

Taming Your Anger

Some Strategies for Young People

Tony Cosentino Renfrew County Catholic School Board, Nov 15, 2012

This booklet looks at some ways to deal with anger. Anger is a normal human emotion. It is part of who we are as human beings, made in the image of God. In the Gospels, we find stories of Jesus getting angry at people who treated vulnerable persons unjustly. Jesus shows us that anger has its proper place in our life.

Problems arise when anger is in the driver's seat and makes our life unmanageable. The strategies and reflection exercises in these pages are meant to help take the uncontrollable and damaging power out of your anger. By using them, you can learn to express your anger in helpful ways that bring peace to you and others around you.

The information in these pages comes from a variety of sources: from personal experience, from twelve step, self-help and faith-based books, including the Bible. All of it has been tested and found helpful. Use this booklet in whatever way it helps you – at your own pace, in the order that suits you. You might want to focus on one section for a while before moving on to another – you'll know what works best for you.

Pages are arranged in workbook fashion, to allow for photocopying of individual sections, if desired.

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Can You Relate to This?

My anger runs so deep, it scares me. I explode at people for silly reasons and can't seem to keep my friends. Sometimes, I feel so full of rage and all alone. I'm angry at my parents for things they've done. I'm angry at God. Why didn't God protect me from the bad things that have happened to me? How can I believe in a God who let these things happen?

You have a right to your feelings, and this includes your anger. But anger has to be channeled and expressed in ways that will actually make things better for you and those around you. Anger can be like water behind a dam. It needs to be let out in safe amounts, in safe ways – so that it doesn't sweep you or other people away like a surprise flash flood. So how to go about this?

1. Get to a Safe Place

If we know we are in flash flood territory, it's important to get quickly to high ground. Here are three strategies for getting to high ground before the flood of anger sweeps you away:

Breathe, Walk, Talk

- **Breathe:** **Take a deep breath and count to five.** Don't react right away – give yourself time to think. Then, if you have to, walk...
- **Walk:** **Excuse yourself from a situation** until you're ready to discuss things without exploding.
e.g., "Sorry, I gotta go." or "I need a time out." or "I need some space. I'll talk to you later." or "I can't talk about this right now. Talk to you later."
- **Talk:** **Find a good listener** – somebody who won't repeat what you've said (unless you or someone else is in danger) e.g., a school counselor, a Chaplain, a grandparent, a social worker, guidance counselor, parent. Talking to someone is really important. Make sure it's a person with experience and years that you trust. Don't let things simmer inside until they explode.
- **Write:** Besides talking things out, some people like to also write down (in a private journal, **not** online) what happened and how it made them feel. Naming your experience and feelings can help take some of the energy out of what you've been through. This can leave you feeling more free to go back and talk about what happened with a clear head if you need to. This strategy isn't for everybody. Use it if it helps you.

Stepping Back...

Think of a time when you felt your anger starting to boil over. Imagine yourself there, and then...

1. Visualize yourself doing the *Breathe* step.
 - Someone has said something unkind to me and I'm getting upset.
 - I take a deep breath, and exhale, counting to five
2. Visualize yourself doing the *Walk* step.
 - I decide it would be better for me to leave this conversation.
 - What words can I use to excuse myself?
3. Name someone you could talk to if your anger threatens to boil over.
 - Someone I could talk to would be...

Listening to God's Word

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy. (Psalm 16)

Prayer

My God, sometimes I feel You are so far away from me in my life. Help me to trust that You are walking with me, leading me to a place of peace and joy.
Amen.

2. Defend Your Boundaries

People are going to say and do unkind things – this happens in life. To handle these things well, it's important to be able to defend your boundaries. You're worth it. Defending your boundaries means letting others know that what they've said or done to you is *not* alright. Defending your boundaries does not mean physical or verbal pay-back or getting even. It's about claiming your own dignity that someone has tried to take away from you.

Go to the Person

As a general rule, always go to the person you're having trouble with, unless it's going to make things worse. Sometimes, it will have to wait until things simmer down, to avoid a blow-out. When in doubt, talk to someone older and wiser who can help you see what's best to do. Here are some tips for resolving an issue with someone you feel has wronged you:

Do:

1. Name the offending words or actions
2. Name the effect the offending words or actions have on you.
3. Name what you need for this offense to be made right.

