With affection to Susan and Greg, my dear children.
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Preface

I practiced psychiatry for 30 years. Prior to that, I was a practicing internist for 10 years. During that time I had the opportunity to care for thousands of patients with every conceivable physical and emotional illness. They were people from every walk of life, from every social stratum, and from every religious persuasion. One of the most common problems I encountered among these patients was anger.

This book has been written primarily for the person who has been taught that anger is wrong and doesn’t know how to handle anger constructively.

I believe that it is critical for a person to be aware of his own feelings, including anger. Feelings are a valuable guide, a sixth sense, a tool to help us evaluate what is happening around us. Losing our awareness of feelings is as tragic as losing our sense of touch, taste, or smell. Many of us, particularly those of us with religious backgrounds, have been robbed of the right to negative feelings, especially the feeling of anger. This is comparable to a psychological rape, in which a vital part of our humanity is violated, leaving us with irreparable emotional damage. Only when we are aware of our feelings are we able to respond to the inevitable conflicts in life constructively.

Furthermore, so many individuals do not know how to express their feelings, needs, and desires in healthy ways. They either are passive, or in some instances, frankly aggressive, which is a major contributing factor to mishandling anger.
This book offers specific guidelines that can help you deal with hurts and anger. It will teach you how to express your needs and desires in healthy, constructive ways.

As a psychiatrist, I believe that anger that is inadequately dealt with is one of the most common problems today. Helping a person recognize and deal constructively with his hurts and anger is one of the most important things that I can do.

In my counseling practice I have used this material countless times with great success. I also draw on this material in my personal life. When I updated this book 10 years ago, I was glad to see that not one major premise needed to be changed. However, a great deal more had been learned by researchers, so I have included more information about the devastating effects of unhealthy anger, along with additional and effective treatment strategies.

When I first wrote this book there were two prominent viewpoints being advocated. At one extreme were those who recommended that people give full vent to their anger, sometimes referred to as “ventilationists.” At the other extreme were those who taught that essentially all anger was wrong. Fortunately the ventilationists have few advocates today. However, there still remain a number who advocate that anger is essentially wrong, a view still held by many Christians today. This view fosters a myriad of problems that will be elaborated on throughout the book.

The knowledge and insights shared in this book come not only out of a sound psychological framework, but I believe are consistent with the Bible, which is a vitally important guideline for myself and for many readers. Therefore, while Christians will find the principles in this
book to be consistent with their beliefs, I believe that non-Christians will also find the methods taught for handling anger to be useful, even though they may not agree with me theologically. I have taught the concepts in this book to both secular and religious audiences with equally effective results.

As for my own experience, I grew up with poor modeling of anger. Often I could sense tension in the air at home, and there was seldom constructive communication during conflicts. Occasionally a strong angry remark would be made, followed by a cold war. I knew that what I saw couldn’t be the solution to handling anger, and I have since learned and taught what I can about how to constructively handle anger.

The problems and solutions that I discuss in the following pages are those that I have personally dealt with in my own life and have seen in the lives of innumerable patients. This book comes not only out of a theoretical framework, but out of practical experience, both personal and professional. I can gladly say over time, I have seen the solutions prove very effective in people’s lives.

All the examples used in this book are real, but names and incidental features have been altered sufficiently to preserve the privacy of the individuals involved.

I greatly appreciate the tremendous assistance in typing and editing by my wife, Betty, and my niece, Lyn Carlson.

—Dwight L. Carlson
Misconceptions About Anger

Jan is an attractive college sophomore who stood several months ago on top of the Vincent Thomas Bridge in San Pedro, California, and seriously contemplated jumping the equivalent of 18 stories to her death. Several weeks ago she attempted suicide by taking an overdose of pills. She sat in my office, ready for this week’s psychotherapy session. She started by telling me about an event that happened Thursday afternoon. Jan said she felt funny and confused, and walked aimlessly around the campus and the adjacent shopping mall. This confusion lasted for several hours, and then she returned to her dorm and felt better. “That was it,” she said. “That’s all!”

“You mean you had this episode of aimless confusion for several hours and that’s what was troubling you?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I waited for more, but all I got was silence. I asked about further feelings or anything else that might have
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“Yes,” she said.

I waited for more, but all I got was silence. I asked about further feelings or anything else that might have
happened that day. Still she came up with nothing. She had had no other feelings, and nothing unusual had happened during the 24 hours prior to her episode. Already 20 minutes of the session had passed, and we seemed to be making little progress.

Eventually I asked, “What do you normally do on Thursday afternoon around 2:30?”

She replied that she normally went to her chemistry class.

“So you didn’t attend class Thursday?” I questioned.

