Chapter 6
Calming the Winds of the Mind

If you are ever touring New England, be sure to go to the top of Mount Washington in New Hampshire. You can drive up the mountain on the road, or you can take the Cog Railroad. However, do not expect good weather! At 6,228 feet Mount Washington is not a high mountain, but it is the tallest of the White Mountain range and lies in an area where storms from several directions collide. Some of the worst weather on earth takes place on this peak. Winds of hurricane force occur 100 days per year. Mount Washington also holds the record for the highest wind speeds ever recorded, 231 miles per hour. One of the first things you notice when you visit (besides the wind) is that the buildings are chained to the ground!

To find a measure of happiness in life, we need to be able to quiet down the winds of the mind. In chapter 3, you were introduced to the concepts of the magic list method and the contemplation period. These two practices help individuals to recognize areas of concern and regulate the time allotted to dealing with the negative. This chapter will focus on acquiring additional skills to reduce tension and calm the mind.

DST Principle No 6. Maintain truth in thoughts
Learn to change your thoughts and more effectively manage anxiety, anger, guilt, depression, and fear. Negative feelings can be transformed through the wise use of compassion, courage, acceptance, humility, and logic.

Tips and Tricks for Diverting the Mind

Some distance from emotions is necessary to provide the proper objectivity in which to solve problems. This is because frontal lobe functioning becomes temporarily impaired when we are emotionally upset, and we are physically unable to think efficiently. The quest is to live in the moment the majority of the time and to enjoy each day. Problem-solving should take place mainly when we choose to do so.

Stephen Hayes is the creator of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). He takes the position that “trying to change difficult thoughts and feelings as a means of coping can be counter-productive.” It is true that we can feel trapped by our negative thoughts, and struggling to resolve them may appear fruitless. In fact, obsessing on problems could be likened to falling into quicksand. Struggling only makes things worse! Certainly, too much emphasis on fixing all our problems can interfere with our attempts at joyful living. It is helpful to recognize that not all problems can be resolved in a timely fashion. To have peace of mind it is essential to learn methods for channeling thoughts. The following are some skills to employ to better manage excessive negative thoughts.

Observation

Thoughts come in many varieties—good and bad, brilliant and common. It is difficult to screen all thoughts. In fact, the more we try to block certain unwanted
thoughts the more intrusive they may become. Therefore, when undesirable thoughts enter, the best first step is to note them without a struggle. Let the thoughts slide by like clouds in the sky. Observation without interaction provides emotional distance. If the negative thoughts linger for many minutes and begin to distress us, we may need to move to other methods of thought management.

**Distraction**

When a specific segment of information is elaborated upon, it tends to remain at the top of our consciousness for a time. Most of us have had the experience of singing a song to ourselves, and then finding that the tune won’t go away. This can be a very positive aspect of the mind since it aids in attention and memory. Unfortunately, in the case of anxiety and other negative emotions, this characteristic can backfire on us. We want to get rid of unpleasant thoughts, not focus on them.

Fortunately, we can also use this special aspect of brain functioning to our advantage. The principle to remember is that it is much more effective to divert our attention versus trying to stop thinking about a problem. However, we must concentrate on the new subject long enough to trigger the brain’s automatic focus abilities. Once we have shifted our focus, we can then immerse ourselves in positive activities. Here are some simple formulas for disrupting negative thinking patterns. Experiment to find out which one is the most effective for your purposes.

**Repetition**

Every time you begin to dwell on your problems, sing a designated song to yourself (in your mind). Do this just for a minute or two and move on to a positive activity. If you don’t like singing, reciting multiplication tables will work, or repeating a meaningful word such as “tranquility.”

**Sensory Chorus**

Drown out the negative by repeating words describing an action sequence. It can be realistic, or have a bit of fantasy in it. Visualize the action while repeating the words—“three pink elephants running around the circus ring” or “two white horses pulling a carriage.” Do this for a minute or two, just long enough to distract the mind from dwelling on unhealthy thoughts.

**Cataloging**

The objective is to look around a room and identify seven or more objects in the room, naming both the object and its function. For example, point out a desk and say, “This is a desk. Its purpose is to provide a surface on which people can write.” This small task keeps the mind busy and it is easy to do anywhere.

**Defusion**

Defusion techniques are an important component of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Defusion basically refers to the process of keeping ourselves from getting too attached to non-helpful thoughts. Defusion techniques do not try to change or stop negative thoughts, but accept their presence and attempt to change
one’s relationship with the thoughts. Those who practice ACT try to move away from trying to change their thoughts, and instead focus on living by their values.

