

# Overcoming Emotions That Destroy

Practical Help for Those Angry Feelings  
That Ruin Relationships

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Chip Ingram

PART 1

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# INTRODUCTION

# 1

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## Hope for Our Anger

If you let anger get the best of you, it will reveal the worst of you.

**H**er voice was trembling. From the moment she came on the air, I knew this was no ordinary call, and I would soon learn it was no ordinary story. I adjusted my earphones in the studio to get a clearer signal.

Between sobs of remorse and tears of joy, this young mother revealed a cycle of angry outbursts and physical abuse that had left her children recoiling and her overwhelmed with guilt and shame. But unlike the numbing headlines of today's newspaper or the bizarre tales of talk radio, this woman's story had a happy ending. She was calling to say thank you. She had learned to bring her anger under control; she wasn't yelling at her children anymore, and the physical abuse had stopped.

Her gratitude was in response to a series of messages titled "Overcoming Emotions That Destroy." Her voice quickened with excitement as she shared key insights that God had used to transform her and her family.



As I drove home later that afternoon, it dawned on me just how pervasive this problem of anger is, along with all its accompanying emotions, such as guilt, shame, and frustration. I hadn't given it much thought until then, but as I crawled along on the crowded expressway, I distinctly remembered a conversation I'd had after teaching the same material earlier in the year.

A well-dressed, distinguished man with a deep tan, white hair, and gold watch was sitting with his attractive wife in church one Sunday. At the close of the service, he grabbed my elbow as I was leaving the auditorium. He directed me through the crowded room to a semiprivate nook and then broke into one of the biggest grins I've ever seen. I recognized his face as a regular at our church, but I didn't know him personally. Leaning toward my left ear, he said, "I can't tell you how much this teaching series is helping me. I'm an exploder. I've vomited my anger on everyone around me for twenty-five years. I've wrecked relationships, almost ruined my marriage, and hated myself in the process. I've tried everything and had all but given up. But last week when you said that anger is a secondary emotion and that it's a symptom, not the real problem, the lights came on! It was one of the most amazing insights of my entire life."

As I strained to hear this man's story over the noise of the room, I couldn't help but see his wife taking notice of our conversation. With my ear tilted to hear him more clearly and my eyes looking back toward his wife, I caught a quick smile from her that seemed to say, "I never dreamed he'd change, let alone that he'd be talking with you about something that has been so carefully hidden from the public for so many years."

Reflecting further, my mind began an informal inventory of letters, incidents, and private conversations I've had since this "Overcoming Emotions That Destroy" series was presented at our church and on the radio.

I recalled a letter from a middle-aged woman that about knocked me off my feet. She was not the kind of person you'd expect to have significant, unresolved issues swirling in her soul for years. But after describing some deep disappointments with her husband and extended family, she revealed a long, dark struggle with depression. Counseling and medication had helped her cope, but she was never far from feeling worthless and discouraged. She had experienced a breakthrough, however, as she listened to the teaching tapes related to anger. Even though she had heard that 90 percent of depression could be related to unresolved anger, she assumed that didn't apply to her. She was, in fact, very quiet and compliant and had never yelled or exploded at anyone. Anger certainly was not a problem area for her—or so she thought. What she learned through the series, however, was that she was a “Stuffer.” She had been taught that anger was wrong and had learned to “bottle it up,” to shove it down deep inside. She thought that stuffing her anger was a godly and proper response. Her letter went on to detail a journey of uncovering piles of unresolved anger and learning to process and express that anger appropriately. To her amazement and joy, she now had freedom from her lifelong depression.

Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting together in my mind, these responses were helping me begin to understand how our failure to understand anger wreaks havoc in our lives. I knew it was a hot issue when I first taught the series, but these responses—both in their variety and sheer number—caused me to rethink the importance of this subject. As a result, I decided about two years after first teaching it to revise the material and teach it again at our church. This overwhelmingly confirmed what I had learned in the past, but now with greater trust and deeper relationships, the feedback was even more honest.

A close friend approached me at about the midpoint of this teaching series and, rolling his eyes, said, “Wow, do I have some work to do!”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, I learned today that I’m a ‘Leaker.’ It hit me why I’m so frustrated with the sexual dimension of our marriage. My wife does things that bug me, but rather than openly and honestly tell her what they are and how I feel, I unconsciously record them, put them on a mental scorecard, and then ‘leak’ my anger toward her on ‘safer playing fields.’ Chip, you can’t believe how sarcastic I’ve become over the years and how I put her down and tease her about stuff all the time. I manage to work the things that bug me into the conversation, but I do it in a half-joking manner so that if she gets steamed, I can laugh it off and tell her I was only joking. When you talked about leaking our anger and how anger puts a barrier in the intimate aspect of a relationship, it was like someone crawled inside my head and allowed me to see the real issue.”

