



The Tool Kit for Anger: Quick skills to increase understanding, self-compassion, and growth by Sherry Skyler Kelly, PhD

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- PROLOGUE

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I. Prologue

Anger is difficult to talk about and, also, to write about. Most of us were told from a very young age, “not to be angry”. However, anger is a very common emotion and one that can feel overwhelming. Anger can take many forms and is experienced differently, as well as uniquely in each situation. As I will discuss later in this book, anger is an emotion that can be understood as a type of “alarm system”. It is an emotion that is trying to tell us something is approaching as a threat, or maybe it’s a warning to take action. Looking at anger in a new way will help you to ultimately understand it and manage it.

Many of us have learned to be afraid of anger, perhaps because of its consequences or of witnessing the fury of it used against us. Often, we find ourselves in the difficult situation of feeling both angry and powerless. How to understand anger, manage it, and harness the energy of it is something not often taught in school. Today, we are exposed to anger more than any generation before through social media and the internet. Even though anger is a very basic emotion - one integral to our survival - it’s something we rarely talk about or learn about. As a result, most of us are not very good at managing anger.

Several research studies over the past decade have shown that over two-thirds of young people have experienced explosive anger - an episode of anger that is so all encompassing that they feel out of control. It is this type of anger that can lead to destructive behaviors, ruin relationships, and have life altering consequences. Alternatively, there is also a good side of anger. The energy of anger can be harnessed for good and can lead to our growth as individuals and as a society.

Why do we get angry? What causes the feelings I experience when angry? Does anger have a purpose, and if so, what is it? Can finding the meaning of our anger help us to actually feel happier? How can we manage anger, without pretending we don’t feel it? How can we grow and flourish from anger?

Today, during great times of uncertainty, political polarization and unrest, we see anger taking many forms - sometimes destructive forms. In the media we see anger often expressed through violence. During times of crisis, we may witness a “collective anger” or a shared anger that is a rallying cry for change. For some people, their anger is being used to define identity and purpose. A silver lining of our current COVID situation and social crisis is the opportunity to develop our inner skills more than ever before.

In this workbook, I will try to answer many of the questions you may have about anger. Each chapter will present an explanation of forms of anger and how anger relates to life. At the end of each chapter, there will be a chance to “pause” and “reset” with exercises to understand your own feelings - including angry feelings - in a way to help you grow.

CHAPTER ONE - ANGER IS AN ICEBERG

First Step: What Is Anger & Why Is It Important to Understand It?

The first step in finding some relief from anger is by understanding it, not just feeling it - or acting upon it. Anger is a valid emotion and it's something we all are wired for. Think of anger as a type of an alarm system, like many emotions are. What is the anger trying to tell you?

Anger serves several purposes, but the main ones are to protect us from danger - even perceived threats to our survival. Later in this book, we will explore why anger is a component of our long evolved "fight or flight" survival system. Because so many mental health challenges we experience - depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, hopelessness - relate to anger, understanding the emotions fueling it is one path to healthier coping.

A recent survey (2019) conducted by IBM Watson Health and National Public Radio (NPR), found that 84% of respondents said they were angrier in the past year than they had been further back in time. No one can deny there is a lot of anger out there - especially as our society feels more divided and conflicted. In June 2020, in the midst of the COVID pandemic and civil protests, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) surveyed almost 5,500 Americans on mental health challenges. The survey found that while 40% of adults reported struggling with mental health, teens and young adults were impacted even harder with over 62% currently reporting anxiety or depressive symptoms.

How does not dealing with anger effectively cause more problems and pain?

Understanding your complex emotions and your emotional needs can be an exciting and necessary journey of self-discovery. Your emotional growth and health are just as important as your physical health. For now, let's get some relief and control of anger by understanding what it is and where it may be coming from.

Here is a starting point for you to understand it: Anger is an iceberg. That's right! Visualize an iceberg - like the one below or a frosty one in your mind.

Like an iceberg, your angry behaviors and feelings are sticking out there above the surface. Beware, because that mountain of sharp ice protruding up from the

depths can be very misleading. Like real icebergs in the ocean, most of your "an-ger iceberg" is actually hiding well below the surface.

Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.



Angry

embarrassed scared grief
shame tricked overwhelmed
frustrated depressed disgusted
distrustful grumpy stressed
attacked rejected helpless
guilt trapped nervous anxious
trauma annoyed exhausted
disrespected unsure envious
disappointed lonely offended
uncomfortable worried insecure
regret hurt

Reference and thanks for this image to - <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/the-anger-iceberg-2/> & <https://thriveglobal.com/authors/the-gottman-institute/>

Your anger that is visible to the world is just the tip of the iceberg, right? What lies beneath that iceberg are the many emotions, experiences, and triggers which are the foundation of your anger. Understanding where your anger is coming from will help you identify the sources of your feelings. It's a new way of thinking about anger and it will take some practice. Here are some strategies to get you thinking in a new and healthier way.