**Defusion techniques**

Picture your thoughts floating away into the sky in the basket of a hot air balloon. Repetition. “Bread, bread, bread...”, or “Orange, orange, orange...” Noticing the thoughts. “I notice I’m having the thought that...”

Sports play-by-play announcer. “It’s the top of the fifth inning. Joe is having a meltdown.”

Thank your mind. “Thank you mind for that interesting thought.”

Naming the story. “Here is another ‘I am such a terrible person’ story.”

Say the thoughts ultra-slow or fast, or in a silly voice.

**Commentary**

Commenting on the type of thought may be useful. We know from experience that some of our thought patterns are ineffective. Attaching labels or witty phrases to these thoughts can help us quickly gain perspective and be better able to let go. If we tend to be self-critical and we notice some negative thoughts forming, we might say something like, “Go away drill sergeant!” We could note we are exaggerating our worries by mimicking Chicken Little and saying, “The sky is falling, the sky is falling.” The process of becoming angry might be interrupted with a phrase such as “Here comes the Hulk.” The commentary method is attractive in that it is simple and fast.

**The Power of Logic**

We all have the ability to dramatically transform our lives. The main ingredient in this process is the purposeful changing of our thought patterns. Satisfaction and achievement do not depend solely upon the winds of fortune, but more upon our reactions to life’s challenges. It is not events that cause emotional responses, but how we choose to think about those circumstances. Distortion, exaggeration, and fear make problem situations appear far worse than they actually are. On the other hand, positive and logical responses help us to effectively control our thoughts and moods.

*The greatest discovery of my generation is that you can change your circumstances by changing your attitudes of mind.*

-William James

Consider the following example of the effects of perceptions upon emotions. The following story was distributed on the Internet:

**Wanted for Attempted Murder (the actual Associated Press headline)**

Linda B., 23, a resident of San Diego, was visiting her in-laws, and while there went to a nearby supermarket to pick up some groceries. Several people noticed her sitting in her car with the windows rolled up, her eyes closed, with both hands behind the back of her head.
One customer who had been at the store for a while became concerned and walked over to the car. He noticed that Linda’s eyes were now open, and she looked very strange. He asked her if she was okay, and Linda replied that she’d been shot in the back of the head, and had been holding her brains in for over an hour.

The man called the paramedics, who broke into the car because the doors were locked and Linda refused to remove her hands from her head. When they finally got in, they found that Linda had a wad of bread dough on the back of her head. A Pillsbury biscuit canister had exploded from the heat, making a loud noise that sounded like a gunshot, and the wad of dough hit her in the back of her head. When she reached back to find out what it was, she felt the dough and thought it was her brains. She initially passed out, but quickly recovered and tried to hold her brains in for over an hour until someone noticed and came to her aid.

Obviously, Linda felt much better when she realized her brains had not fallen out and it was just bread dough on the back of her head. The dramatic shift in mood this woman experienced demonstrates the ABC theory of Albert Ellis, a leader in cognitive psychology.\(^2\)

\[\text{A (actual event)} \rightarrow \text{B (beliefs)} \rightarrow \text{C (consequences)}\]

It is always our perceptions, no matter how brief in duration, that produce the subsequent emotions. Once we recognize the great significance of our thoughts, we then have the power to begin taking control of our emotions, and ultimately our lives. In his book *A New Guide to Rational Living*, Dr. Ellis made the point that: “Humans do not get upset, but they upset themselves by devoutly convincing themselves at point B of irrational beliefs about what happens to them.”\(^3\)

Distortion, exaggeration, and fear all serve to make problem situations far worse than they actually are. It is always our perceptions, no matter how brief in duration, that produce the subsequent emotions. We can control our moods by managing our thoughts effectively. Positive and logical responses help us to safely navigate the stormy seas of life.

The logical conscious mind serves as a guide to the inner self. Patterns of action are set largely by the ideas we have already brought forth in our minds. Thus, a person who feels frustrated and tells himself he will “never get a job” or that he will “always be depressed” experiences those thoughts as true. The heart is quite dependent on the interpretations of the rational mind.

*The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.*

-Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Allow me to share the story of “Bill.” Bill was a hard-working man in his thirties with a young family. He had been significantly depressed for over a year. Therapy went very slowly for several months. I could not even understand the reason for his depression. It was embarrassing. I was about ready to tell him he should get a new and better therapist! Although Bill was a man of excellent character, I began to wonder if he was being totally open about his feelings. All lines of questioning resulted in dead ends. He would just say, “No, that doesn’t bother me.”

