

Dealing with Feelings

As you progress in your recovery, you may notice unaccustomed emotions and feelings beginning to surface. This is particularly true if you're beginning to confront your phobias. It's entirely normal to experience feelings more intensely when you begin to face situations you've been avoiding for a long time. If this is happening to you, you're on the right track.

Many people who are phobic and prone to anxiety tend to have difficulty with feelings. You may have a problem just knowing *what* you're feeling. Or you may be able to identify your feelings but unable to express them. When feelings begin to come up in the course of facing phobias or dealing with panic, there is often a tendency to withhold them, which only aggravates your stress and anxiety. The purposes of this chapter are 1) to help you to increase your awareness of feelings and 2) to give you some tools and strategies for identifying and expressing them more readily.

Some Facts About Feelings

- Feelings, unlike thoughts, involve a *total body reaction*. They are mediated both by a part of your brain called the limbic system and by the involuntary, autonomic nervous system in your body. When you're emotionally excited, you "feel it all over" and experience bodily reactions such as increased heart rate, quickened respiration, perspiration, and even shaking or trembling (note the similarity to panic, which is another type of intense emotional state).
- Feelings do not come out of the blue but are *influenced by your thoughts and perceptions*. They arise from the way you perceive or interpret outer events and/or the way you react to your own inner thought processes or "self-talk" (see chapter 8), imagery, or memories. If you can't identify a stimulus for a particular emotional reaction (for example, a spontaneous panic attack), that stimulus may be unconscious. Feelings are also affected by stress. When you're under stress, your body is already in a state of physiological arousal similar to that which accompanies an emotion. Since you're already primed to have emotional reactions, it may not take much to set you off. The particular type of emotion you happen to experience will depend on your view of external events and what you tell yourself about them.
- Feelings can be divided into two groups—*simple* and *complex*. There is much controversy and disagreement about how to do this—and even whether it can be done—

but for our purposes here, a distinction will be made between *basic emotions* such as anger, grief, sadness, fear, love, excitement, or joy, and more *complex feelings* such as eagerness, relief, disappointment, or impatience. Complex feelings may involve a combination of more basic emotions and are also shaped by thoughts and imagery. Many of the feelings on *The Feeling List* presented later in this chapter are complex. Complex feelings can last a long time and are more tied to thought processes, while basic emotions tend to be short-lived, more reactive, and more tied to involuntary physical reactions mediated by the autonomic nervous system. Fear or panic is a basic emotion, while free-floating anxiety (anxiety without an object) is an example of a more complex feeling.

- Feelings are what give you *energy*. If you're in touch with your feelings and can express them, you'll feel more energetic. If you're out of touch with your feelings or unable to give them expression, you may feel lethargic, numb, tired, or depressed. As you'll see shortly, blocked or withheld feelings can lead to anxiety.
- Feelings often come in *mixtures* rather than in pure form. Sometimes you may experience a simple, basic emotion such as fear, sadness, or rage. More often, though, you'll find that you feel two or more emotions at the same time. For example, it's common to feel anger and fear at the same time when you're threatened. Or you may feel anger, guilt, and love all at the same time in response to arguing with your partner, parent, or close friend. The common expression *sorting out feelings* reflects the fact that you can feel several things at once.
- Feelings are often *contagious*. If you're close to someone who is crying, you may start to feel sad or even cry yourself. Or you may pick up on another's excitement or enthusiasm. Phobic and anxiety-prone individuals are often particularly susceptible to taking on the feelings of people around them. The more you learn to be in touch with and comfortable with your own feelings, the less prone you'll be to "catch" those of others.
- Feelings are *not* right or wrong. As reactions, feelings simply *exist*. Fear, joy, guilt, and anger are not in and of themselves valid or invalid—you just happen to have these feelings and usually will feel better if you can express them. The *perceptions* or *judgments* you made that *led* to your feelings, however, may be right or wrong, valid or invalid. Be careful not to make yourself or anyone else wrong for simply having a feeling, whatever that feeling may be.
- Feelings are often subject to *suppression*. Sometimes you may actively control or "hold in" your feelings. For example, you're still upset from an argument with your spouse and then you have to talk to a colleague at work. You deliberately and consciously hold back your feelings, because you know that it would be inappropriate for them to carry over into your work situation. On other occasions, you may start to experience feelings that are unpleasant and decide that you don't want to deal with them. Instead of deliberately suppressing them, you just get busy and put your mind on

something else—in essence you ignore them. This avoidance or evasion of feelings is a subtler form of suppression (which some people speak of as “repression”). Over time, the practice of continually suppressing your feelings can lead to increased difficulty in expressing or even identifying them.* When the process of suppression begins in childhood, you tend to grow up being out of touch with your feelings and going through life experiencing a certain numbness or “emptiness.”

