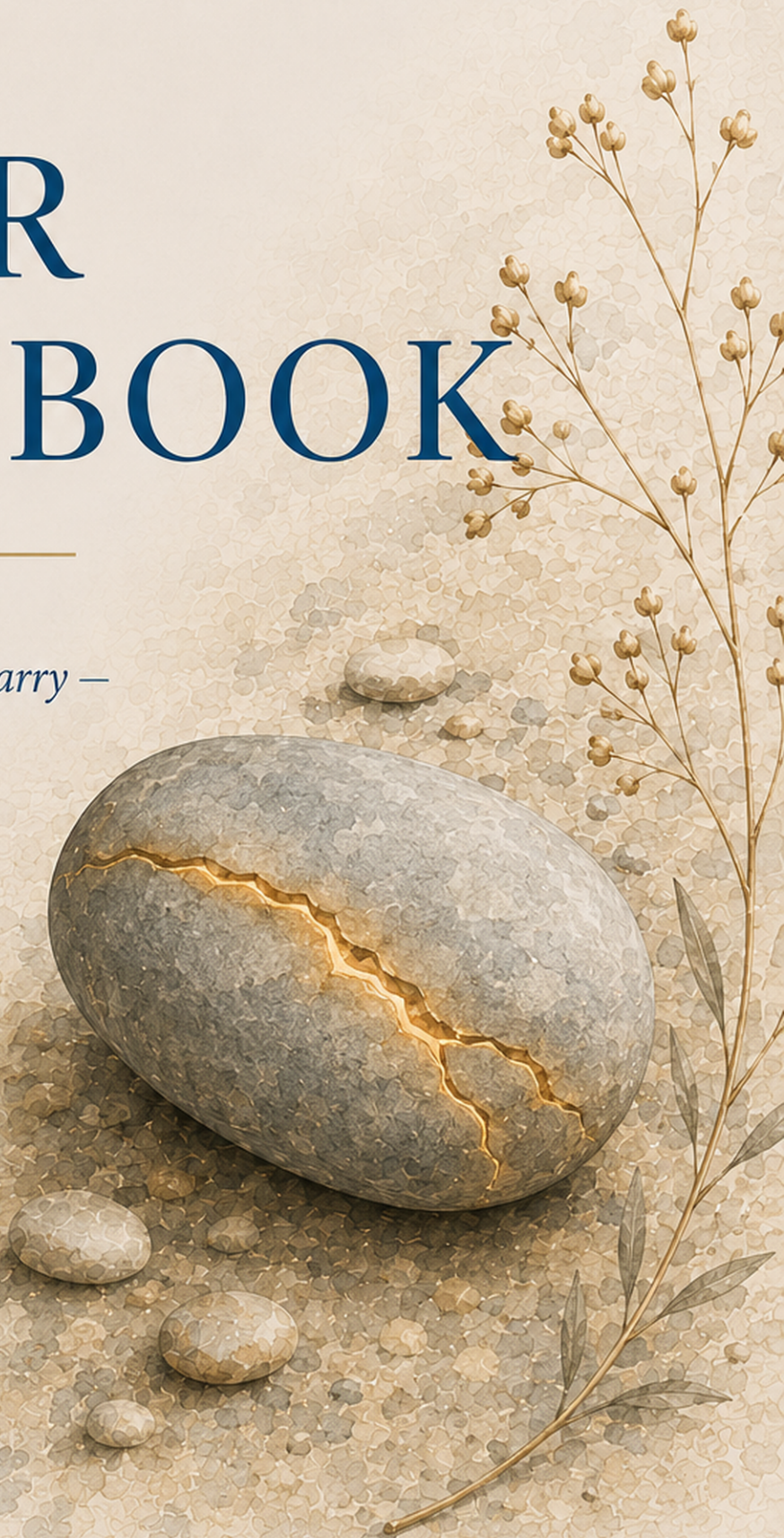


THE ANGER WORKBOOK



*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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Before you begin

This workbook is for two people.

It is for the person who carries anger they cannot always control — who has watched it arrive faster than they could stop it, say things they did not mean, and leave a kind of wreckage they then have to live alongside.

Who may feel a deep shame about it that they rarely admit to anyone.

And it is for the person who lives on the receiving end of someone else's anger — a parent's, a partner's, a child's. Who has learned to read a room before they enter it.

Who has come to feel that they are somehow the problem, because they so often seem to be the cause.