Then the golden day finally arrived. I was starting to give up on the idea of making any progress with this client when a moment of enlightenment occurred. Bill
would often mention college and how important it was to him. He had completed one year of college, but had to stop because of financial difficulties. He was very concerned, even self-critical, about the fact that he had not yet obtained a four-year degree. I asked Bill, “You mean that unless you have a college degree, you are no good?” He said, “Yes, that’s right.” He was totally steadfast in this idea.

Realizing that Bill had to work to support his family, I asked him how many years it would take him to graduate if “everything went perfectly.” He said it would take five years to graduate if all went well. I questioned if that meant he had to be depressed for the next five years until he graduated. Bill’s eyes widened, and he looked quite concerned. I presented the following concept: “No matter what our future goals are, all we can do each day is our best.” He agreed this was true. I then proposed that he set up some significant daily goals by which he could more fairly judge himself. Bill’s goals included such things as doing a good job at work, spending time with his children, exercising, and working one hour per night on a home study course.

Since Bill was very conscientious, he reached his goals nearly every day and began to accept himself. The depression subsided, and we stopped the counseling after a few more sessions. I checked up on him for several months and found that he remained free of symptoms despite some significant stress.

Bill’s life circumstances did not change one iota. Financial and health problems continued to afflict his family, and he was not able to attend college while I was in contact with him. However, some marvelous changes in attitude did occur as Bill began to look at his situation more logically. Instead of focusing exclusively on one negative detail (that he was not a college graduate), he learned to appreciate the positive things he was accomplishing.

**Finding Freedom in Truth**

This next section introduces a very important idea about thought management. It is proposed that we can transform most negative thought patterns to the point that they cease to be of significant concern. Some believe that the incessant chatter of the mind is so impervious to psychotherapy as to almost make it not worth addressing. They advocate only methods to downplay negative thoughts and distract and refocus the mind. Similarly, many individuals try to immerse themselves in activities such as housework, exercise, or listening to music in order to escape from problems. I would suggest that this is a significant error, and it is important to use the contemplation period to whack away at the weeds of discontent. The idea is to find a happy balance between working on problems and living our lives. Problem-solving need not be performed every hour, or even every day. The trick is to remain aware of the degree of inner pressure that tells us there are issues to consider.

Dealing with emotions can be compared to river rafting. When the current is slow and the channel wide, rafting is a fairly simple
endeavor. However, when the current becomes swift and there are large rapids, a
great deal of expertise is required to keep the raft from overturning. Similarly, when
life is calm, emotions are relatively easy to manage. We can suppress any negative
emotions and just move on. The negative energy fades away over time. However,
when larger problems arise, and emotions grow more powerful, effective skills are
necessary for psychological survival.

On one occasion my family and I went on a memorable rafting trip on the
Snake River near Jackson, Wyoming. Gary, our experienced guide, prepared us well.
One of the instructions he drilled into us was to keep paddling all the way through
the rapids. He told us, “Even when a wave breaks over your head, keep paddling!”

The section of the rapids with the biggest waves was called Kahuna, “the Great
One.” It is an enormous challenge to maintain your paddling when a wave envelops
you and you feel as if you are totally under water! Focusing on that task under such
circumstances goes against all your instincts. Fortunately, the folks in our raft
remembered their training, performed ably, and we made it through safely. It was
exhilarating! Some of the rafts behind us had no guides, and each of these lost some
people overboard in this rough stretch of the river.

The logical system (system 2) is our guide when dealing with emotions. It is
essential to good mental health to allow ourselves to experience and then process our
negative feelings. This takes courage and belief in the process, not too unlike
continuing paddling even though a wave has totally submerged you. The thought of
experiencing and then managing packed-in emotions can be intimidating. Typically,
those growing up in dysfunctional families or those experiencing trauma have not
had the best environment for learning effective coping skills. Now is a great time to
develop better emotional habits.

Some helpful guidelines exist for handling the various emotions. For instance,
with grief it is essential to feel our pain. Note that we can grieve over things other
than death. It could be the loss of a relationship, or a lost career opportunity. I
advise clients to take time to grieve and feel their sadness as part of the healing
process. I often suggest they schedule an hour or two to get in touch with their
feelings. Oft-stated fears such as “I won't be able to stop crying” have little basis in
reality. By expressing our emotions appropriately, we manage to stay more in control.
For each loss there is a cup of grief to be poured out. It is a process, not an event,
and the cup must be poured out gradually.

Depression is more related to guilt, low self-worth, anger turned inward, and
pessimism. Anxiety is generally caused by fearful thoughts regarding future events.
While it is helpful to share our concerns with others, cognitive solutions to
depression and anxiety should also be sought to modify the feelings. If we are not
aware of the issues troubling us and have fully repressed our feelings, our difficulties
will be compounded. The cardinal rule of emotion management is to first discover
what we are feeling. Please recognize that the inner self always knows. Stay in touch!