Why Phobic and Anxiety-Prone People Have a Tendency to Suppress Their Feelings

People with anxiety disorders tend to withhold their feelings. There are several reasons for this.

First, many such people tend to have a very strong need for control and/or a fear of losing control. It’s difficult to surrender to the partial loss of control involved in a full experience of your feelings. When feelings have been chronically denied for a long time, they can loom very large and overwhelming when they first begin to surface. You can even experience irrational fears of “going crazy” or “coming apart” when you give in to the full force of these long-withheld feelings. Note that these are the very same fears that occur during a panic attack. In fact, in some cases *panic itself may be a signal that suppressed feelings are trying to emerge*. Instead of dealing with feelings that seem overwhelming, you panic instead. It’s important to learn that feelings only *seem* overwhelming or scary at the point when they first begin to surface. This scariness goes away as soon as you allow yourself to accept and *feel* them. It’s simply not possible to “go crazy” by fully feeling your emotions. In fact, “craziness”—or severe emotional disturbance—is more likely to develop as an outcome of not experiencing your feelings.

A second reason why phobic people have difficulty expressing their feelings is because often they grew up in families with overly critical parents who set unrealistically high or perfectionist standards. In such a situation, a child doesn’t feel free to express her or his natural impulses and feelings. Parental approval is so essential to every one of us that we will always suppress our natural reactions and feelings if they are in conflict with parental expectations. As adults, many of us continue to make that choice. Anger is typically the most common feeling to be withheld because it was frequently not tolerated in childhood or its expression was punished. To the child, anger becomes truly dangerous if its expression threatens the continued approval and affection of the parents, on whom that child is completely dependent for survival. More will be said about anger later in this chapter.

* In this workbook, the terms “repression” and “repressed feelings” are avoided because there is frequently confusion between the popular use of these terms (where what is meant is usually similar to the term “suppression”—the conscious withholding of feelings) and the more technical, psychoanalytic use of the word “repression” to refer to an unconscious defense mechanism.

Identifying, Expressing, and Communicating Feelings

Because phobic people, by their very nature, tend to be emotionally reactive and have very strong feelings, it is especially important for them to learn to express rather than withhold what they feel. Actually, a three-stage process is involved here.

Perhaps you have so withheld your emotions that much of the time you don't even know *what* you're feeling. An important first step is to learn how to *identify* your feelings. Once this awareness and your ability to identify feelings has developed, the second step is learning to *express* them. This usually involves being willing to share your feelings with another person. Alternatively, you may choose to "write out" your feelings in a journal, or physically discharge them (for example, by crying or venting anger into a pillow).

Once you've given some expression to your feelings, you're ready for the third and final step: *communicating* them to whomever you perceive to have contributed to "triggering" these particular emotions. For the purposes of this chapter, "communicating" a feeling means to let someone know that your feeling involves something he or she said or did. While *expressing* anger means simply finding a way to discharge it—for example, telling a neutral friend that you feel angry about something—*communicating* anger means to let someone know that you're angry about something he or she said or did.

The good news is that identifying, expressing, and communicating your feelings is something that can be learned—and something that can be improved upon with practice. It does take some time and perseverance, however, if you've been accustomed to withholding or ignoring feelings for much of your life.

To sum up, your ability to gain awareness of and express your feelings is an *essential* part of the process of recovering from anxiety disorders. It is just as important as relaxation, desensitization, and the cognitive skills discussed in previous chapters.

Identifying Your Feelings

How can you identify what you're feeling? It will help to follow these three steps:

1. Recognize the symptoms of suppressed feelings.
2. Tune in to your body.
3. Discriminate the exact feeling.

Recognize Symptoms of Suppressed Feelings

Held-in feelings frequently make themselves known through several types of bodily and psychological symptoms:

Free-floating anxiety. Anxiety arises from many sources. Sometimes it's simply fear in the face of uncertainty. Sometimes it's the result of anticipating a negative outcome ("what-if"

thinking). If anxiety doesn't seem to relate to any specific situation—if it's only a vague, undefined uneasiness—this may be because it arises from strong but unexpressed feelings. Every feeling carries a charge of energy. When we hold that energy in and do not give it expression, it may create a state of tension or vague anxiety. The next time you hold in your anger toward someone, notice whether you feel anxious afterward. Holding in enthusiasm or excitement about something can also produce anxiety.