So how about you? Did your heart resonate with one of the people I just described? Could you or someone you love have an anger problem that’s resulting in emotions that destroy relationships, produce guilt, and rob you of joy? If so, do you realize there’s hope? Did you know that just as these real people found real help, you don’t have to be a slave to anger or any related emotions that destroy? You may not have considered that anger issues go way beyond a bad temper or an occasional blowup; understanding what anger is, how it works, and how to deal with it positively could be the key to overcoming chronic depression, sexual frustration, and relational breakdowns. In fact, anger may not have to be your enemy at all; it can be harnessed to help you grow personally, relationally, and spiritually like you’ve never imagined. If all this sounds too good to be true, let me assure you we’re offering no magic pills or quick, simplistic solutions to complex problems. We do, however, have a stream of testimonies

that show how knowing the truth about anger can be liberating, both personally and in relationships with others.

The stories I have shared are but a tiny sampling of the responses we've received while teaching this material over the last decade. I tell them not because I have some extraordinary ability to teach, but because millions of people are held hostage by their anger and don't know how to deal with it. In many cases, they don't even realize they're held hostage.

This book has grown out of our hearts' desire to see God help others. The greatest teacher in the world said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). This book is designed to get at the truth about our anger so that you and those you love can be set free.

### Have you ever . . . ?

- Have you ever done something you wished you hadn't when you were angry?
- Have you ever said something when you were angry you wish you could take back?
- Have you ever made a bad decision when you were angry?
- Have you ever ruined a friendship, a marriage, a family relationship, a ministry relationship, or a business relationship because of anger?
- Have you ever seen a person hurt because of someone's anger—physically, emotionally, or psychologically?

It's amazing what we do when we're angry. We may blow up in haste at a boss: "I'm tired of being treated this way! You can take this job and shove it. I'm out of here!" Then a little later on the phone: "Uh, honey, I lost my job. Yeah, I know we have a lot of bills. No, my boss really doesn't want to talk about it anymore."

Or we may shut down in silence: “Honey, what’s wrong? Please tell me. Please talk to me. Did I do something wrong? What’s eating at you?”

Or we may gossip and get back indirectly: “Did you hear what she did? Can you believe it? I wouldn’t want to judge, but I think what she did was ungodly and foolish. I wouldn’t share this if I wasn’t concerned. Of course, *I’m* not affected personally.”

**We make a lot of bad decisions when we’re angry.**

We make a lot of bad decisions when we’re angry. When we get out a sword of anger, we cut people by shutting them out or by knocking them over. Many of the scars we inflict, whether directly or indirectly, are not easily healed.

Solomon, an ancient king known for his wisdom, wrote many sayings. “A hot-tempered person commits many sins” (Prov. 29:22 TNIV), he warned. When angry, we are more apt to do something wrong. We often have wrong reactions and do dumb deeds. We say things that shouldn’t be said, we lash out and hurt people, we do things we abhor, we build up fortresses to keep others out, or we project our anger onto undeserving souls. We generally react in ways that intensify rather than relieve our anger. We end up inviting either self-hatred and shame (internalized anger) or resentment and bitterness (externalized anger) into our hearts.

Here is a list of common anger triggers:

We feel categorized or stereotyped.

We feel trapped.

We feel unfairly treated.

We feel blamed.

We feel ignored, misunderstood, insignificant, belittled, or put down.

We feel entitled to something and don't get it. Our expectations aren't met.

We are given unsolicited advice. We feel that someone has treated us in a condescending way.

We are teased insensitively.

We are criticized.

Someone hasn't respected our limits.

We are given ultimatums or threats.

We are kicked, pushed, slapped, or hit.

Our space or territory has been invaded.

We don't feel safe.

We feel self-pity.

We don't admit our imperfections.

## Where Are You with Anger?

Have you been scared and scarred by the anger, rage, screaming, and abuse of other people? Are your memories full of anger-filled moments? It's painful to be on the receiving end of someone's emotional outburst.

Or have you found yourself more often on the giving end? Do you need help controlling and containing your anger? Do you need to confess, "When I get angry, I blow. I've hurt those around me, those I love. I'm out of control! *Help!*"?

Do you stuff your anger and pretend you don't have a problem because you keep it from showing? Have you held your feelings in for years, developing ulcers, headaches, intestinal problems, and other kinds of physical ailments?

Do you assume blame when you or others get mad? "Whenever I feel angry or anyone is angry with me," a woman shared, "I assume it's my fault. I try to figure out what I did wrong, what I

did to make the other person mad, or where I was at fault.” Do you feel all anger is your fault?

Do you automatically blame others? When you’re mad or someone is mad at you, do you assume, without question, that the other person is to blame? Do you tend to point your finger at external things (other people, places, and things) rather than look for internal reasons (your own ego, pride, hurt, or selfishness) for your anger?

Do you find yourself avoiding people when you’re mad? Do you seek ways to get back indirectly?