Anger must be quickly channeled and neutralized as if it were a highly
combustible fuel. Finding safe outlets, changing perceptions, and judicious
communication are key elements of anger management.

Guilt is not a well-respected emotion in modern times, but it is a necessary
aspect of the human condition. Appropriate guilt as part of a change process can be a spark toward significant personal growth. Feeling remorse, apologizing to those we may have wronged, and making changes in behavior can be necessary steps toward feeling at peace again.

Obviously, there are many ways to handle the various emotions. As we allow ourselves to more fully experience our feelings, we can to become more acquainted with the rules that govern emotions. With effective training, adults can improve their coping skills fairly quickly.

**Thought Management**

We can control our moods by managing our thoughts effectively. Positive and logical responses will help us to safely navigate the stormy seas of life. To help analyze self-defeating thought patterns, a list of four principal *thinking errors* has been constructed. These thinking errors have a major impact on the production of negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger.

**Thinking Errors**

1. **Exaggeration**
   Making incorrect judgments about the meaning or importance of events. Fears, excess emotion, or lack of complete information affect your interpretation of the situation. (You are not invited to the neighborhood block party. You assume all your neighbors hate you, and begin to make plans to move.)

2. **Labeling**
   Focusing on your faults and those of others without appreciating the good. Using labels to suggest a lack of worth with no potential for change. (“I can't stand the fact that I got a D in Math 101, I am so stupid;” or, “Tom is so lazy, he will never get his house painted.”)

3. **Not accepting reality**
   Refusing to accept that the past cannot be changed, or that one cannot completely control the future. Mistakes and undesirable possibilities must be accepted as realities. (“If I had only applied myself more to studying in college and partied less, my life would be totally different now.”)

4. **Predicting**
   Deciding that you *know* in advance what will happen. Foretelling negative future outcomes based upon lack of past success. (You have been turned down for three jobs and you are certain no one will ever hire you again.)

   Whatever satisfies the soul is truth.
   
   -Walt Whitman

**The Editing Technique**

Keep your thoughts in harmony with truth.

Man’s nature is to strive mightily to change the world to suit his desires and fantasies. We hold tightly to our belief that happiness is tied to our script of how things must and should be. The great majority of negative emotions are closely
connected to our ineffectual strivings to mentally control our environment. We make ourselves miserable by using dramatic repetitive self-talk in response to perceived problems. Peace comes from seeing things the way they really are. The editing technique is designed to change our very desire to indulge in negative thinking.

THE FOUR GREAT THINKING ERRORS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exaggerating</th>
<th>Labeling</th>
<th>Not accepting reality</th>
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Is it really that big?  
Labels are for soup cans, not people.  
If we just run faster, we could get out of here.  
100% accurate?

Instructions for the Editing Process

1. Write out your distressing thoughts about the present problem.
2. Cross out lines that contain exaggerating, labeling, denial of reality, or predicting from your self-talk.
3. Write the issue of concern in more accurate terms using the Key Thoughts Guide below.

Key Thoughts Guide

a. What are some logical and rational statements I can make to help me view this problem more clearly?

b. Am I being positive in my attitude? What are some encouraging declarations I can make? What things are working in my favor?

c. If the worst did come to pass, how could I best handle it?

d. What are some of my personal strengths that will help me to overcome this challenge?

4. Read the new corrected statements five times or more to help convince the inner self.

When confronted by the truth repeatedly, we eventually cave in to the understanding that it is futile to resist reality. Therefore, repeating the corrected thoughts five times appears to be one of the most critical components in cognitive mediation. The repetition provides extra illumination and seems to help the inner self accept the reality of each situation. The editing technique sets up a fascinating
emotional paradox. Human beings are only addicted to dwelling on negative thoughts, not logical, realistic thoughts. It appears that holding onto the fantasy that things will change because we are upset is very compelling to the inner self. The inner self does not like the truth as it compels us to either change ourselves, work harder, or accept something we do not like. “Editing” frees people from the desire to obsess and allows them to get back into the present moment.

Individuals gain insight and clarity of thought as they continue to practice this technique. Subconscious impulses for drama and control greatly decrease and negative thinking begins to be cut off even before it gets started! Correct thinking is a vital element in recovery and spiritual living. We become the masters of our moods as we learn to identify and revise incorrect ideas.