Depression. In his well-known book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck defines depression as “stuck feelings.” Often we feel depressed when we're holding in unexpressed grief or sadness over some loss. Letting out tears and crying often helps us to feel better—we effectively mourn the loss. Depression can also result from holding in anger. Gestalt psychologists were the first to point out that depression can mask anger turned in against the self. If you find yourself feeling depressed without any obvious, recent loss, it may help to ask yourself what you're angry about. This is an especially good question if you find that you're attacking and criticizing yourself.

Psychosomatic symptoms. Common psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, and asthma are often the end result of chronically withheld feelings. While psychosomatic symptoms can arise from any type of chronic stress, the holding in of feelings over many years is a form of stress that is especially likely to take its toll on your body. Learning to identify and express strong feelings can lead to a reduction or even a remission of many types of psychosomatic symptoms.

Muscle tension. Stiff, tight muscles are an especially common symptom of chronically withheld feelings. We tend to tighten certain groups of muscles when we suppress and hold in what we feel. Different feelings are held in by tightening different muscle groups. Anger or frustration is often suppressed by tightening the back of your neck and shoulders. (These are the areas, incidentally, where tension is most commonly experienced in our society.) Grief and sadness can be held in by tightening muscles in the chest and around the eyes. Fear can be held in through tightening up in the stomach-diaphragm area. Withheld sexual feelings may be indicated by a tightening up of muscle groups in the pelvic region.

These correlations between areas of the body and suppression of specific feelings should not be viewed as absolute. Anger, for example, can be held in by tightening many different muscle groups from the eyes to the pelvis. The point is that tight muscles and physical tension in any region may be a sign of chronically bottled-up feelings. This relationship between suppressed feelings and muscular tension has been explored in great depth by the school of therapy known as *bioenergetics*. The books of Dr. Alexander Lowen provide a good introduction to this approach.

Any of the above four symptoms may indicate that you've been withholding strong feelings. Once you've recognized this, the next step is to tune in to exactly what it is you're feeling.

Tune In to Your Body

Staying in your head, preoccupied with daily worries and concerns, tends to keep you out of touch with your feelings. To switch gears and gain access to your feelings, it's necessary to shift your focus from your head to your body. Again, feelings tend to be held in the body. Our use of language reflects this in expressions such as "heart-broken," "pain in the neck," and "gut-level feeling." By making time to tune in to your body, you can learn to get in touch with and identify your feelings. Many people have found the following steps to be useful. (They are based on a process called "experiential focusing" developed by Eugene Gendlin—see the reading list at the end of this chapter.)

1. Physically relax. It's difficult to know what you're feeling if your body is tense and your mind is racing. Spend five to ten minutes doing progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, or some other relaxation technique to slow yourself down.
2. Ask yourself, "What am I feeling right now?" or alternatively, "What is my main problem or concern right now?"
3. Tune in to that place in your body where you feel emotional sensations such as anger, fear, or sadness. Often this will be in the area of your heart or your gut (stomach/diaphragm), although it may be other areas higher or lower in the body. This is your "inner place of feelings."
4. Wait and listen to whatever you can sense or pick up on in your place of feelings. *Don't try to analyze or judge* what's there. Be an observer and allow yourself to sense any feelings or moods that are waiting to surface. Simply *wait* until something emerges.
5. If you draw a blank on steps 3 and 4 or are still stuck in your head (your thoughts are racing), go back to step 1 and start over again. Most likely you need more time to relax. A few minutes of slow, deep breathing will often help to increase your awareness of your feelings.
6. Once you've obtained a general sense of what you're feeling, it may help you to make it seem more concrete by answering the following questions:
 - Where in my body is this feeling?
 - What is the shape of this feeling?
 - What is the size of this feeling?
 - If this feeling had a color, what would it be?

If, after taking the time to relax and tune in to what you're feeling, you still have only a vague sense of what's there, it may be useful to look at a list of "feeling words" to help you to identify the exact feeling you're experiencing.

Identify the Exact Feeling: The Feeling List

The list of feeling words on the next page may help you to identify exactly what you're feeling. Use the list anytime you have a vague sense of some feeling but are unsure of exactly what it might be: read down the list until a particular feeling word stands out and then check to see if it matches your inner experience.

Expressing Feelings

Once you're able to identify what you're feeling, it's very important to express it. *Expressing feelings*, here, is defined as "letting them out" by 1) sharing them with someone else, 2) writing them out, or 3) physically discharging them (such as by hitting a plastic bat against your bed or crying into a pillow). Expressing your feelings does *not* mean "dumping" or directing them toward someone you perceive to be responsible for how you feel. The skill of letting someone know how you feel about them (or better, their behavior) is discussed later, in the section "Communicating Your Feelings to Someone."

