible at all.

So be on your own side while you do this. Not instead of taking responsibility, and not instead of taking action. Alongside both.

Whichever side of anger you're on, let me leave you with the same thought.

Anger is a messenger. It's almost never the deepest truth of what's happening, only the loudest part of it.

For the person who carries it, underneath it's something more vulnerable that deserves to be heard, by you, before it has to shout.

For the person who receives it, it was never the verdict on you that it felt like.

And for both of you, the pattern you're caught in was learned, which means it can be changed, slowly, imperfectly, and often more from understanding one another than from trying harder alone.

I hope what I've shared here has landed in a way that gives you both some clarity, some hope, and a path forward.

Whatever else happens, please take care of the child in you who needs your help to heal. On either side of this, that's who has been waiting.

Your life is worth doing the work. I can attest to that personally.

It's challenging, and at times it's painful. But there's a light, there's hope, and there's a way through.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

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12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

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*Anger is not the problem.
Anger is a messenger.
The work is learning to hear what it carries.*



This workbook is for two people — the one who carries anger they cannot always control, and the one who lives on the receiving end of someone else's. Written for both at once, it offers each the understanding the other can't see from where they stand: that anger is almost always protecting something more vulnerable underneath, and that the pattern between two people, not either person alone, is usually what needs to change.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  What anger actually is — a messenger, not the message
-  For the person who carries anger — what's underneath, and what it costs
-  For the person on the receiving end — it's not the verdict on you it feels like
-  The cycle between you — how the two roles lock together
-  What helps — for both of you
-  How to find the right level of support

*Underneath anger is almost always
something more vulnerable — a hurt
or a fear that deserves to be heard,
before it has to shout.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)
BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate relationships, emotional regulation, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.

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