*The gods plant reason in mankind, of all good gifts the highest.*

-Sophocles

**Anger Management**

Anger is an instinctual response that can serve to protect one’s interests and safety. It is a normal emotion and has positive uses. At its best, it is a tool for change. At its worst, it is a major force of destruction.

If you are held captive by your anger, you probably want to change but may not know how. Few people are happy about their tempers. Displays of anger are often embarrassing and can cause significant relationship problems both at home and in the workplace. Chronic anger may also contribute to stress and depression as well as physical problems such as headaches, colitis, and heart disease. Like a great river that periodically overflows its bank, anger must be dammed and channeled.

**The Origins of Anger**

To address an anger management problem, we must first understand what causes anger. Many people subscribe to the self-control theory that says that anger-prone individuals just need to rein in their impulses. This model is too simplistic and only deals with the outward manifestations of the problem. Merely increasing self-control is seldom an effective method for change.

The danger from floating icebergs used to be a great concern to shipping and passenger vessels. Over 80 percent of the bulk of an iceberg is under water and not easily visible. We remember from history that in 1912 the magnificent ocean liner, the *USS Titanic*, then considered unsinkable, struck an iceberg and sank in the North Atlantic. The most important elements of anger management are associated with changing our habitual attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs. The actions we see are only the “tip of the iceberg.” Successful anger management deals with eliminating anger at its source.

*Anger will never disappear so long as thoughts of resentment are cherished in the mind. Anger will disappear just as soon as thoughts of resentment are forgotten.*

-Buddha
Changing Attitudes

The 2017 California wildfire season is the most destructive one on record. Well over a million acres burned in the state with the Thomas fire and the Tubbs fire being the worst. The Thomas fire in Ventura County burned the most acres in California history. The Tubbs Fire in Sonoma and Napa Counties was the most destructive in history and destroyed 5,643 structures and claimed 22 lives. Total damages for the state from the fires are expected to reach near 200 billion dollars.

When fires are close to cities, letting them burn out is not a viable option as they can destroy homes and businesses. When fire crews need to control fires, one of the more important steps they take is to build a fire line. They bulldoze, cut, and dig a wide, cleared path that the fire cannot jump over. By strategically using fire lines, the conflagration can be more effectively managed.

We all need to make a very important decision about what type of personal behavior is acceptable. The higher our goals for anger management, the more successful we eventually will be. Mankind is very adept at rationalization. We cannot allow loopholes. Unless we set tight boundaries, our impulses will escape like horses through a broken fence. Consider the two following examples of different attitudes about expressing anger:

A) *I know I have a bad temper. I yell when people frustrate me, but maybe they should try harder to act right.*

B) *I try to accept people for who they are. I choose to not let others control my emotions and actions because there is a positive way to handle most situations.*

It is important to evaluate whether our attitudes regarding anger expression really work for us over time. Verbal abuse such as criticism and name-calling may provide temporary feelings of control, but damage others’ sense of security and can destroy relationships. Fighting often leads to legal problems. Those who try to justify their bad behavior are only perpetuating bad habits. The more one gives into anger today, the greater the problem tomorrow. People change when they decide to take responsibility for their behavior and firmly commit to correctly managing their emotions.

*It is easy to be an angel when no one ruffles your feathers.*

-Anonymous

In the realm of human emotions, the first line of defense against angry outbursts is to stop, control our response, and take a time-out. A time-out means removing oneself from the situation and allowing an opportunity for more rational thinking. Time-outs provide important boundaries and can stop anger from growing out of control. Removing ourselves from a frustrating situation for a few minutes may be the best use of time there is.

*The greatest remedy for anger is delay.*

-Seneca
Changing Thoughts: Escape from Fantasy Island

I conducted an anger management group for many years. When new people joined us, I would tell them they were going to learn how to make their anger disappear. They seldom believed me, but it was a realistic promise. It is not situations that make us angry, but our perceptions. It is our view of the problem that triggers the outburst of anger. Similarly, a loaded gun cannot go off until the trigger strikes and sets off the explosive charge of gunpowder in the bullet. The trigger for anger, the real cause, is judging others' behavior.

It is almost impossible to get angry without judging others. In Matthew 7:1 in the New Testament, it says, “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” We become frustrated when someone does not live up to our expectations of how we think he should act! We decide that his behavior is immoral, unethical, or socially substandard and, at least in our minds, demand immediate change. Unfortunately, these types of thoughts cause more frustration than anything else.

Angry feelings are born from a natural desire to maintain control over our environment. However, it is a fantasy that other people will act the way we think they should. It is much more helpful to use radical acceptance and accept that people act the way they really are. We would all do best to eliminate the hazardous word “should” from our vocabularies. The more realistic phrase “I wish” can be substituted. The only thing under our control is how we choose to respond to frustration.