Feelings can be compared to charges of energy that need physical release or discharge from the body. When unexpressed, they tend to be stored in your body in the form of tension, anxiety, or other symptoms previously described. Your physical health as well as your sense of well-being depends on your willingness to acknowledge and express feelings at or close to the time they occur. Here are some useful ways of expressing your feelings.

Talk It Out

Probably the best way to express feelings is to share them with a supportive friend, mate, or counselor. Sharing means not just talking *about* your feelings but actually letting them out. It's important that you have a high level of trust toward the person you share with in order to open up and fully disclose your true feelings. And it's important that they *listen carefully*—in other words, they do not offer advice, opinions, or suggestions while you're sharing. Your ability to share will in part be determined by your partner's willingness to do nothing more than "just listen." (This type of listening may still be "active," where the listener occasionally summarizes what you've said in order to confirm that it's been correctly understood.)

Write It Out

If your feelings are running high and there's no one immediately available to talk to, take a pen and paper and write out what you feel. You may wish to keep a "feeling journal" in which you enter your strong feelings from time to time (see exercise 2 at the end of this chapter). Weeks or months later it will be very instructive to go back and read through the journal to get an idea of broad patterns or themes running through your life. Whether you keep a journal or not, the act of writing out your feelings will often suffice as an outlet until you have the opportunity to talk them out.

The Feeling List

Positive Feelings

Affectionate
 Alive
 Amused
 Accepted
 Beautiful
 Brave
 Calm
 Capable
 Caring
 Cheerful
 Cherished
 Comfortable
 Competent
 Concerned
 Confident
 Content
 Courageous
 Curious
 Delighted
 Desirable
 Eager
 Excited
 Forgiving
 Friendly
 Fulfilled
 Generous
 Glad
 Good
 Grateful
 Great
 Happy
 Hopeful
 Hopeful
 Joyful
 Lovable
 Loved
 Loving
 Loyal
 Melancholy
 Passionate
 Peaceful
 Playful
 Pleased
 Proud
 Quiet
 Relaxed
 Relieved
 Respected
 Safe
 Satisfied
 Secure
 Self-reliant
 Sexy
 Silly
 Special
 Strong
 Supportive
 Sympathetic
 Tender

Negative Feelings

Afraid
 Angry
 Anxious
 Apprehensive
 Ashamed
 Awkward
 Bitter
 Bored
 Confused
 Contempt
 Defeated
 Dejected
 Dependent
 Depressed
 Despairing
 Desperate
 Devastated
 Disappointed
 Discouraged
 Disgusted
 Distrustful
 Embarrassed
 Exasperated
 Fearful
 Foolish
 Frantic
 Frustrated
 Furious
 Guilty
 Hateful
 Helpless
 Hopeless
 Horrified
 Hostile
 Humiliated
 Hurt
 Ignored
 Impatient
 Inadequate
 Incompetent
 Indecisive
 Inferior
 Inhibited
 Insecure
 Irritated
 Isolated
 Jealous
 Lonely
 Melancholy
 Miserable
 Misunderstood
 Muddled
 Needy
 Old
 Outraged
 Overwhelmed
 Panicky
 Touchy
 Trapped
 Troubled
 Unappreciated
 Unattractive
 Uncertain
 Uncomfortable
 Uneasy
 Unfulfilled

Discharging Sadness

You might want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you ever cry?
- Under what circumstances do you cry?
- Do you cry because someone hurt you? Because you feel lonely? Because you're scared?
- Do you cry for no apparent reason?
- Do you cry only when alone or do you permit someone else to see you crying?

Sometimes you may have a feeling of being on the verge of tears. You feel like you would like to cry but are having difficulty "getting it out." At this point, you may find that a particular artistic prodding will help. Evocative pieces of music that have personal significance can often help to elicit tears. Watching an emotional movie or reading poetry or literature or even certain television commercials may also bring an initially vague sense of sadness to the surface.

Discharging Anger

Often you may feel angry or frustrated but are reluctant to express it for fear of hurting others. It's quite possible, and often healthy, however, to discharge your anger in ways that are not destructive—ways that do not involve "dumping" your anger on someone else. *Going through the physical motions associated with aggression* will usually bring anger to the surface. The target of these motions, however, always needs to be an inanimate object. All of the following have been helpful to many people in ventilating angry feelings:

- Hitting a large pillow with both fists
- Screaming into a pillow
- Hitting a punching bag
- Throwing eggs against a wall or into a bathtub
- Yelling within the confines of a car
- Chopping wood
- Hitting a life-size inflatable doll
- Hitting an old tennis racket or a plastic bat against the bed
- Having a vigorous physical workout

I do not recommend that you engage in any of the above (with the exception of physical exercise) on a daily basis. There is evidence, reported by Carol Tavris in her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, that excessive ventilation of anger only tends to produce more

anger. The popular term “rageaholic” describes the type of person who has become addicted to anger through *excessive* expression. On the other hand, many phobic and anxiety-prone people have a tendency to withhold or deny angry feelings under any circumstances. Anger may be such a difficult emotion for you that some additional comments are warranted here.