Don't:

1. Get back at the person(s) with gossip (e.g., Facebook) or violence
2. Become obsessed with revenge
3. Keep it all inside without talking to someone.

When you... I feel... I need

A popular way to defend your boundaries is to use the "When you... I feel... I need" approach. For example, someone makes a put-down comment about you in front of other people, and you may feel humiliated, disempowered, and very angry. You can respond by saying something like:

"You know, **when you** said (what you said)...
I felt (really put down in front of everybody).
 And **I need** (you to stop making these kinds of remarks, because I find them very hurtful)."

You can also add the consequences such as,

"If this keeps happening, I can't be around you"

or

"I'm going to take this to the office next time it happens."

Re-group if You Need to

At first, you may have to get out of the situation as quickly as possible, to keep tempers from exploding. That's a good thing – **get to a safe place and re-group yourself.** Sometimes, the other person isn't ready to hear what you have to say, and it's better to wait. Remember, cool heads prevail. It might take a few hours, a few days or a week. It's worth it to wait until the right time.

When it's an Adult or Someone in Authority

There might be a time when you feel that an adult or someone in authority has treated you poorly, and it's really eating at you. **Go to them when things have calmed down** later in the day or the next day and express how you feel in relation to what they said or did. Remember, *when you... I felt... I need.* You might say something like this:

"When you said (what you said) to me yesterday, I felt quite hurt. I'm asking you, please don't do this again." You might be surprised at the positive response.

Your Boundaries are Important

But no matter how the other person responds, you've stood up for yourself. You've re-claimed your self-respect, even if the other person won't recognize it. You've defended your boundaries, and **let others know it's *not* okay to treat you poorly**, and that's what counts. Your boundaries are important, no matter what anyone tells you.

Stepping Back...

Try going back to a time when you didn't have a chance to defend your boundaries, and try to fill in what you might have said:

1. *When you* _____
2. *I felt* _____
3. *I need you to* _____

Listening to God's Word

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
(Isaiah 43:1b)