If you are the first person, I want you to know this is not written to shame you.

If you are the second, I want you to know this is not written to ask you to absorb more.

I have put both of you in the same book on purpose.

Not because your experiences are the same — they are not — but because there is something each of you can only really understand by seeing it from the other side.

The person who carries anger often cannot see what it does to the people around them, because in the moment they are not thinking about the impact. They are responding to a pressure that feels unbearable.

The person on the receiving end often cannot see that the anger is not, fundamentally, about them — because it lands on them, again and again, and after enough times it becomes very hard not to take it as a verdict on who you are.

Each of you holds a piece of the truth the other is missing.

I want to say something at the very start, as plainly as I can:

Anger is not the problem.

Anger is a messenger.

It almost always arrives carrying something else underneath it — hurt, fear, shame, helplessness, a need that has gone unmet for a very long time. The anger is the part that is loud enough to be heard.

It is rarely the part that most needs attention.

This is true for the person who expresses anger, and it is true, in a different way, for the person who receives it.

I know something of both sides of this myself.

I grew up with a father who struggled with alcoholism and with bipolar disorder, and the home I grew up in could be frightening and unpredictable.

I learned, very early, to watch closely — to read his mood before I knew what kind of evening it would be, to make myself small and useful, to try to manage something that was never mine to manage.

That kind of childhood teaches you to treat someone else's anger as your responsibility. It took me a long time to understand that it never was.

When I was younger, I came to realise that much of the anger I experienced was protecting deeper feelings that had not yet found words or understanding.

Looking back, I can see there were times when it felt bigger than the moment itself, and times when what was being stirred belonged as much to the past as it did to the present.

Over time, I learned that my anger was often pointing me toward something more vulnerable beneath it. More often than not, it was carrying hurt, fear, or unmet needs that were asking to be acknowledged.

This workbook is an attempt to take anger seriously — not to suppress it, and not to excuse what it sometimes does, but to understand it well enough that it can begin to be met differently.

Some sections are addressed more to one of you than the other. I will mark those clearly, so you know when a passage is speaking to your experience, and when it is offering you a window into the other person's.

I would gently encourage you to read all of it. The parts written for the other person are often where the most useful understanding lives.

Whichever side of anger you are on — or if, like many of us, you are on both — what you are carrying is real, it makes sense, and it can change.

With warmth,

*Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

GETTING STARTED

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 are ready.

And if you recognise, anywhere in these pages, that what is happening in your relationship has stopped being difficult and become unsafe, please turn to the final section, which speaks to that directly.

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

SECTION 1

What anger actually is

A messenger, not the message

Anger has a worse reputation than it deserves.

Most of us were taught, in one way or another, that anger is dangerous, or shameful, or a sign that something has gone wrong with us. Some of us learned that it was not safe to feel at all.

Others learned that it was the only feeling that ever got heard.

But anger itself is not the problem.

It is a normal, universal human emotion — one with a real and important job.

What anger is for

At its root, anger is a signal of threat or violation.

It arises when something we care about feels endangered — our safety, our dignity, our boundaries, the people we love, our sense of fairness, our sense of self.

In that sense, anger is protective. It is the part of us that says: this matters, and something is wrong here.

A person who could feel no anger at all would be strangely undefended in the world — unable to register mistreatment, unable to know when a line had been crossed.

So the goal of this workbook is not to get rid of anger. It is to change your relationship with it.

Anger is almost always a secondary emotion

Here is the single most useful thing I know about anger:

It is almost never the first feeling.

Anger tends to arrive second — after something more vulnerable has already been felt, often too quickly to notice.

Underneath anger, there is very often:

- Hurt — the feeling of having been wounded, dismissed, or let down.
- Fear — of loss, of rejection, of being out of control, of being harmed.
- Shame — the sense of being exposed as not good enough, of being seen in a way that feels unbearable.
- Helplessness — the feeling of having no power over something that matters enormously.
- Unmet need — for respect, for closeness, for rest, for recognition, for safety.

Anger is the part of that experience that feels strong, rather than weak.

This is much of why it is reached for. When the underlying feeling is helplessness or shame — feelings that make us feel small — anger can feel, by comparison, like power. It restores a sense of agency, however briefly.

It is easier, for many people, to be furious than to be frightened.

None of this happens consciously. The shift from hurt to anger can take a fraction of a second. By the time the anger is felt, the more vulnerable feeling underneath it may already be out of view.