Dealing with Anger

Of all the different emotions that can give rise to anxiety, anger is the most common and pervasive one. Anger comprises a continuum of emotions ranging from rage at one extreme to impatience and irritation at the other. Frustration is perhaps the most common form of anger that most of us experience.

A proneness to phobias and obsessive-compulsive behavior is often associated with withheld anger. *Your preoccupation with phobias, obsessions, and compulsions increases during those times when you're feeling most frustrated, thwarted, and otherwise angry with your situation in life.* Frequently, however, you are entirely (or almost entirely) unaware of these angry or frustrated feelings.

Why should people suffering from phobias and other anxiety disorders be predisposed to deny or withhold anger? There are several reasons:

- Individuals who are prone to phobias and anxiety tend to be “people pleasers.” They want to think of themselves—and appear to others—as pleasant and nice. And that leaves very little room for experiencing, let alone expressing, anger.
- Such people, especially if they suffer from agoraphobia, are often unusually dependent on relationships with significant others. Outward expressions of anger are taboo because they might threaten to alienate the very person on whom the agoraphobic feels dependent for survival.
- People who are prone to anxiety have a high need for control. But anger, when full-blown, is probably the least rational and least controllable of our feelings. Giving in to anger, with the attendant loss of control, is very frightening if you are someone who always feels the need to “keep a grip” on yourself.

The consequences of withholding anger over time have been discussed in the previous section detailing the symptoms of suppressed feelings. Generalized anxiety can be a sign of suppressed anger. So can depression or psychosomatic symptoms such as ulcers, neck and upper back tension, or tension headaches. Some additional signs of withheld anger include

- An *increase* in phobic concerns or sensitization to new situations without any obvious reason
- An *increase* in obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behaviors
- Self-defeating behaviors, such as excessive self-criticism, maximizing what's wrong with your life while discounting the good, complaining about problems without taking any action, passive-aggressive behavior such as procrastination or always being late, blaming others, and worrying about the future instead of enjoying the present

Some Guidelines for Learning to Deal with Anger

Once you've become aware of the signs and symptoms of suppressed anger, what can you do to better deal with these feelings? The following guidelines may be helpful:

1. *Be willing to let go of the standard of always having to be nice or pleasing in all situations.* Expand your self-concept so that you can allow yourself to express irritation or anger in situations when to do so might be appropriate. Examples would include occasions when someone keeps responding to you with snide remarks or subtle put-downs—or a situation where someone breaks an important agreement they made with you. Remember that expressing your anger does *not* mean dumping it on someone else, but rather sharing with someone (preferably *not* the person you feel angry at) that you're feeling angry. You need to do this with feeling, rather than merely talking in a detached manner about your anger. Expressing your anger might alternatively mean to write out or physically "exercise out" your angry feelings. When you're ready to tell people you're angry with them or their behavior, there are specific skills you can learn to communicate your feelings without hurting or belittling the other person. See the section below, "Communicating Your Feelings to Someone," and chapter 13 for guidelines about communicating anger or other feelings.
2. *Work on overcoming "what-ifs" about what might happen if you let your anger out.* Usually these what-ifs are exaggerated and unreasonable—for example, "What if I go berserk or crazy?" or "What if I do something terrible?" Remember that anger withheld for a long time may *seem* ominous at first. Its intensity may startle you during the first few moments you give it vent, but it is not going to cause you to "fall apart," "go crazy," or "do something destructive." The intensity of your angry feelings will diminish quickly as soon as you allow yourself to experience them. This is especially so if you express your anger in a benign way. If your anger is intense, try discharging it onto inanimate objects or on paper in the ways previously described, instead of "dumping" it onto someone you'd like to blame for your feelings.
3. *Work on overcoming fears about alienating people you care about when you allow your anger to show.* Being able to appropriately communicate angry feelings to significant others is, in fact, an indication that you do care about them. If you didn't care, you would be more likely to withdraw from them and withhold your true feelings. While over-expression of anger can be destructive to others or yourself, not ever communicating angry feelings to someone you love may convey either indifference or a kind of phony, "holier-than-thou" equanimity.
4. *Learn to communicate angry feelings assertively rather than aggressively.* It is quite possible to convey your anger or frustration toward other people in a way that respects their dignity—in a way that doesn't blame or put them down. One way is to begin what you say with *I* rather than *you*—in other words, "I feel angry when you break your agreements" instead of "You make me so mad when you break your agreements." "I-statements" maintain respect for the other person; "you-statements"

put people on the defensive and assign them the blame for your feelings.