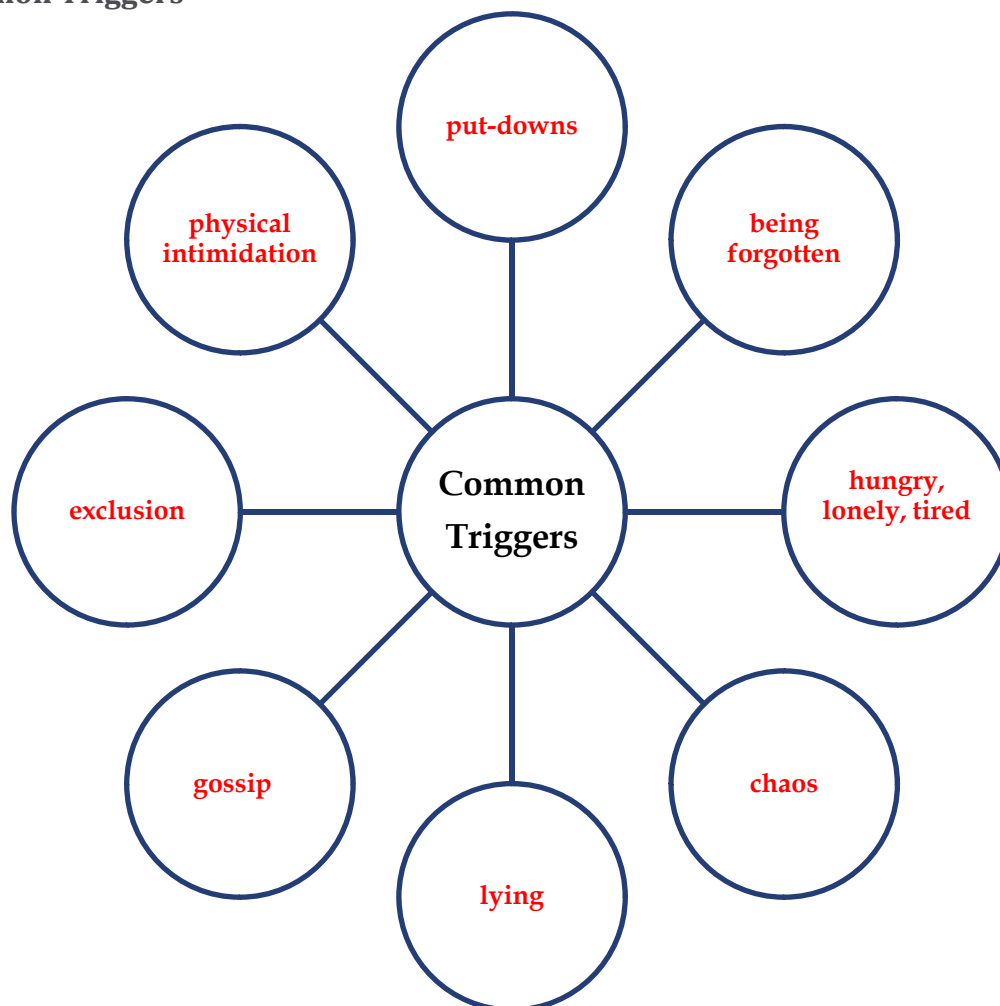
Prayer

O God, You called me to life as Your beloved child. Give me the wisdom to understand my dignity as Your child, and the strength to defend my boundaries, little by little, day by day. Amen.

3. Know Your Triggers

What triggers your anger? Are there certain things that you find really upsetting? Words, actions or situations can be like powerful triggers that set our anger in motion. But it doesn't have to be this way. We can take the power out of them by naming them when they happen, and stepping back before they overtake us. But first, we have to know what they are. Let's have a look...

Some Common Triggers



Common Triggers Cont'd

**hungry, lonely, tired
being forgotten**

-the *big three* triggers.
- other people are too busy to do things with me, or forget about me and my needs

put-downs

- someone makes put-down remarks or gestures to feel superior at my expense

intimidation

- someone bigger or with more power *unjustly* takes something that was mine (e.g., butting in line ahead of me, grabbing something from me), screams or uses their size to control me.

exclusion

- someone keeps me out of a group to make me feel bad or to make themselves the centre of attention.

- gossip** – someone spreads rumours about me, tells others my personal secrets, or talks badly about me behind my back.
- lying** – someone lies to take advantage of me, or make fun of me
- chaos** – there’s no order, no one seems to care about what’s going on, everyone shouting to get attention.

This is heavy stuff. If you need to take a break and think about this, go ahead. You can come back to it later and look at some strategies for dealing with these and other triggers.

Once you know your triggers, you can say, “Okay. I’m *feeling put-down* or, *I’m surrounded by chaos*. This is a real hot-button trigger for me. I’m just going to breathe, take a step back, and back out if I need to. Once you’ve named the trigger in the moment, you are on the path to freedom. Please read on...

Stepping Back...

Try and name some triggers that get your anger pot boiling.

I feel anger or rage when someone...

I feel anger or rage when I see...

Listening to God’s Word

The Lord is my shepherd... He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

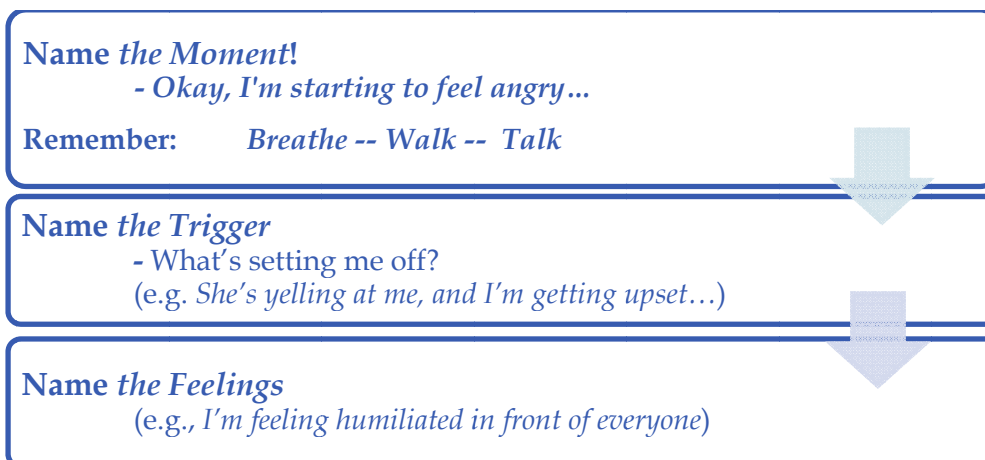
(Ps 23: 1-3a)

