

Managing and releasing stored anger

Oftentimes parties with high levels of stored anger have so many accumulated grievances that they have a hard time sorting them out. To reduce stored anger, to feel better and function better, it is necessary to do as much of this sorting as you possibly can. This worksheet will be broken down into two sections. The first section will help you go through the stages of working through specific grievances you can identify. The second section will help you use strategies that do not require the identification of specific grievances.

Before starting this process, please think about these ideas. First, no matter who you are, one of the best things you can do to help manage anger is use effective boundaries in your life today. This way, you will not build up even more anger. Secondly, be aware that you must expect this process to take a while. Our experience is that the longer it takes for anger to build, and the more of it that builds up, the longer it takes to release. Finally, it is also possible that for a short period of time, identifying some of your old grievances may increase your anger. This is not abnormal. Be patient and remember the saying “you can’t leave a place you’ve never been”. If you follow these steps it is overwhelmingly likely your anger will gradually subside and you will find the effort well worth it.

SECTION 1 IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING SPECIFIC GRIEVANCES FROM YOUR PAST

This first section will take you through a series of steps or stages to help you process stored anger. The first stage is to identify past grievances. To do so, it is useful to follow a three step process (While doing this consider that people with high levels of accumulated anger have often been told to either deny their feelings of anger and/or refrain from protecting themselves in response to their anger):

Step 1: Make a list of the past grievances and hurts that you are very aware of and that come immediately to mind. Then, over the next several days, add to this list as you think of other times or ways you’ve been hurt by others: (Use additional pages anytime you need to in responding to questions.)

Step 2: Starting with your childhood, go through the history of your life in order and see if this review of your history helps you find additional items. Spend several days doing this:

Step 3: Identify the most important people in your life and with respect to each one consider whether they have done things that have emotionally or physically hurt you. Spend several days doing this:

Worksheet continues on page 2.

STAGE 2 - The second stage is to identify which of these grievances is truly *justified*, because some may not be. Here it is important to remember the nature and purpose of anger. Anger is an emotion that gets us to take protective action when others are trying to physically or emotionally hurt us. It is based on the implied social duty we have not to hurt each other. When we are not willing or not able to take self-protective action in response to these actions by others, we build up anger (and we call this “stored” or “accumulated” anger).

People that have accumulated a lot of anger need to consider these things when they are reviewing their lists to screen out unjustified anger.

- ▶ 1. Sometimes, people with high levels of accumulated anger tend to base their anger on unrealistically high duties or standards. They may expect too much.
- ▶ 2. People with high levels of accumulated anger tend to “over-personalize” other’s behavior. This means they often tend to assume others have bad or harmful intent towards them when they really don’t.

With these ideas in mind, go through your list of grievances and in some way highlight five categories.

- ▶ The first category are grievances that you can exclude from your list because they do not pass the test of true physical or emotional harm done to you.

▶ The second category are grievances that you can de-intensify based on the intent of the other. This means that a more realistic interpretation of the grievance allows you to see that the harm was accidental and not intentional.

- ▶ The third category are grievances where there was true physical or emotional harm, but where you can de-intensify the grievance because you can see the offender in a more compassionate way. An example might be someone who hurt you, but was overwhelmed with stress or pain. Remember, whether you choose to re-interpret a grievance based on the status of the offender is personal and completely up to you.

- ▶ The fourth category are grievances that you are confused about, which we will discuss further below.

- ▶ The fifth and final categories are those grievance that remain where there was true physical or emotional harm and no reason to exclude or de-intensify them.

With respect to the confusion category, it is a good idea to find several trusted and mature friends or contacts that can offer their input and help you clarify whether these situations really justify your anger. Obviously, you want to avoid doing this with other people that have high levels of stored anger themselves. Once you have done this, then re-categorize them.

Worksheet continues on page 3.

STAGE 3 -The third stage is to take action on those grievances that have passed the test of justified anger. There are a number of strategies and actions that can be taken here. Remember, some of the parties that have hurt you may no longer be alive and this will obviously limit the actions that can be taken with that group of people.

CATEGORY 1: "After the Fact" actions

Better late than never boundaries – this is where we set overdue boundaries with those that have hurt us in the past and may still be hurting us in the present.

- ▶ Demands for compensation – this is where we make demands for compensation that are proportional to the grievance. This category includes, but is not limited to, court-of-law actions. We encourage parties taking action under this category to carefully consider whether they have power to enforce their demands. Be prepared to accept an outcome where you don't receive the compensation you feel is just.
- ▶ Law enforcement reports – once again, caution is in order here and parties doing this should remember that they may or may not receive the justice they feel they are entitled to. Nonetheless, some may find it cathartic just to take this step.

- ▶ Declarations and indictments – this is where we make statements to offenders that acknowledge our harms. Once again, sometimes just the act of doing so, without expecting anything in return, will feel satisfying and just. This action will often be one that calls out "the elephant in the room" and strips away the veil of secrecy.

- ▶ Reconciliation actions and processes – this is for situations where there are likely to be justified grievances that run in both directions. We encourage parties in this situation to use the services of trained mediators or conciliators.

CATEGORY 2: Symbolic or cathartic actions

These actions may be especially useful where we are unable to find our offender or where our offender is dead. Almost anything is fair game in this category if it helps you release anger. Examples include writing letters to dead people, visiting gravesites and expressing anger in verbal or other ways that don't damage property and fantasizing about retaliatory actions, to name just a few.

Another "branch" in this category is to help others that have been offended or victimized in a similar way. This may feel empowering and cathartic.

CATEGORY 3: Seeking and receiving validation of your grievances

Having another or others witness and validate your grievances is powerful and healing. Having them fail to do so is frustrating and only adds to your anger. For this reason it is extremely important that you carefully choose who to do this with. Many people mean well but still might say very invalidating things like "you just need to move on" or "it's not as big a deal as you think" or "you just need to forgive".

If your sense of anyone (whether they are therapist, clergy, family member, romantic partner or friend) is that they are unable to compassionately validate your grievance, keep looking until you find someone that is. This is an area where you may find it useful to choose an effective anger validating therapist because the process sometimes takes a while and it may be unrealistic to expect others to give you so much emotional energy.

SECTION TWO – GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH STORED ANGER

These are strategies that may be useful whether you are dealing with specific grievances or just have a general sense of anger or rage about things you cannot identify.

- ▶ **Physical release of energy** – this can involve “passive” forms of exercise that release energy and exhaust you. It can also involve forms of exercise that are aggressive and possibly more cathartic like boxing or martial arts.
- ▶ **Spiritual strategies** – there are endless possibilities in this area. We encourage their use, especially when you’ve taken all reasonable anger releasing action - including seeking and receiving validation. As far as forgiving others, this ultimately may be very empowering and liberating, but it must be done on your terms and only when and if you are ready.

▶ **Building and living a positive life** – we’ve heard it said that success is the best revenge and there is truth to this. Once again, when all reasonable and feasible anger releasing actions have been taken, there will be a time to build the best life possible for yourself. This is the point at which you say to yourself, “I’ve done everything I can in terms of taking anger releasing actions. At this point, if my grievances continue to haunt me and bring me down, then I am letting the offender continue to damage me. I have a choice not to do this.”