Believe it or not, other people don't *make* you angry. You react angrily to your own interpretation of the significance of another person's behavior. Something they say or do goes against your standards of what is acceptable or just, and so you feel angry. You can learn to convey your angry feelings without hurting, judging, or blaming others by using the communication skills discussed in the next section.

5. *Learn to discriminate different modes of expressing anger, depending on the intensity of your feelings.* If your anger is *very* intense, you're probably not ready to talk to someone yet. Instead, you need a direct and physical mode of expression such as pounding pillows, screaming into a pillow, or engaging in a vigorous physical workout. After your anger has lessened as a result of direct physical expression—or if it was moderate in the first place—talk it out with someone. If possible, it is best to share it with a neutral friend first before directly confronting the person with whom you're angry. If no such neutral person is available, use the communication guidelines that follow as well as those outlined in chapter 13. If, finally, your anger is only a mild irritation, you can use the tried-and-true method of deep breathing and counting to ten to dispel it—or communicate it directly if you wish.

A Caveat

This section on dealing with anger is intended for you if you have difficulty being aware of, or expressing, angry feelings. If you tend to withhold your anger, even when you are being taken advantage of or abused, then learning to be more in touch with your angry feelings can be empowering. If you have difficulty standing up for yourself in the face of manipulation or when your boundaries are violated, then appropriate, *assertive* communication of your anger is something that you will certainly want to learn.

On the other hand, if you feel angry often and find that your angry feelings interfere with your relationships, then obviously you don't need instructions on how to identify and express your anger! If you're tired of the emotional and physical toll that frequent anger can take, you're looking for a different solution. *When any emotion is excessive or destructive, the solution lies not in expressing it more but in changing the self-talk and mistaken beliefs that aggravate that emotion.* In brief, while this chapter will be useful if you have difficulty acknowledging or expressing feelings, a more cognitive approach is needed for any feeling that is excessive or destructive to you (for example, anxiety itself). Thus it may be useful, if anger comes too easily and interferes with your relationships, to review chapters 8 and 9.

Anger, like all other emotions, is determined by your perceptions and your internal monologue. Other people and situations don't, *in themselves*, "make" you angry: it is your interpretations of what others do and say and your internal commentary about them that stimulate anger. Often these interpretations and this self-talk contain an element of distortion. Any of the following cognitive distortions can trigger anger:

- *Global labeling*—When you describe someone to yourself as a "bum" or a "jerk," you write them off in a way that ignores the whole person.

- *Black-or-white thinking*—You see things in extreme terms, so that people or situations are either all good or all bad; there are no shades of gray. You thus often lose sight of the truth of a situation.
- *Magnification*—When you blow something out of proportion, you increase your sense of being wronged and victimized. This is a common way of fueling and maintaining anger.
- *Entitlement*—When you believe that you should always get what you want, everything should come easily, or life should always be fair, your thinking rests on the mistaken belief that you are *naturally entitled* to complete gratification of your needs all the time. This kind of misconception can lead to a lot of self-defeating anger and blame.

The above examples are just four among several types of distorted thinking that can lead to excessive and destructive anger. A more complete discussion of the mistaken beliefs that can trigger anger may be found in the book *When Anger Hurts* by Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay. If excess anger is interfering with your well-being and relationships, I highly recommend this book.

Communicating Your Feelings to Someone

Communicating your feelings, for the purposes of this chapter, means letting someone know that your feelings have something to do with what they said or did. This level of dealing with your feelings is usually riskier than simply expressing them to a third party or setting them down on paper. Yet when you let someone know how you feel toward him or her, you have the greatest likelihood of being able to work through or “complete” the feeling—in short, to be done with it. You can live in fear or anger toward someone for a long time without any change until you finally let the person know how you feel. Once you do, you no longer need to “hold” the feeling in secret or silence. Sometimes the person you have feelings toward is no longer available or alive, in which case you can still communicate your feelings by writing a letter (see exercise 3 at the end of this chapter).

There are two important rules for communicating your feelings:

1. Be sure that the person you disclose your feelings to is willing to hear you out and listen.
2. Avoid blaming or belittling the person you’re addressing.