Whether we blame ourselves or others, whether we express or repress, whether we avoid or attack, anger still exists. It doesn’t go away. It just comes out in different ways. A client shared that even though he’s generally good at controlling his anger, keeping it bottled up, “Every once in a while I blow

**It doesn’t go away.  
It just comes out  
in different ways.**

up. And when I do, it’s pretty bad—as if I’ve saved it [the anger] up for a long time.”

This book is for everyone. It is for those who: (1) feel a need to deal with their anger; (2) need help communicating anger effectively; (3) want to move on and let go of the past; (4) find a string of broken, bleeding relationships due to their angry outbursts; (5) feel isolated and/or lonely because of their anger; (6) are unhappy; and (7) feel out of control.

## Whom Can You Trust?

We hope by now your heart is stirred, your ears are perked, and somewhere in your skeptical heart you are saying, “It sounds good, but where does this advice come from? Who are Chip Ingram and Becca Johnson, and why should I trust what they have to say?”

In a world full of self-help, “promise people anything” to sell a book atmosphere, we think that’s a valid question that deserves an honest answer. Chip is the teaching pastor of *Living on the Edge* radio ministry, former president of Walk Thru the Bible, and former senior pastor at Santa Cruz Bible Church. He has done graduate work in education, psychology, and theology and has a passion to help people take the truth and put it into practice in ways that impact their whole lives and relationships. He is married and has four grown children.

Dr. Johnson is a licensed psychologist and author of books on guilt and child abuse. She is a wife, mother of four and “missionary-at-large,” providing counselor training around the world. Her life’s work is to encourage people to work through painful experiences and emotions in order to more fully enjoy God’s love. Her desire is to help the hurting heal with God’s hope. She brings a wealth of invaluable insight, education and experience.

Above all, we are both “fellow strugglers” in this arena of anger. We have both been unfairly treated, had plans thwarted, been let down, felt rejected, and been wrongfully accused. We have also yelled; made big mistakes; been prideful, self-centered, and self-righteous; and been rightfully accused. We have cried and lamented, whined and pouted. We struggle with anger in our relationships with our spouses, our children, family, friends, and colleagues. We both have more firsthand experience with anger than we care to admit. We know anger from the receiving as well as the giving end.

This book is simple, but not simplistic. It is practical, but not just a list of self-help tools to merely manage your anger. It is theologically rooted and biblically accurate, but not preachy or religiously trite. It is psychologically sound, but not filled with psychological jargon. Our goal is to help you! As stated before, we promise no magic formulas, no easy shortcuts, and no soft



answers for hard questions. But we do promise clear, practical, accurate information that, if applied faithfully, will teach you how to stop wasting your anger and start harnessing it as one of the most powerful change agents and motivational factors in your life.

This book seeks to help answer these questions:

- When is my anger valid?
- When is my anger destructive either to me or to others?
- How do I express anger?
- What does God say about anger?
- What does God recommend regarding anger?
- When should/shouldn't I get angry?

It's okay to skip around this book, reading the parts most applicable to your needs. We've purposefully tried to make short, easy-to-read chapters that you can complete in about five to ten minutes each. We have also included lots of charts and information for quick summary and reference. Our hope and prayer is that you will attempt to learn, apply, change, and/or get help.

In this book, we also hope you will be able to:

- identify the unhealthy ways you respond to anger;
- uncover the feelings underneath your anger;
- choose God-given, emotionally healthy ways to deal with anger;
- incorporate practical suggestions and exercises in dealing with anger into your life;
- deepen your understanding of God and his purpose for anger; and
- rejoice in God's anger-abatement plan.

## The Benefits of Dealing with Anger

When we learn to effectively experience and deal with our anger, we find that our relationships are healthier, our work is less stressful, and our lives are more enjoyable. We have fewer diseases and physical complaints, and we have less need to control, avoid, or defend ourselves in relationships. Instead of taking our anger out negatively on ourselves or on those around us, we learn to direct it in ways that are helpful rather than harmful. Rather than blame ourselves, God, our parents, the boss, coworkers, our spouses, our children, or friends, we can learn to constructively identify the source and nature of our feelings.

Anger has great power for both good and bad and should be dealt with in ways that are constructive rather than destructive. We need to face our anger and force ourselves to deal with it. As we confront our anger, we develop clearer boundaries in our relationships; we experience open, honest communication; and we are better in tune with our own needs and desires.

## The Bottom Line

Anger is a pervasive problem, but there's hope in learning how to deal with it.

## Questions to Consider

1. Do you or someone you know have a problem with anger?
2. What have you/they done about it?
3. What has worked or been helpful in bringing about positive change? What hasn't worked?

## Action Steps to Take

- Think about a time when you got angry, and identify as specifically as you can how you should have responded differently.
- Ask someone you trust to tell you about a time when they saw you get angry. Ask them to tell you how they think you express anger and when you are most likely to become angry.
- On an index card, write a few statements regarding what you hope to learn from this book. Then sign the card and put it in a conspicuous place where you will see it often.