It is realistic to appreciate that other people are not actually running about trying to understand and live by the “rules” we have set up for their behavior. Unless we hand them a copy of our personal behavior manual, they probably do not know all our rules, and may not care. Our challenge is to avoid condemning people for bad behavior. To manage anger well, we must lower our expectations and see each person the way he or she really is. There are no perfect individuals in the world. We are all on different levels of development in the various areas of life. Some have not yet learned the value of good morals or interpersonal sensitivity. If we are honest, we know we also fall short in many ways.

An important tactic used by those fighting forest fires is to have helicopters or planes empty great tanks of water or fire retardant onto the flames. We can extinguish our anger with “cool thoughts” (rational thoughts from the logical system). Allowing ourselves to think “hot thoughts” (emotional thoughts from the inner self) is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

Let us consider a frustrating event and compare two thought processes. In this example Joe's supervisor at work is evaluating his job performance:

Hot thoughts This really hurts (awfulizing). He has no right to treat me this way (demanding). He is a real jerk (labeling). He has the sensitivity of Attila the Hun. It's his fault we make mistakes. He harasses us too much (blaming). I'll get even, wait until we are asked to evaluate him (punishment).

It is easy to let ourselves get furious, but we can neutralize our anger through use of logical and rational thoughts. Choosing to take an understanding attitude can also make a substantial difference.
Cool thoughts I do feel hurt, but I'll get over it. He is the supervisor. It is his job to give us feedback. His criticisms were fairly accurate, and he did say he appreciated me. He really didn't do anything wrong, and he has been a decent boss. I need to work this through in my own mind. It's not his fault I'm sensitive.

Reason is the mistress and queen of all things.
-Marcus Tullius Cicero

The following technique has proven to be highly effective for managing anger. A cue sheet of twelve questions called the “Anger Shrinking Card” is listed below. The instructions are simple: “Each time you get angry, read this card!” The cue card will help you learn to structure your thoughts in more positive ways. I suggest that people keep copies in easily accessible places such as their wallet or purse, or taped onto the refrigerator.

Anger Shrinking Card
1. Describe the frustrating situation.
2. What rule of mine is this person breaking?
3. Why is the person acting this way (bad mood, does not understand the situation clearly, personality trait, or feels threatened)?
4. What emotions might lie beneath my anger (frustration, hurt, jealousy, resentment, guilt, or insecurity)?
5. Am I being fully logical about this problem, or do I need to calm down or take a time-out to think more clearly?
6. What did I do to possibly contribute to the problem?
7. What is my immediate impulse to act?
8. What is my fantasy about what will happen if I act on my impulse?
9. What would the actual consequences be if I do not choose to control my anger? Considering these consequences, would acting out be worth it in 30 days?
10. Is there any solution or compromise that would resolve this situation?
11. What could I say to appropriately express my feelings?
12. Is this problem so great that I cannot forgive the person or just put it aside?

Additionally, people sometimes act badly when they are fearful, feel alone, or are under stress. We do not know what hardships an individual may have encountered on the road of life. Rather than seeing difficult people as bad and annoying, we might exercise compassion and view them as people who really need a positive influence.

Managing anger well does not mean bad behavior should be tolerated. When correction is necessary, we should strive to do this in a spirit of love and wisdom. The emotional challenge is to condemn the behavior, but still appreciate the individual worth of the offending party. By setting limits in a compassionate manner, we can
often help others move toward a higher plane of behavior. While we will not be 100 percent successful in helping others to change, we can seek to control our own thoughts and behavior. If our hearts and minds are right toward others, we can enjoy the wonderful gift of inner peace.

*The broad general rule is that a man is about as big as the things that make him angry.*
-Anonymous

**Journey to the Center of the Self: Changing Beliefs**

The earth's surface or crust consists of 13 enormous tectonic plates. These land plates float on a sea of magma, which is superheated rock in liquid form. The crust of the earth is about 4 miles thick under the ocean, 22 miles thick under the plains, and 45 miles thick under the mountains. This is quite thick or thin depending upon your perspective. The crust of the earth makes up only 1 percent of the earth’s total volume. In certain areas the magma develops what are known as “hot spots.” Plumes of the molten magma shoot up and melt openings in the earth's crust. One can tell where these hot spots are located because the magma pushes so close to the surface that its effects can be observed. The volcanoes in Hawaii and the geysers in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming are associated with magma hot spots.