Prayer

My God, help me recognize the rough waters of anger before they swallow me. Help me to step back from them and walk with You in peace. Amen.

4. Disarming our Triggers

Triggers can set off anger that's like a runaway train. And runaway anger can be very destructive. Under its influence, we can say or do things we regret later. The good news is, you can learn to step off the runaway anger train before it gets going too fast. This takes practice, but it is possible. Just be patient with yourself and learn some strategies to handle the triggers that set it off. Here's a suggestion on how to deal with situations that trigger your anger:



At first, you might not be able to name the *trigger* and *feelings* until an incident is long over – perhaps when you're talking to somebody about it, and trying to understand what happened. This is how we learn. At first, **naming your triggers and feelings might take days. Then, with practice, it will take hours, then minutes, and eventually, you'll find yourself understanding what's happening as it is taking place.** Here's the good news:

When you **name your triggers...**
...you can **begin to take back their power over you.**

When you **name the feelings you have...**
... your **feelings are less likely to have you.**

Get to know which triggers rouse your anger; accept the way you feel, then choose a strategy to deal with them in an appropriate way (more on this in the following pages).

With practice, you'll recognize when your anger is being triggered and why. And this will help you identify which triggers are being touched, and to step back with your feelings to calmly decide how to best respond. At that point, you'll be able to say,

Okay, that's a trigger issue for me, but I don't need to react. I choose to just pull back from this situation for now. I may choose to say something later.

Stepping Back...

Look back at your list of triggers in the previous *stepping back* box. Try and name a feeling that you associate with each.

Trigger: _____ Feeling: _____

Trigger: _____ Feeling: _____

Trigger: _____ Feeling: _____

Listening to God's Word

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. (Ps 34: 18)

Prayer

O God, I give You my broken heart to heal. Be with me when I feel crushed by my anger and pain. I can make this journey to freedom and peace with You by my side. Amen

5. Pick and Choose Your Battles

It's okay to be angry, but we have to decide how important some things are. The expression "don't sweat the small stuff" rings true here. If it really bothers you, then you should probably address it directly. If something said or done to you is deeply hurtful or unkind, or repeated over and over, then it's up to you to stand up and put a stop to it. In the heat of the moment, it might be best to take a deep breath and count to five. Then, either speak up calmly or excuse yourself (and talk to someone if you need to) and choose a time when you've cooled off to talk to the person privately. Just remember, you don't have to let every little remark or look get you riled up. Sometimes, the best way to keep your inner peace is to just walk away and let it go.

Remember Your Strategies:

- a) **Get to a Safe Place**
(*breathe, walk* if you have to, *talk* to someone if you need to)
- b) **Defend your Boundaries**
(*when you... I feel... I need...*)

Stepping Back...

See if you can name three minor triggers that might leave you a little annoyed, but are something you can walk away from and forget about:

Minor Trigger: _____

Minor Trigger: _____

Minor Trigger: _____

I can walk away from these things and keep my inner peace.

Listening to God's Word

Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7: 7-8)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I am knocking at the door of your heart. Hear my prayer. Help me to know and choose what's important, and forget about what's not, so that I can live and walk in Your peace. Amen.