“No,” she answered. When I asked her why, she didn’t seem to know.

Because I knew that Jan was very conscientious and that this was highly unusual behavior for her, I questioned her further. Eventually I found out that in the previous chemistry class her lab partner had had trouble understanding the instructions, so Jan tried to help by quietly explaining them. But the instructor heard the whispering and snapped, “Be quiet, Jan.” Jan instantly quieted down and didn’t say another word the rest of the class.

When I asked her how she felt about the instructor’s remark, she at first denied having any reaction or feeling anything. But as I probed further and pointed out that there must have been a powerful reason why she didn’t attend class, she finally was able to get in touch with a slight feeling of irritation at her lab partner and her teacher.

You see, one of Jan’s basic problems is that she is a very sensitive person who has always been uncomfortable with feelings of anger. When she became a Christian, she was taught that anger is sin. Therefore, she progressively hid
from herself her own feelings of irritation and anger. This powerful source of energy had become repressed to such a degree that she literally felt nothing. Even when she was ready to jump off the bridge, she said she felt “numb.” When people insulted her she wouldn’t feel hurt or angry, but on the other hand, when something good happened, she wasn’t able to feel happy either.

Jan illustrates Misconception #1 that many people have about anger: If you don’t look, feel, or seem angry, you don’t have an anger problem.

Joseph Cooke, a missionary to Thailand, exemplifies another misconception people have about anger. In his book Free for the Taking he says

...squelching our feelings never pays. In fact, it’s rather like plugging up a steam vent in a boiler. When the steam is stopped in one place, it will come out somewhere else. Either that or the whole business will blow up in your face. And bottled-up feelings are just the same. If you bite down your anger, for example, it often comes out in another form that is much more difficult to deal with. It changes into sullenness, self-pity, depression, or snide, cutting remarks. . . .

Not only may bottled-up emotions come out sideways in various unpleasant forms; they also may build up pressure until they simply have to burst forth. And when they do, someone is almost bound to get hurt. . . .

I remember that for years and years of my . . . life, I worked to bring my emotions under control. Over and over again, as they cropped up, I would master
them in my attempt to achieve what looked like a gracious, imperturbable Christian spirit. Eventually, I had nearly everybody fooled, even in a measure my own wife. But it was all a fake. I had a nice-looking outward appearance; but inside, there was almost nothing there…. And way underneath, almost completely beyond the reach of my conscious mind, the mass of feelings lay bottled up. I didn't even know they were there myself, except when their pale ghosts would surface now and then in various kinds of unsanctified attitudes and reactions. But they were there nevertheless. And the time came when the whole works blew up in my face, in an emotional breakdown.

All the things that had been buried so long came out in the open. Frankly, there was no healing, no recovery, no building a new life for me until all those feelings were sorted out, and until I learned to know them for what they were, accept them, and find some way of expressing them honestly and nondestructively.¹

Despite his best intentions, Joseph Cooke fell victim to Misconception #2: If you ignore your hurts and anger, they will go away and won't cause you any trouble later on.

Joe is a 26-year-old machinist. One thing is sure—he doesn't have any trouble expressing his feelings. He makes it quite clear when he is angry—a little too clear. Everybody was quite aware of the fact that he was hostile when he broke his guitar into a thousand pieces just because his friend criticized his playing. His son knew he was angry at

¹
misconceptions about anger

him for leaving his bike in the driveway, because Joe deliberately drove over the back wheel of the bike. His wife was very aware of his feelings when he broke windows, doors, dishes, and furniture.

Joe was applying the theory popularized in the 1970s that said that if you just get your feelings and anger out in the open, you’ll feel better and everything will be fine. But there’s just one problem with this view—it doesn’t work, and in the long run, it destroys one’s health and relationships. It certainly wasn’t working for Joe, who was usually miserable and frequently on the brink of suicide. He had fallen prey to the tempting Misconception #3: Just let all your feelings and anger hang out—just get them out of your system—and you’ll solve your anger problems.

Brenda, a professional-looking secretary, is very aware of her hurts and angry feelings, but she would never dream of expressing them like Joe does. She tells me, “I can’t get angry at anyone—if I could, I wouldn’t be here. I can’t get angry because then no one would love me.” She adds, “I can’t even get mad at a guy who tries to seduce me.”