Why this matters for both of you

If you are the person who carries anger, this means your anger is information. Not something to obey, and not something to be ashamed of — but something to get curious about.

The question is never only what am I angry about, but what was I feeling, just before the anger arrived?

If you are the person on the receiving end, this means the anger directed at you is, far more often than it feels, a sign of something happening inside the other person — not an accurate measurement of your worth.

That does not make it acceptable, and it does not mean you have to absorb it. But it can loosen the grip of the belief that their anger is the truth about you.

Both of you are, in a sense, trying to understand the same messenger. One of you from the inside, one from the outside.

EXERCISE 1

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. This 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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

SECTION 2

For the person who carries anger

What is underneath it, and what it costs

This section is addressed to the person who struggles with their own anger. If you are on the receiving end, reading it will show you something important about what may be happening inside the other person.

If you are reading this section as your own, you may already know the particular loneliness of it.

The anger that arrives faster than you can catch it. The words that are out of your mouth before you have decided to say them.

The aftermath — the apology, or the silence, or the slow accumulation of moments you wish you could take back.

You may love the people your anger lands on. That is often what makes it so painful.

And you may carry a private shame about it that you rarely let anyone see — a sense that there is something wrong with you, something you should be able to control and cannot.

I want to offer you the same thing I would offer you in my consulting room.

Not absolution — your anger may have done real harm, and that matters. But not condemnation either.

Something more useful than both: understanding.

Your anger is protecting something

Anger that is frequent, intense, or hard to control is almost always sitting on top of something more vulnerable.

It may be protecting an old hurt — a wound from long before this relationship, that current situations keep pressing on.

It may be protecting against shame — the unbearable feeling of being criticised, exposed, or found wanting, which anger can push away faster than anything else.

It may be protecting against helplessness — the feeling of having no control over something that matters, where anger restores at least the sensation of power.

It may be protecting a need that has gone unspoken for so long that it now comes out sideways, as fury, rather than as a clear request.

The anger is not the deepest truth of what is happening in you. It is the part loud enough to be heard over the rest.

The nervous system, and the speed of it

One of the most important things to understand is that anger, at full intensity, is not primarily a thinking state. It is a nervous-system state.

When anger floods the body, the parts of the brain responsible for reflection, perspective, and impulse control are, in effect, partially offline. This is sometimes called flooding, or being hijacked. It is physiological, not a failure of character.

This is why insight alone often isn't enough.

You can understand your anger perfectly in a calm moment, and still be swept away by it in a heated one — because in the heated moment, the understanding part of you has temporarily lost the floor.

Knowing this changes the work.

The task is not only to understand your anger, but to learn to recognise the early physical signs of flooding — the heat, the tightening, the narrowing of attention — and to interrupt the escalation before the thinking brain goes offline.

If your anger had roots that came before this relationship

For many people who struggle with anger, the intensity does not match the present situation because it is not only about the present situation.

If you grew up in an environment where anger was the dominant emotion, or where you were frightened, criticised, or made powerless, your nervous system may have learned anger as its first line of defence — long before you had any choice about it.

This does not excuse the impact of your anger now. But it does explain something. The disproportion you may sometimes sense — the feeling that your reaction was bigger than the moment deserved — is often the past arriving in the present.

And what was learned, however early, can be understood and slowly changed.

The cost — named honestly

Part of what keeps anger in place is that we do not let ourselves fully feel its cost.

The cost to the people you love, who may have learned to be careful around you, to manage you, to keep parts of themselves hidden.

The cost to your relationships, where closeness becomes harder because safety has been eroded.

And the cost to you — the shame, the isolation, the gap between the person you want to be and the person your anger sometimes makes you.

Letting yourself feel this honestly is not the same as drowning in shame. Shame says there is something wrong with me, and tends to drive the very behaviour it condemns.

What is needed instead is something closer to honest responsibility: this has caused harm, and I want to understand it well enough to change it.

EXERCISE 2

What is 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?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 3

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 people 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?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 4

The cost, named honestly

For the person who carries anger

This one asks for courage. With honesty, and without collapsing into shame: what has your anger cost?

What has it cost the people you love — in safety, in closeness, in the ways they may now manage themselves around you? What has it cost your relationships? And what has it cost you?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

SECTION 3

For the person on the receiving end

It is not the verdict on you that it feels like

This section is addressed to the person who lives with someone else's anger. If you are the one who carries anger, reading it will show you something important about what it is like to be on the other side of yours.

