

What's Making *You Angry?*

10 Steps to Transforming Anger So Everyone Wins

*A presentation of Nonviolent
Communication™ ideas and their use by*
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Introduction

When we are angry, three things are happening: 1) We are upset because we are not getting our needs met; 2) We are blaming someone or something else for not getting what we want; 3) We are about to speak or act in such a way that will almost guarantee we will not get what we need, or that we will later regret.

When we are angry, we focus almost completely on what we *don't* want, and our thinking is caught up in images of the wrongness of others that are involved. We have lost sight of what we really *do* want and need.

Using the steps below you will learn how to change this pattern and connect with the life-serving purpose of anger. You will discover where anger comes from and learn how to express it in ways that meet both your needs and the needs of others. Use these steps to refocus your attention during an angry conflict and learn to create outcomes that are satisfying for everyone involved.

STEP 1

Think of Anger as a Red Light on Your Dashboard

Anger acts like a warning light on your car's dashboard—if you attend to it promptly you're more likely to get where you want to go. Remember, when dealing with anger the goal is not just to “turn off the red light.” Anger can be a wonderful wake-up call to help you understand what you need and what you value. Like warning lights and gauges, your emotions and the physical sensations in your body are there to help you understand which of *your needs* are being met or are not being met.

So, when tempers flare or violence looms, it helps to remember that you can make life enjoyable for yourself and others if you focus your attention on what you need, and put aside any ideas of the other as “wrong” or images of them as the “enemy.” Make it your goal to attend to your underlying needs and to aim for a resolution so satisfying that everyone involved has their needs met also.

STEP 2

Look Clearly at What Happened

Have you ever asked a person what they are angry about? Most likely, they told you that someone said or did something wrong. One example might be an executive saying, “He’s unprofessional! He ruined the presentation! He was disrespectful to everyone in the meeting!” Such statements say very little about *what really happened*. In this step you want to be like a detective—you want “just the facts.” Notice the difference in the quality of information between the previous statements and the following: The executive might have said, “He arrived twenty minutes later than the scheduled start time, and brought coffee-stained handouts.”

In this step you take a clear look at *what* you are reacting to. When you can objectively describe what happened, you are more likely to be clear about what you need. Other people are less likely to respond defensively because they can more easily agree with what you’ve said. So, the second step in dealing with a charged situation is to be able to state a clear observation of the situation itself.

Statements from an angry spouse, such as “You insulted me,” “You’re a control freak,” or “You’re always trying to manipulate me,” imply wrongness, but they *don’t* describe what actually happened. With the aim of making a clear observation, you ask yourself, “What would a video camera have recorded?” With this perspective you might be able to describe the situation very differently. “I heard you say I’m a lazy slob.” “You said you wouldn’t go out with me unless I wore the red dress.” “You said I always wear clothes that are out of style.” Once you can clearly describe *what* you are reacting to, free of your interpretation or evaluation of it, other people are less likely to be defensive when they hear it.

STEP 3

Take Responsibility

Anger is also a signal that you've been distracted by judgmental or punitive thinking, and that some precious need of yours is being ignored. Use your anger to remind yourself to stop, look under your hood and into your heart to find out what needs attention.

When your car's water temperature gauge is in the red, your engine's need for cooling is not being met. When your car's battery warning light is off, your charging system is doing fine. Like these indicators, your emotions and the physical sensations in your body are very powerful and accurate indicators of the conditions under your personal hood. They are designed to tell you very quickly and clearly, in each moment, which of your needs are—or are not—being met.

Keep in mind that other peoples' actions can never “make” you feel any certain way. Feelings are *your* warning indicators. Your feelings always result from whether or not your needs are being met. Anger results from focusing your attention on what another person “should” or “shouldn't” do and judging them as “wrong” or “bad.” As your attention shifts to identifying which of your needs aren't being satisfied in a situation, your feelings will shift also. When you discover that you didn't receive treatment that met your need for respect, you might feel hurt, scared, or disappointed, but without “should” thinking and judgments of others as “wrong” you won't feel angry.

When your feelings have served their purpose—when your attention is fully focused on your needs and values—then anger melts away. This transformation is not the same as repression, and it's not the same as “calming down.” The

emotions you feel when you are in touch with your needs may be intense and very painful, but they will be *different* emotions than anger.

STEP 4

“Name the Blame” and Get Clear About What You Feel

In our culture most of us have been trained to ignore our own wants and to discount our needs. We’ve been called selfish for “wanting,” and “needy” when we voice our deepest yearnings. But the fact is that *everyone* has needs, all the time. Every human being needs respect. Everyone needs nourishment, harmony, self-expression, and love (to name a few basic human needs). The only humans who don’t have needs are dead.

When you’re angry you are likely to have “blame thinking” going on in your head. Inside of “blame thinking” you have emotions, and these are caused by unmet needs. When you can get conscious of your “blame statement,” you can begin to explore your feelings and use these feelings to get clear about which of your needs are going unmet.

For example, if your blame statement was, “She’s always insulting me,” what emotion or body sense would you feel? Would you feel tense, scared, sad, anxious, or confused? Naming our feelings is not as easy as it sounds! As a society, we are trained to mix our evaluation with our feelings and this is what gives rise to “blame statements” in the first place. Separating your feelings from your judgment of others is an important part of getting clear about your needs and moving into action to get them met. You can use the feelings inventory in chapter four of Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg’s book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* (PuddleDancer Press, 1999) to develop your *vocabulary of feelings* and learn how these feelings relate to your needs (see Basic Feelings list at the back of this booklet).

STEP 5

Determine Your Needs

"Wait a minute, my reliability warning light is on!" The executive who thought the employee "ruined the presentation" remembered that his anger was just a warning. When he looked underneath his anger, translated his judgments, and discovered his underlying needs, he realized that he values reliability, integrity, and trust very highly. Focusing on these needs brought a shift in the executive's state of mind. His anger dissolved. Instead, once in touch with these unmet needs, the executive felt *worry* and a pang of *disappointment*.

Even the harshest labels like "psychopath" are just veiled expressions of unmet needs. When a person calls someone a psychopath, it's a tragic expression of their unmet needs, possibly for predictability, trust, or safety. It's tragic because the very *act* of calling someone a psychopath almost guarantees that the underlying needs will continue to go undiscovered, unexpressed, and unmet.

The beauty of being able to correctly interpret your feelings as warning signals is that, once you discover what you need, you are back in a powerful position to act toward getting your need met! You can use the human needs inventory in chapter five of *Nonviolent Communication* to develop your *vocabulary of needs*.

Having named your need, spend some time really noticing how important that need is to you, how you yearn for it, and how much more satisfying life is when that need is satisfied.