The first rule is important because your feelings are an intimate part of you that deserves respect. If someone isn’t truly ready or willing to hear you, you’re likely to go away feeling discounted and misunderstood. Your sadness, fear, or anger toward the person may even increase. When you’re ready to tell someone how you feel, ask her or him to make time to listen to you. You might say, “I have something important to say and I’d appreciate it if you would listen.” If the other person interrupts you, you might say, “Would you please wait until I’m finished?” When others truly listen to you, it means that they give you their

undivided attention, don't interrupt, and don't offer any advice, opinions, or judgments. They just listen—silently and attentively. If they have any comments, these can wait until after you're finished with your communication. The only appropriate interruption by the other person would be an occasional summary of what you've said, just to confirm that they heard you accurately. This occasional summarizing by the listener is called *active listening* and is a skill that you can learn about in any basic book or course on communication. Good listening skills on the part of the person you're addressing will actually *enhance* your ability to disclose and communicate what you're feeling.

The second rule is important because the person you're speaking to can best listen if you respect him or her and refrain from blaming or making him or her responsible for your feelings. Three skills are needed to accomplish this: 1) using first-person statements, 2) referring how you feel to the other's behavior rather than to him or her personally, and 3) avoiding judging the other person.

1. *Use first-person statements. When you communicate how you feel to someone, begin what you say with the expression "I feel ..." or "I'm feeling ..."* In this way, you take responsibility for your feelings rather than putting them off onto the other person. The moment you tell someone "You make me feel ..." or "You caused me to feel ..." you relinquish your responsibility and put the other person on the defensive. Even if part of you wants to cast blame, you'll get across more easily and get a better hearing if you begin with "I feel ..."
2. *Refer to the other person's behavior rather than making a personal attack.* What do you have feelings about? Although initially it may seem that you're angry at or scared of the other person, this almost invariably turns out to be an overgeneralization. On further reflection, you'll find that you're angered or frightened by something specific that was *said* or *done*. Before communicating your feelings, it's important to determine what that something was. Then, when you actually speak, complete your first-person statement with a reference to that specific behavior or statement.

"I'm feeling angry because you didn't call when you said you would."

(*Not: "I had a panic attack because you didn't call—not that you'd care" or "You didn't call, you jerk, and it made me feel awful."*)

"I felt threatened when I saw you dancing with your secretary at the party."

(*Not: "How could you dance with her when you knew how humiliated I'd feel?" or "You're so completely insensitive to my feelings."*)

"I feel scared when you talk about leaving."

(*Not: "I'm scared" or "How can you talk to me like that when you know how vulnerable I am?"*)

Although right and wrong ways of stating your feelings can involve little more than a difference in wording, it is an important difference. Referring your feelings to people rather than their behavior results in putting either them or yourself in a one-down position. In the first example, dumping anger on the

other person is likely to make him or her feel guilty or angry. Calling someone a jerk will certainly put him or her on the defensive. In the third example, telling someone you're afraid of her or him is likely to make *you* feel more defensive and to promote distance in the relationship. In brief, referring your feelings to a specific statement or behavior lets other people know that you're upset with *something they can change*—rather than with who they are personally.

3. *Avoid judgments.* This point speaks for itself and is an extension of the previous point. When telling people how you feel about what they said or did, avoid judging them. Your problem is with their behavior, not them. Refraining from judging others will greatly increase the likelihood of their hearing you out.

Looking for the Need Behind Your Feelings

Strong feelings are often a clue to unmet needs. Perhaps you're feeling anxious because you're afraid of what other people will think of you if you show signs of panic. The need for acceptance underlies your fear. You experience sadness or grief because you're alone after the departure of someone you felt close to. The need beneath your grief is for companionship and affection. Or you're feeling angry because your partner broke an important agreement you had. The need behind your anger is for respect and consideration. Or you may be feeling bored, empty, or depressed because your life seems too dull or routine. The need behind your boredom is for a greater sense of meaning and purpose in your life.

By looking for the need behind your feelings, you give your feelings a new and deeper perspective. You're not just feeling anger or sadness without reason: you know you have a particular need. Once you've gained more insight into your needs, you can begin to address how to go about meeting them. If you ignore or fail to address the needs behind a feeling, you'll find that the feeling will come up more and more, to the point that it feels as if it will never leave you. Once again, you can view your excessive feelings as a sign rather than a problem. When it gets to the point that you're asking yourself why you feel sad all the time—or angry all the time—that is a sure sign that you need to uncover some unmet need or needs. The subject of how to ask for what you need is dealt with in detail in the following chapter on assertiveness. More will be said about the nature of human needs and the importance of acknowledging and addressing them in the chapter on self-esteem. If anxiety plays too big a part in your life, take that as a sign that you're denying some of your basic needs.