If you are reading this section as your own, you may be very tired.

Living with someone whose anger is frequent or unpredictable is a particular kind of exhausting. You learn to scan — to read the mood before you have fully entered the room, to adjust yourself, to anticipate, to manage.

You become an expert in someone else's weather.

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 are too sensitive, too difficult, too much — that if you were somehow different, it would not keep happening.

I want to offer you something I find myself saying often to people in your position.

Their anger is not the truth about you.

It is information about them.

This does not mean you are 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 is happening inside them — their history, their pain, their nervous system, their unmet needs — far more than it is a measure of your worth.

What happens to you over time

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

You may have become hyper vigilant — always slightly braced, always monitoring, unable to fully relax even in calm moments, because you have learned that calm does not always last.

You may have learned to make yourself smaller — to suppress your own needs, opinions, and feelings, because expressing them has too often had a cost.

You may have lost touch with your own reactions — so practised at managing someone else's state that you no longer always know what you yourself feel.

You may carry a low, persistent sense that you are the problem — because you are so often cast as the cause.

These are not signs of weakness. They are the natural adaptations of someone who has been doing something genuinely difficult, often for a long time, often without acknowledgement.

What is yours, and what is not

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

You are 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 are not responsible for managing another adult's emotions. You are not responsible for preventing their anger by being perfect. You are not 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 are 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 is not 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 is all about you, and help you respond from a steadier place.

But understanding someone's anger is not the same as excusing it, and it is 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 are not afraid. Hold both: understanding for them, and care for yourself. If you can only hold one, let it be care for yourself.

EXERCISE 5

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 are allowed.

What have you come to believe about yourself in this relationship? That you are 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

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 6

Sorting what is yours from what is 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 is not actually yours — responsibility for managing their moods, for preventing their anger, for the way they choose to express it?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 7

Coming back to your own signal

For the person on the receiving end

When you have spent a long time managing someone else's feelings, your own can become faint. This exercise is a small step back toward 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 is hard to find, that itself is information. What would it take to begin listening to your own reactions again?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

SECTION 4

The cycle between you

How the two roles lock together

This section is for both of you. It describes the pattern you are 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 is rarely just one person's anger sitting in isolation.

It is 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 the person who carries anger, 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 person on the receiving end, this lands as threat. Their 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 angry person. 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.

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.

Why each of you cannot see the whole of it

From inside the anger, it is very hard to see the impact. The angry person is 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 does not register — or registers only later, as remorse.

From the receiving end, it is very hard to see that the anger is not fundamentally about you. It lands on you, so it feels like it is about you. The history and pain driving it are invisible from where you stand.

This is exactly why seeing it from the other side matters so much. Each of you can offer the other the piece they structurally cannot see for themselves.

The cycle is the thing to change — not the person

There is something quietly hopeful in understanding it this way.

If the problem is one person's defective character, there is not 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.

The angry person learning to catch the escalation early changes the cycle. The receiving person learning to step out of their automatic role — to stop absorbing, to respond from steadiness rather than fear — changes it too.

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

EXERCISE 8

Mapping your cycle together

For both of you

If it feels safe to, this exercise can be done separately and then shared. If sharing is not 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 angry person feel, just before the anger? How does it come out? How does the other person 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 might the angry person catch it earlier? Where might the receiving person step out of their usual role?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

SECTION 5

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 is not a set of techniques to be applied perfectly. It is a set of directions — some for the person who carries anger, some for the person 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 toward 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 is the moment to pause. To step away. To say I need a few minutes rather than continuing into the flood. A genuine pause is not avoidance.

It is 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 is felt and named does not have to convert to anger to be heard.

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

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

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

For the person on the receiving end

Tend to your own nervous system first. You cannot respond from steadiness when you are 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.

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

Where it is safe, experiment with responding differently — not placating, not defending, but staying steady, naming calmly what is happening, declining to absorb what is not yours.

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.

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 is not the right response when a relationship has become unsafe.

For both of you

Talk about the pattern when you are 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.

Agree on a way to pause.

Many couples and families find it helps to agree, in advance and in calm, on a signal that either person can call to stop an escalation — with a commitment to return to the conversation later, rather than using the pause to avoid it.

Remember you are 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.

EXERCISE 9

Your pause plan

For both of you

A pause is the most reliable circuit-breaker there is — but only if it is 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 are on the receiving end

What helps you stay grounded, or remove yourself, when anger begins? What is your own signal that you need to step away?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 10

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 toward.