The equivalent in human behavior to magma hot spots are the areas of sensitivity we all have. We may be particularly reactive around such difficult issues as abandonment, criticism, or control. Our perceptions of past painful events become submerged in the subconscious and affect our present behavior. When someone treads on our hot spots, we can experience significant emotional turmoil. However, if we can become more aware of our patterns of emotional overreaction, we can stop ourselves from having destructive eruptions.

I would like to share an incident at the boys’ ranch I used to work at that highlights this problem of past conditioning. There was one 17-year-old boy who, despite a long history in the juvenile system, appeared to enter the program with a very positive attitude. He had some goals for himself and wanted to make his life work. We had very few problems with him for four or five months. Everyone was looking forward to him completing the program with flying colors and going into independent living. I was very surprised one day to hear that he had hit a counselor and was in the seclusion area.

I went over to discuss this startling turn of events with him. First, I asked the obvious question, “Why did you do this?” The boy’s response was perplexing. He said, “I don’t know.” He also was baffled by this incident and wanted to understand it for his own benefit. We reviewed the entire sequence of events, but it still did not make sense. He had been sitting down and the youth counselor had been standing by him lecturing him about a minor rule infraction. Without any warning, this large youth punched the counselor hard in the chest.

I asked him if those events might have reminded him of anything from the past. After giving it some thought, he came up with something. The state had taken
away custody of this young man from his mother for physical abuse among other things. She had a pattern of escalating from verbal reprimands to full-scale assault. One time she broke a glass jar of peanut butter over his head. The scene of the counselor standing over him lecturing reminded him of how the physical abuse by his mother generally began. In his subconscious mind, he was defending himself.

As we recognize that a patterned response to a particular situation is inappropriate, we need to do a track down. With the following Track Down Sheet we can look to the past to discover how we responded in thought and behavior to related experiences. Once we have insight into our subconscious conditioning, we can gain control over our behavior.

First, we can consider the response the present situation warrants. Usually we will realize there are essential differences between the present and past. Once we prepare ourselves to be aware of a certain type of situation, we can delay our emotional response and switch into more rational thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Track Down Sheet</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the pattern of emotional overreaction that concerns you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. What is the fear or context that triggers the behavior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is there an underlying belief or assumption that gives rise to this behavior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What past experiences influenced you to think in this manner? (Related historical events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Looking at your history from an adult perspective, are there any other explanations or conclusions that could be drawn? (New interpretations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What are some different, more positive ways you can think and act now if similar situations occur?</td>
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This awareness of our emotional hot spots is an important key to good self-control. It can be quite valuable to practice the new responses we wish to make by using visual imagery. Picture in your mind the triggering event that sets you off, then see yourself responding in the manner you would desire. Do this daily for a couple of weeks.

Some individuals seem to be angry most of the time without any apparent precipitants. Their negative behavior may be more connected with attitude. For instance, a person might have the belief that people cannot be trusted, or he could have the attitude that he must be very aggressive to avoid being taken advantage of. He could do a track down to discover which past events are associated with his defensiveness.

Effective anger management involves more than just suppressing our impulses. Anger builds up from within based upon thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. Past experiences significantly affect our worldview and our reactions to situations. Modifying aggressive impulses begins with the decision to limit and control what we will allow in our behavior. It is important to recognize that our initial perceptions are often distorted, emotionally-based, and linked to the inner self. We can process our reactions to situations by logically analyzing our thinking, letting go of control, and
demonstrating compassion and acceptance toward others. As we accept the overall goal of transcending anger, our relationships will improve, and we will experience greater inner peace.

**Additional Methods for Managing Anger**

We recall that impulses come from the heart of man, the inner self. We already spoke about cutting off anger at its source by changing perceptions and beliefs. There are a few other ways to change aggressive desires. Anger can be a thorny problem, so we want to have as many tools in our belt as we can get.

**Make an Action Film**

Despite their illusory nature, movies have a surprisingly great emotional impact on human beings. Although we logically recognize that the people on the screen are only actors portraying a story, we are still thrilled by chase scenes, emotionally moved by dramas, and terrified by horror films. I believe the explanation for this phenomenon is that the heart has a difficult time distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

For this reason, one of the most damaging things we can do is to visualize aggressive or violent scenes in our minds when we are angry. This gives the heart the false message that acting out is a viable solution and increases the likelihood of aggression. People tend to eventually act out the behavior they fantasize about. To more effectively contain our impulses, we really should consider the whole story. While it might seem satisfying to obtain revenge or to “teach a lesson” to some offensive person, the legal, emotional, and spiritual consequences of aggression far outweigh any possible brief catharsis.