Self-Evaluations

The following two self-evaluations are intended to help you gain more awareness about how you handle two important emotions—anger and sadness. Use them as a basis for identifying any attitudes or habits that stand in the way of your ability to express and communicate what you feel.

Self-Evaluation 1: Developing Awareness of Anger

1. What messages did you receive as a child about expressing anger?
2. What types of people, situations, and events tend to make you angry?
3. Is it okay for you to feel anger?
4. How do you feel about expressing angry feelings? To others? To inanimate objects?
5. If you do express anger, how do you go about it? Are you aggressive? Assertive? Stubborn/resistant? Complaining? Rebellious?
6. What are you willing to do to increase your ability to recognize angry feelings? Express anger? Communicate anger appropriately?

Self-Evaluation 2: Developing Awareness of Sad Feelings

1. What messages did you receive as a child about crying?
2. What types of situations might lead you to cry? Do you usually cry for a reason—or for no apparent reason?
3. Do you always cry alone, or can you cry in the presence of another?
4. How do you feel about crying? Relieved? Depressed? Ashamed? Other?
5. What are you willing to do to improve your ability to recognize sad feelings? Express sad feelings? Communicate sad feelings appropriately?

Exercises

The following three exercises offer direct ways to express your feelings.

Exercise 1: Establish a Listening Partner

Make an arrangement with your spouse, your partner, or a close friend to set aside an hour or more each week for listening to each other. Then do a trade-off. First, your partner gives you his or her undivided attention for a half hour, while you express what you've been feeling during the week. Then you switch roles. As a speaker in this process, you need to focus on how you've actually been *feeling* about what's happening in your life, not just chat about or describe it. If you are the listener, you need to give the speaker your undivided attention without interruptions. For the duration of the period that you're listening, refrain altogether from offering your advice, opinions, or comments. You may ask the speaker for clarification if you're confused about what he or she is saying. It also helps occasionally to summarize what you hear the speaker say, beginning with, "Let's see if I'm following you. You said ..." Again, this is called *active listening*.

Exercise 2: The Feeling Journal

Set aside a notebook whose sole purpose is to provide a place where you can express your feelings. Make entries whenever you feel the need to release frustration, anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, or grief, as well as positive feelings such as joy, love, and excitement. Begin each entry with the words "I feel" or "I felt" and refer to *The Feeling List* to help identify the specific feelings you are experiencing.

Exercise 3: Write a Letter Communicating Your Feelings

Write a letter communicating your feelings to someone who is not available in person. Good candidates for this would be an ex-spouse or lover or a deceased parent. Make time to express *all* of your feelings toward this person, both positive and negative. Persist with the process until you feel that you've said everything you need to say. It's not uncommon for such a letter to run on for several pages.

When you've completed the letter, read it to a close friend or counselor, which will help make it more real. It's all right, on the other hand, if you prefer to keep the letter private.

Option: You may want to write a letter to someone who is available but to whom, for various reasons, you've avoided communicating your feelings. I suggest that you consult with a close friend or, even better, a counselor before deciding to send such a letter.

Summary of Things to Do

1. Reread the section "Symptoms of Suppressed Feelings" until you're familiar with both psychological and bodily signs of suppressed feelings: free-floating anxiety, depressed moods, psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches or ulcers, muscle tension, and so on.
2. If you have difficulty identifying your feelings, practice the focusing exercise in the section "Tune In to Your Body." Use *The Feeling List* to help you identify exactly what you're feeling.
3. Practice expressing your feelings on a daily basis. Establish a "listening partner" with whom you can talk out your feelings regularly (exercise 1) and/or keep a feeling journal (exercise 2). Notice changes in your level of bodily tension and mood after expressing what you feel.
4. If anger is an especially difficult feeling to deal with, reread "Some Guidelines for Learning to Deal with Anger." Practice getting comfortable expressing your anger to a neutral person or in a journal before attempting to communicate anger directly.
5. In communicating anger or any other feeling to people directly, remember to 1) make sure that they're willing to listen to you, 2) use first-person statements, 3) refer

your feeling to their behavior (or statements) rather than to them personally, and 4) avoid judging them.

6. Write a letter communicating your feelings to someone who was or is important in your life (exercise 3).

Further Reading

Gendlin, Eugene. *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books, 2007.

McKay, Matthew, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning. *Messages: The Communication Skills Book*. Third edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009.

McKay, Matthew, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay. *When Anger Hurts*. Second edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2003.

Peck, M. Scott. *The Road Less Traveled*. Twenty-fifth anniversary edition. New York: Touchstone Books, 2003.

Rubin, Theodore I. *The Angry Book*. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Tavris, Carol. *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*. Revised edition. New York: Touchstone, 1989.