6. Detach from the Outcome

You Can Only Change Yourself

You have a right to your feelings. You owe it to yourself to defend your dignity and boundaries. You can choose how you deal with other people and difficult situations. But **you can't change anyone but yourself.**

You can't control what other people are going to say or do when you speak up for yourself. Sometimes you can do all the right things and still get an unkind reaction. Try not to take it personally. You've defended your boundaries, and that's what's important. Leave the rest to the other person and to God. You can't change anyone but *you*, with God's help, and that's more than enough ☺.

Let your mood be your own decision. If others are mean or miserable, you can still be at peace with who you are. It's your right to choose to be happy, even when others around you are not.

Some People Will *Not* Change

You need to accept that **some people will not change**, no matter what you or anyone else says to them. **That's their choice, and you need to accept that.** Maybe they're not ready to let go of what angers them.

Hold onto Your Peace

Strive to find peace by making good choices in your life. Accept responsibility for the bad ones, but strive to move forward day by day. If you fall (and *everybody* falls), get back up. Don't expect to be perfect – give yourself time to grow: it's about progress, not perfection. When you need it, seek help from people who are older and wiser and from friends you look up to. Hold onto your peace by being kind to others, and by defending your boundaries. **You're worth it.**

Know Your True Friends

If someone says they're your friend but doesn't treat you that way, then you have to question if they're really your friend. This is especially true if they are emotionally abusive, call you names, make put-down remarks or try to push you around. **Don't compromise your right to true friendship by hanging around with people who try to make you feel poorly about yourself. Your life is a precious gift**, no matter what anyone says. Don't let anyone fool you into believing you are less valuable or important as a person than you truly are. This is especially true with a boyfriend or girlfriend. **Never accept abuse**, and never believe you deserve abusive behaviour. No one has the right to treat another person this way.

Believe it or not, with time, you will be much less affected by other people's negative words and attitudes. And you'll be able to make better choices about the people you want to be with. **As you develop your skills, and detach from other people's behaviour, you will be less rattled by things people say or do.** Take your time, and accept the bumps along the way, and you'll find your anger gradually losing its power with time.

Stepping Back...

Think of when someone says something unkind that triggers your anger. Then, remind yourself that their lack of kindness is not your problem. Here are a few suggestions:

- *That's her opinion. I don't have to accept it.*
- *He's in a very bad mood. It's his problem. I'm not taking it personally.*
- *I can't control what she thinks or says. That's her business, not mine.*

Listening to God's Word

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5: 16)

Prayer

O God, help me become everything You want me to be. Help me believe that You desire to shine through me. Amen.

7. Step out of the *Reaction Trap*

Some people live inside what can be called the “reaction trap.” They go from one crisis to the next, reacting to people and situations day after day, year after year. In fact, if there isn’t a crisis, they create one. People living inside the *reaction trap* can turn ordinary problems into larger than life drama, and draw others into their drama with them. They love the excitement. It gets them fired up, distracted and gives them energy. **People living in the *reaction trap* thrive on overreacting to other people’s problems.** But they’re not free to live in peace. They’re too caught up in their own and everyone else’s drama.

You can choose to be who you are. **You can choose *not* to live in crisis.** This means knowing your triggers, defending your boundaries, and not making other people’s problems your own. These are the first steps to freedom and peace. If you learn to defend your boundaries and detach from other people’s moods and behaviours, you’ll be freer to be the kind of person you want to be.

God made you free. **God has no desire to see you worried about other people’s business** or their opinions of you. Just strive to be kind to others, defend your boundaries, and let God take care of everyone else. You don’t have to let other people’s moods or actions determine your own moods or actions. Another person’s bad mood or sour attitude is really their own problem. Whatever someone else thinks of you is really their own business.

Remember, you don’t have to be drawn into anyone else’s misery. Keep your own boundaries. Accept that you can’t change anyone else – just worry about changing yourself. **Grow bit by bit, day by day in freedom, and become all you were meant to be.** Some days will be better than others. But you’ll get there with God’s help.

Stepping Back...