A more helpful way to use the power of visual imagery in anger management is to highlight the dangers of aggression. We can do this by visualizing in great detail all the negative consequences that could occur as a result of acting out. This personal video should include the effects upon others as well as ourselves. Since this imagery will seem quite real to the heart, it can have a very sobering effect on our emotions and greatly change our desires. Thinking realistically about consequences before they happen is an important step in self-control. In my anger management group, we had what I called the “thirty-day rule.” I informed the individuals who attended the group that it was not my role to tell them how they should handle every situation. However, I proposed that whatever they planned to do, they should anticipate feeling good about their decision 30 days later!

Many years ago, there was a tragic situation in Massachusetts that made national headlines. Two fathers got into a fistfight over the issue of unnecessary roughness in a youth hockey game. Three young brothers ended up seeing their father beaten to death before their eyes. I am sure that Thomas Junta, the man who was charged and later convicted, did not wake up that morning with a plan to kill someone and subsequently go to prison. Had he thought more about the consequences of fighting and made previous decisions to exercise self-control, that situation never would have occurred.
Communication

It is sometimes necessary to be appropriately assertive to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Communication is most effective when we calmly share what the issue is, how we feel, why we feel that way, and what we want. It is important to avoid blaming, and to stress instead what kind of change is desired. As much as possible convey these thoughts with feelings of love and true concern. Sensitive people will consider what we have to say. Inflexible, non-caring people are unlikely to change no matter what we do. Therefore, it is helpful to accept that we will not always get our way.

It is good to be a peace-maker. Oftentimes, compromise is required for the sake of finding harmony. However, sometimes others are overly focused on taking advantage of us. If we have already gone an extra mile or two, we need to just say NO. It can be said quietly, but firmly, “I am sorry, I am not able to do that.” If we do not establish limits when we really need to, we are setting ourselves up for stored resentment, and a possible blow-up later on.

*Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.*

-Laurence J. Peter

The Power of Positive Emotion

We recall that impulses come from the heart of man, the inner self. We already spoke about cutting off anger at its source by changing perceptions and beliefs. Another wonderful way to eliminate aggressive desires is to employ an incompatible response. Creating a strong emotion that is different than the one we want to eliminate immediately changes our feelings. The perfect solution is to find the inner wisdom to show love to those who afflict us. Humor also works well to diffuse anger. These are very powerful proactive approaches for resolving inner conflict.

Keep Your Balance

It is a difficult task in this complex world to keep one’s attitude up and stress level down. We all have schedules and pressures to contend with as well as inner frustrations about our life’s course. It is important to maintain the correct priorities by nurturing relationships with family and friends, and making time for exercise and hobbies. One of the best things we can do to relieve stress is to work on coping skills. This means paying more attention to our inner feelings and practicing cognitive mechanisms such as the ones provided in this book. If we find ourselves overly reactive and irritable, it is a sure sign we need to make some changes somewhere.

I have come to realize that people often do not know the true source of their stress. Several years ago when my work as a psychologist seemed to be overly taxing me, I took an inventory of my work stresses. It surprised me that the real issue was not the burden of trying to help my clients with their great troubles. It was my paperwork! I had fallen behind and could not seem to catch up. It really bothered me. Once I discovered the true problem, I came in on a few Saturdays and got on top
of things. It made a great difference in my stress level, though I admit I did not enjoy working on weekends.

As we gain more control over our lives, it is important to regularly take inventory and analyze our points of stress. If we do not take care of our emotional, spiritual, and physical health, we will have a considerably more difficult time managing anger.

**Action Step**

1. Practice using some of the techniques from the beginning of this chapter to help bypass negative thoughts. These techniques were observation, distraction, defusion, commentary.

2. Use the editing technique on three issues that arise and upset you during the next week. Make sure to write down the answers to each question.

3. Over the next week focus your attention on improving your anger management skills. First decide which behaviors are unacceptable, then set your boundaries. Once these guidelines are set, it will be easier to follow them regardless of provocation or circumstances. Consider the following steps each time there is a significant frustrating event:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Four Cs of Anger Management</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Control</strong> Take responsibility for anger management. Delay your reaction to situations. Set personal standards for behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Consider</strong> Avoid hot thoughts (emotional) and focus on cool thoughts (logical). Judging fuels anger. The consistent exercise of acceptance and compassion bring inner peace. Use the Anger Shrinking Card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Communicate</strong> As appropriate, communicate the primary feelings behind the anger (hurt, fear, insecurity, etc.), avoid pressure tactics, check out assumptions, and use good listening skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Cooperate</strong> Give others freedom of choice and practice a willingness to compromise.</td>
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*When anger rises, think of the consequences.*

- Benjamin Franklin

**Notes**


3. Ibid