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 are on the receiving end: what would you most want the other person to understand about what it is like to be on the other side of it?

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 would be with someone you love.

Your reflections

SECTION 6

Exploring the origins of your reactions

If you want to go deeper

Before you begin

If you're completing this workbook with your partner, I encourage you to begin by reflecting on these questions individually before coming together to share what you've discovered.

As you listen to one another, try to listen with curiosity rather than correction. You are not debating the present conflict; you are learning about the experiences that shaped each of you long before you met.

As you listen, notice whether you can hear the younger experiences beneath your partner's reactions. Rather than asking, "Why are they reacting like this?" you might instead wonder, "What might this reaction be protecting?" or "What has this person experienced that makes this response understandable?"

The goal is not to excuse hurtful behaviour or avoid accountability. Rather, it is to develop a deeper understanding of yourselves and each other, creating more space for empathy, compassion, and new ways of responding.

Earlier in this workbook, we explored the idea that anger often protects something more vulnerable beneath it.

This section invites a different question.

Not simply, what is my anger protecting? but where did these reactions, beliefs, and ways of coping first begin?

Whether you are the partner who expresses anger or the partner who finds themselves on the receiving end of it, both of you bring a lifetime of experiences into your relationship.

What often creates distress between couples is not simply what is happening in the present. It is the meeting of two different histories.

Each of us learned something different about relationships growing up. Some of us learned that conflict was dangerous, while others learned it was the only way to be heard. Some learned to become louder when distressed, while others learned to become quieter. Some learned to express their needs openly, while others learned to suppress them altogether. None of these responses developed in isolation. They were often creative adaptations to the environments we grew up in.

When we experience something emotionally significant, our minds naturally try to make sense of it. The meaning we give those experiences gradually shapes our beliefs about ourselves, other people, and the world. Those beliefs influence how we feel in similar situations, and the ways we learn to cope with those feelings gradually become our protective patterns.

Years later, a present-day disagreement can activate that whole sequence again — often without us even realising it.

If we had never experienced something similar before, we would be far less likely to react so strongly. Our reactions often become intense because something about the present has touched something familiar from the past. This doesn't mean your reaction is wrong or that the present situation isn't important. Rather, it suggests that the present may be awakening an older emotional experience that has not yet been fully understood or processed.

This is not about blaming parents, caregivers, or the past.

Nor is it about finding someone responsible for your current struggles.

The purpose is understanding.

The question is not:

Who is to blame?

The question is:

Where did I learn this, and does it still serve me today?

Sometimes there are two things happening during conflict: the event itself, and the meaning we give to the event.

The event is what actually happened.

The meaning is the story our minds begin to tell about what happened.

It is often this meaning, rather than the event itself, that evokes the strongest emotional response.

For example, if your partner forgets something important and you find yourself feeling angry, the anger may seem to be about the forgotten event itself. But as you look more closely, you may discover thoughts such as:

- *I don't matter.*
- *I'm not important.*
- *I'm being taken for granted.*
- *I can only rely on myself.*

Similarly, if your partner is angry with you, your strongest reaction may not be to their anger itself, but to what it means to you:

- *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 probably wouldn't arrive at them so quickly today. They feel immediate because they have become familiar.

The situation is happening in the present, but the beliefs, emotions, and protective responses it activates can sometimes be much older.

The questions that follow are intended to help you gently explore those deeper layers — not to analyse yourself endlessly, but to understand yourself more deeply.

Questions for reflection

Rather than trying to answer every question, choose one recent disagreement or emotionally charged moment and gently work your way through the following.

Step 1: What actually happened?

Describe the situation as simply and objectively as you can.

Then create two columns.

What happened	What I found myself believing it meant
My partner became quiet after we disagreed.	<i>They don't care about what I'm feeling.</i>
My partner forgot something important to me.	<i>I don't matter.</i>

Often it is the meaning we give an event, rather than the event itself, that creates the strongest emotional response.

You may notice that another person could experience exactly the same event and come away with a very different meaning. This doesn't make your interpretation wrong. It simply reminds us that the meaning we give an experience is shaped by the experiences we've lived before.

Step 2: What happened inside me?

Before trying to understand your thoughts, gently pause and notice your body.

- What is happening in my body right now?
- Where do I notice this emotion?
- Is there tightness, heaviness, tension, heat, shakiness, numbness, a racing heart, or a knot in my stomach?
- What does my body seem to be preparing me to do — to fight, withdraw, freeze, please, or protect myself in some way?