Here’s a prayer that sums up much of what we’ve been looking at so far. Try it out, use it when you find your anger rising:

Serenity Prayer

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And the wisdom to know the difference.*
 (St. Francis of Assisi)

8. Give it to God

We are God's children. We were made for the peace and freedom that come with being a child of God. But so often, violence, un-kindness and neglect become part of our lives, and we're not to blame. **Our path to serenity lies in turning our pain over to God.**

Somehow, the act of turning things over to God takes the sting out of our suffering. It lets us know that not everything depends on us, and that there is much more hope in God's grace than in our own efforts to make things better.

I can't change the world, but **with God's help, I can change myself**, and the way I approach things. This is my path away from uncontrollable anger and rage. I can lay my burdens down at the foot of the cross, and ask Jesus to walk with me, and to help me through each day, with the gift of his Holy Spirit. So here are three suggested steps to help you turn your struggles to the care of God:

Accept that...

1. I'm powerless to change anyone else but myself.
2. I can only change with God's help.
3. I can turn over my problems to God each day, and he will be there to help me.

Or more simply...

1. *I'm powerless to change anyone but me*
2. *I need God's help to change*
3. *Help me, God – I give you (this person/situation).*

Stepping Back...

Think of a difficulty you have with someone. Perhaps you've been carrying it for a long time. Try the above 1-2-3 steps:

1. *I'm powerless to change _____ (this person),*
2. *I need God's help to find peace in this situation.*
3. *Help me God – I give _____ (this person) to you.*

Listening to God's Word

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah, 29:11-13)

Prayer

O God, help me to believe that you *do* have a plan for my life. Help me to accept that I can't change anybody but myself, and to turn all my cares over to you. For you alone can bring me peace. Amen.

9. Resentment, Expectations and Forgiveness

Resentment is poison to the soul. It can eat away at a person and destroy their peace. Not only that, it destroys our relationships. **Resentment usually happens because we expected something from someone, and they did not deliver what we expected.** Sometimes our expectations are just, especially when persons responsible for our safety or well-being fail in their duty. Even in these cases, resentment is not a good thing. Spinning our wheels in resentment gets us nowhere. We need to come to terms with what has happened, and move on with our own lives. This doesn't happen overnight, so be patient with yourself. You *will* get there.

Generally, resentments arise because we expected to be treated well, but were not. Or maybe we expected someone to be perfect, and they were not. Maybe we expected someone to change for the better if we were nice to them, but they did not. Maybe we expected something impossible – like for them to be a saint, and they failed. Perhaps they were as broken as we were, and we were the one with the problem, not accepting them as they are.

Expectations are often unfair. They set people up for failure in our eyes; they also set us up for resenting others. So how do we let go of resentments? There are two things we must do:

1. We must **free others from our expectations**, and **learn to love them as they are**. Again, we are not the ones who change others. **We can only change ourselves.**
2. We have to **forgive others for being who they are**, and to **let go of holding them captive with our expectations**. We cannot control whether they will change, how they might change or when they might change.

By freeing others of our expectations, we free ourselves from resentment.

Forgiveness is the key to peace when we have resentments. This is not an easy thing, especially if someone has hurt us deeply. In fact, **it's something we need God's help to do**. If I can't forgive someone, I can at least make the choice, and express my desire to forgive. Remember the 1-2-3 exercise in the *Give it to God* section:

Accept that...

1. I'm powerless to change anyone else but myself.
2. I can only change with God's help.
3. I can turn over my problems to God each day, and he will be there to help me.

We can change this around a bit to say:

1. **I'm powerless to forgive on my own.**
2. **I can only forgive with God's help.**
3. **I can turn over to God each day my desire to forgive, and He will be there to help me.**

Forgiving and Forgetting About Resentments

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean forgetting about the wrong that was done to you. But it *does* mean **forgetting about your resentment toward the person who wronged you**. Sometimes, we will have to forgive people who have not changed or apologized. But by doing this, **we free ourselves to move on**, and free them as well from our expectations. If we cannot let go of our expectations, we end up angry persons. God does not want this for us. **The only way forward is to turn things over to God and to try to forgive with God's help.**

Stepping Back...