Brenda typifies a host of patients I have known who wouldn’t hurt anyone, who are never angry, and who seem to have an ideal temperament. Individuals like Brenda are friendly, well-liked, “nice” people. But they pay a tremendous price for their perpetual “niceness.” After a few years, physical and emotional illnesses often develop that affect their health, their relations with family members, and their job performance. Brenda is a victim of Misconception #4: It won’t cost me too much emotionally to be a nice person who never gets angry at anybody.
Mary, a 42-year-old bank teller, sought my help for dizziness and stomach symptoms. Her internist had been unable to find a physical cause for her symptoms, which were so severe that they were interfering with her job. Upon questioning, Mary didn’t seem to be harboring any bitterness or anger toward anybody she knew, including her husband of 20 years. But as therapy progressed it became apparent that she had buried a number of hurts over the years. At first she didn’t see any correlation between these old hurts and her current symptoms.

Our next obstacle was her failure to realize that a dedicated Christian could not only have such feelings but could resolve them in a constructive way. She was afraid that if she expressed her true feelings to her non-Christian husband, he would think less of her faith, might leave her, or might even have a heart attack and die, leaving her to blame herself. Eventually she started gingerly applying the principles outlined in this book, and to her amazement, her relationship with her husband got better—not worse. A newfound love developed between them, and her symptoms were resolved.

Mary illustrates Misconception #5: *If I express my hurts and anger to the person I’m angry at, our relationship will suffer.*

It is my opinion that at least 50 percent of all emotional, psychosomatic, and interpersonal problems (including familial and marital problems) are the result of poorly handled anger. In addition, it has been repeatedly proven that many physical illnesses—such as hypertension, heart attacks, and even cancer—are more common in individuals who have a problem with anger. What is
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Mary illustrates Misconception #5: If I express my hurts and anger to the person I’m angry at, our relationship will suffer. It is my opinion that at least 50 percent of all emotional, psychosomatic, and interpersonal problems (including familial and marital problems) are the result of poorly handled anger. In addition, it has been repeatedly proven that many physical illnesses—such as hypertension, heart attacks, and even cancer—are more common in individuals who have a problem with anger. What is more staggering is that a large percentage of these people don’t even realize that they have an anger problem. Some of them may perhaps be aware that they are nursing a backlog of old hurts, but many others are not aware of the role that feelings and anger play in their lives.

As you’ve been reading about these patients, perhaps you’ve been saying to yourself, “I’m sure glad I don’t have a problem with anger like they do.” But, I ask you to consider the fact that it is precisely the person who thinks he never gets angry who often has the most serious problem with anger. He may be chronically late, sulk, whine, or stew; he may be cynical, envious, or catty; he may savor secret injustices, gossip “self-righteously,” or engage in hurtful humor; he may be sarcastic, make caustic comments, or develop a martyr complex; but if you ask him if he has a problem with anger, he will smile innocently and say, “Why, no—I never get angry.”

The problem is that this person doesn’t see these things as symptomatic of an underlying problem with anger. Like many of us, he has a very simplistic notion of what anger is. Most of us think of a person who has a problem with anger as someone who yells at his kids and kicks his dog. But more often it is the person who suffers in stoic silence who has a problem with anger. The people who bury anger or who express it in such camouflaged forms as bitterness, cynicism, or envy often fail to recognize the indicators of anger in their lives. They don’t recognize as anger the little inner twinge when a friend makes an ever-so-carefully-phrased insult in the middle of a conversation. They don’t recognize as anger the vague
bitterness at their family for not appreciating all that they do for them.

Many people who are unable to recognize anger in their lives do sense that they have been hurt many times in the past, and that many of these hurts have not been resolved. If you find that you usually sense hurts rather than feelings of anger, perhaps it would be helpful for you to substitute the word _hurts_ with the word _anger_ when you read this book so that it is more applicable to you.

The root cause of many of these misconceptions about anger is a distrust and even a denial of our emotions. The fallacy of denying our emotions of hurt and anger can be illustrated by the following example:

My first car was plagued with a multitude of problems, including overheating. In those days the temperature gauge was an actual needle that would slowly rise higher and higher. My anxiety level would have a parallel response, and I’d nervously sweat out the miles to my destination, or at least to the nearest gas station.

I could have saved myself a great deal of anguish by putting my hand over the gauge or even painting it black so I couldn’t see the needle rise. I might have saved myself a lot of anxiety. However, if I had done that, then I wouldn’t have known the car was overheating until I saw steam pouring out from under the hood, meaning that something was seriously wrong with the car.

Although painting over the temperature gauge may seem like a ridiculous thing to do, it is precisely what many people do with anger. They ignore it and even deny its very existence until it boils over, at which point they can’t avoid it any longer. But by that time it may have
caused incalculable harm to the person himself and to those around him.

Just like our cars need a temperature gauge and we would never dream of painting over it, so too we need our emotions and must never deny them. Our feelings, including the feeling of anger, are God-given gifts that will serve us well if we are able to be aware of them and act on them appropriately.