Then ask yourself:

What emotions were present beneath my reaction?

Beyond anger, was there hurt, fear, sadness, shame, loneliness, rejection, disappointment, helplessness, or grief?

What was I believing about myself in that moment?

For example:

- *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?

If this situation had never happened before, I would probably be far less likely to react this strongly.

What feels familiar about this experience?

Have I felt this way before?

How far back does this feeling seem to go?

Can I remember an earlier time when I felt something similar?

Step 4: What did I learn growing up?

As you think back to your childhood:

- How was anger expressed in my family?
- What happened when someone became angry?
- What happened when I was upset or needed comfort?
- Were my emotions welcomed, ignored, criticised, dismissed, or met with discomfort?

Looking back now, what do these experiences seem to have taught me about:

- myself?
- other people?
- relationships?
- expressing my emotions?

Step 5: How did I learn to protect myself?

When I felt hurt, afraid, criticised, or alone growing up, what did I tend to do?

Did I:

- become angry?
- stay quiet?

- try harder?
- keep everyone happy?
- leave the room?
- shut down emotionally?
- pretend everything was okay?

How might these responses have helped me then?

Do they still serve me today?

Step 6: If my younger self were here...

If the younger version of me who first learned these patterns were present during this conflict:

- What might they be feeling?
- What might they be needing?
- How might I respond to them with understanding instead of judgement?

What you might actually do with this

Start small. Pick one recent disagreement — it doesn't need to be a major one — and write your way through the questions above for that single moment. Writing, rather than simply thinking, often slows the mind enough to notice things you might otherwise rush past.

Try separating the event from the meaning. You might even draw two columns on a page. In one column, write what actually happened. In the other, write what you found yourself believing it meant. Seeing them side by side can create space to question the meaning without dismissing the reality of the event.

Write yourself a brief history page. Separate from any current disagreement, reflect on how anger and emotional needs were handled in your family growing up, and how you learned to cope. Keep it somewhere safe. Over time, it becomes something you can return to, rather than having to rediscover it every time you're triggered.

Save the question about your younger self until after things have settled. It asks for a level of gentleness that is often difficult to access in the middle of conflict. You may find it easier later that day, or even the following day.

As you work through several situations, look for the pattern rather than focusing only on the incident. You may begin to notice the same beliefs, emotions, bodily sensations, or coping strategies appearing across different situations. That repeated pattern is often more revealing than any single conflict.

Finally, choose one small thing you would like to do differently the next time that familiar pattern arises. Lasting change rarely happens through dramatic transformation. More often, it begins with one small, intentional response that gradually replaces an old way of protecting yourself with a healthier one.

There is no need to rush to find answers.

Sometimes simply becoming aware of the questions is enough.

Awareness often begins not with finding an explanation, but with becoming willing to listen.

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’s 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.

SECTION 7

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 is one distinction in this territory that matters more than any other, so I want to begin there.

First — the difference between difficult and unsafe

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

Some relationships are not difficult but unsafe. And the response to that is 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 are 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 is not a dynamic to be solved by understanding the other person better, or by managing yourself more carefully. Your safety comes first.

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

What you can do on your own

For a relationship that is 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 is yours from what is 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.

For the person who carries anger, therapy is particularly valuable when the anger is 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.

Internal Family Systems is especially useful here — understanding the angry part as a protector, and meeting what it guards, tends to change things more deeply than trying to suppress it.

Compassionate Inquiry and trauma-informed approaches matter when the roots reach back into a frightening or volatile childhood.

For the person on the receiving end, 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 is yours and what is not.

This is often work that connects to earlier experience too — many people 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 is appropriate for relationships that are difficult — but it is not the right first step where there is abuse or fear, where individual safety and support come first.

When more support may be needed

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

For the person on the receiving end, the toll of chronic exposure to anger — anxiety, depression, the wearing-down of self-worth — is itself worth taking to a professional, in its own right.

A simple way to think about it

If there is 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 have 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.

Whichever side of anger you are on, I want to leave you with the same thought.

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

For the person who carries it: underneath it is 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 are caught in was learned, which means it can be changed — slowly, imperfectly, and often more from understanding one another than from trying harder alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 anger and emotional regulation, 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 — no obligation, no pressure. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. All enquiries are handled personally and treated with complete discretion.

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Credentials	MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

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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



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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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