Think about this – *Whom do I carry the deepest resentments toward?
What did I expect of them?*

Try the above 1-2-3 steps:

1. *I'm powerless to forgive _____ (this person) on my own.*
2. *I can only forgive _____ (this person) with God's help.*
3. *God, I give you my desire to forgive _____ (this person) to you. Help me to forgive him/her.*

Listening to God's Word

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not see it? (Isaiah 43: 18-19)

Prayer

O God, help me to accept that You are doing new things in my life. Help me to let go of old resentments, and to live in Your freedom and peace. Amen.

10. A Word About Food

Eating good food is important for our physical and emotional health. A lot of foods can affect our mood. If you find yourself on an emotional roller coaster, try eating less processed junk foods (with artificial colours, flavours and additives), and more whole, unprocessed, natural foods. For a significant number of people, the foods with the greatest effect on mood are:

- wheat products (gluten) Gluten is a protein in wheat that humans do not digest. It causes inflammation in *some* people, which can influence their mood. Some people report that in their experience, it brings on rage, depression or other problems.
- milk products from cows Milk from most cows in North America contains a protein that is difficult to digest, called Type A1 Beta Casein. It also can cause inflammation, which can result in mood swings.
- sugar Eating sugar can produce blood sugar highs followed by lows, resulting in mood swings. Over-consumption of sugar can also produce inflammation, which can have a negative influence on mood.

Many people find their emotional highs and lows dramatically shrinking after they stop eating wheat, dairy, sugar and processed junk foods. Additives in processed foods can also affect our mood in negative ways. This may or may not be an issue for you, but it's worth checking out on your own. At the very least, by eating healthy foods will help build a strong and healthy body to house a healthy mind and spirit.

Stepping Back...

Every human person, from conception until natural death, has a dignity that is supreme among all God's creatures. We are God's masterpieces, and we are worthy of good food that is going to keep us healthy and strong.

Listening to God's Word

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. (Ps 8:3-5)

Prayer

My God, thank you for making me in Your image. Help me to care for the precious gift of my life with the good food, rest and exercise I need. Amen.

Conclusion: Pulling it All Together

The strategies for handling anger presented in these pages take time to master. This is why they're presented in a kind of gradual step-by-step way. Try them out, and find someone you can talk to about how they're working for you. It is possible that you will find other ways to deal with situations that trigger your anger. Take what you can from these pages and leave the rest. To wrap up, here are the major points we covered:

- **Getting to a Safe Place**
 - *Breathe – Walk if you have to – Talk*
- **Defending Your Boundaries**
 - *When you... I feel... I need...*
- **Knowing Your Triggers**
- **Disarming Your Triggers**
 - **Naming your feelings and stepping back from them**
- **Picking and Choosing Your Battles**
- **Detaching From the Outcome**
 - **You can only change yourself**
 - **Some people will not change**
 - **Know your true friends**
- **Stepping out of the Reaction Trap**
 - **You can choose *not* to live in crisis**
- **Giving it to God**
 - *I'm powerless to change anyone but me*
 - *I need God's help to change*
 - *Help me, God. I give this person/situation to you*
- **Resentments are Built on Unrealistic Expectations**
 - **Forgiveness is the key to peace**
- **Good Food is Important**

Stepping Back...

Every one of us is made in God's image, each with our own unique beauty. God looks upon our beauty with a parent's tender love and desires that we grow to be all we can be. He sent us His Son Jesus, who died, rose and sent us His Holy Spirit so that we could have fullness of life in Him. That fullness of life starts here and now in our hearts. It grows with the Holy Spirit's help, in the good choices we make and in the healthy relationships we build each day.

Believe in yourself. Know that God will never turn His back on you, no matter what mistakes you make and no matter what anybody tells you. God is there for you. Always. Unconditionally. Strive to live a good life, make good friends, take care of yourself, body, mind and soul. You are worth it.

Listening to God's Word

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10: 29-30)

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank You for dying and rising for me. Give me the wisdom and strength of Your Spirit to walk in your peace, Your strength and Your joy, for I know You will never leave me. Amen



The above symbol is a reminder of the Gospel story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. (Mk 6:45-52; Mt 14:13-21; Jn 6:15-21) It reminds us that when we give our lives and talents over to God's care, great things begin to happen, often beyond all expectations. May it be so for you.