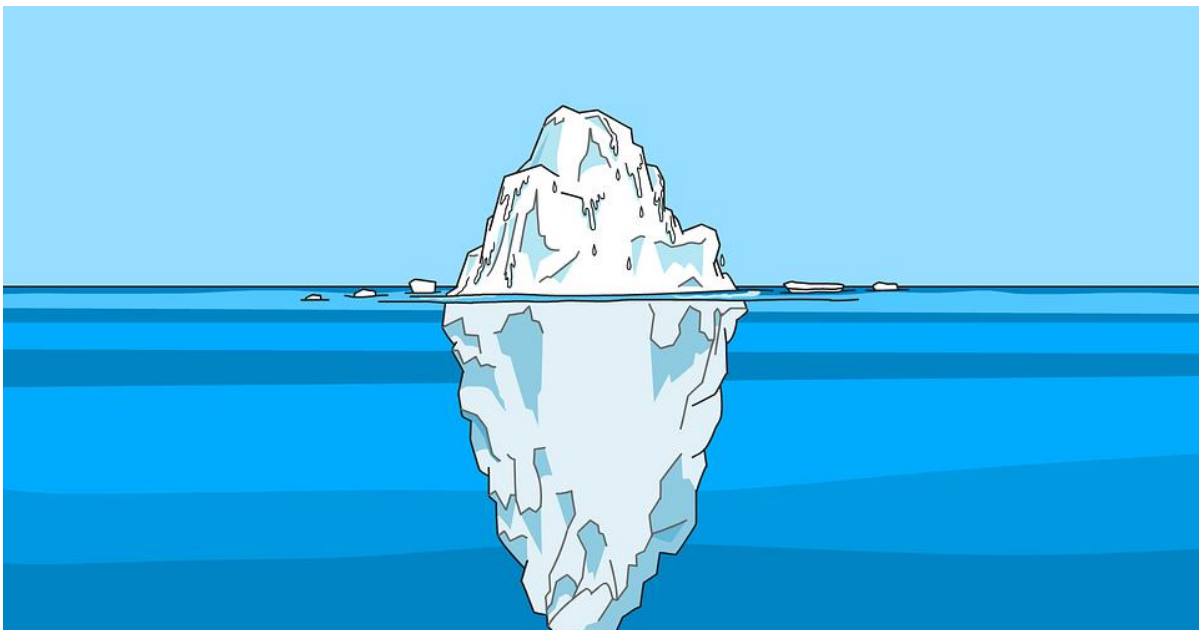
What lies beneath the surface of your anger iceberg? Everyone has their own emotions and experiences underneath that visible anger. Hurt. Rejection. Fear. Worry. Stress. Bullying. Abuse. Deceit. Disrespect. Shame. Guilt. Perceived threats. Many psychologists study anger by viewing it as an emotional and sensory response to a threat. In fact, how you anticipate and perceive those threats has a lot to do with how angry you may feel, as well as how you will act upon those feelings.

In this Tool Kit for Anger, we will make anger easier to understand by thinking about it first as an iceberg with your own unique and complex emotions floating beneath it. Why? Because understanding where anger comes from helps us put our emotions into words by identifying the sources. Also, the visualization of anger as an iceberg creates a type of structure within which we can feel more in control while exploring the emotions.

Exercise One:

Draw your own anger iceberg. Write down the emotions, experiences and triggers you believe are underneath the surface. The process of drawing a representation and writing down even some of those emotions - particularly painful ones - will help you think about your anger in a more constructive way.

Anger >



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What's beneath it?

In my work with clients, I have seen three big F's often floating beneath the anger iceberg: Fear, Failure & Frustration. If you tried the exercise above, you may see how many of your emotions that set off anger can be grouped in one of those three F's: Fear, Failure & Frustration. By the way, these three F-factors are also found in much of the research on anger over the past several decades. Fear is a common factor found beneath anger's surface.

Exercise Two:

The next time you experience anger (it might be today), ask yourself:

- * What lies beneath the angry surface?
- * Where is my anger coming from?
- * What am I afraid of that is at the root of my anger?
- * Am I actually feeling fear?
- * Am I angry at myself for feeling like a failure?
- * Am I angry at someone else because I am blaming them for my failure?
- * Is the anger I feel coming from frustration?

* Am I angry because I couldn't get what I wanted? (Failure/Frustration)

Journaling can be one way to visualize and organize the patterns of reactions, as well as feelings, that are churned up by anger. For the exercise throughout this book, you may find it helpful to write down the insights

Second Step: Start Expanding Your Emotions Into Words.

The cognitive strategies above - visualizing your anger as an iceberg and identifying the emotions deep beneath the surface com-prise the first step in getting a sense of control of it, as well as some relief. The second step is to start thinking about those emotions you identified and expanding them into words.

A good place to proceed is by trying to figure out if those feelings fall into those big F categories of Fear, Failure & Frustration. Why? Those F's are very often the foundation of anger because they set off our built-in threat response. It's like an alarm system and those are the biggest intruders of our mental well-being.

Anger is an emotion. We don't judge emotions in the Tool Kit. In the next chapter, we will discover how emotions are neither good or bad. Emotions are an alert system. What are your emotions trying to tell you?

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