
Understanding Anger, Guilt, and Shame

Anger, guilt, and shame are problematic for many people. Vic's difficulties in controlling his anger created significant problems in his marriage. Marissa's shame centered on her history of sexual abuse and affected her self-esteem and her relationships. This chapter describes the cognitive components of anger, guilt, and shame and details strategies for understanding and managing these feelings.

ANGER

Chapter 6 began with a description of Vic's angry explosion following a conversation with his wife, Judy. You may or may not express anger as Vic did, but you probably have experienced a similar upheaval of anger at times when you thought you were being seriously mistreated or someone was taking advantage of you. When we are angry, our body mobilizes for defense or attack, and our thoughts are often filled with plans for retaliation, or "getting even," or they focus on how "unfairly" we have been treated. As with all moods, anger is accompanied by changes in thinking, behavior, and physical functioning, as described in Chapter 1.

ANGER PROFILE

Thoughts		Physical Reactions	
Others are threatening or hurtful	Tight muscles	Rules have been violated	Increased blood pressure
Others are treating me unfairly	Increased heart rate		
Behaviors		Moods	
Defend/Resist	Irritable	Angry	Frustrated
Attack/Argue			
Withdraw (to punish or protect)	Enraged		

Notice that the emotion of anger can range from irritation to rage. How angry we become in a given situation (social environment) is influenced by our interpretation of the meaning of the event. If Vic's wife, Judy, grew silent in a conversation and he interpreted her reaction as fatigue, Vic might be mildly irritated. However, if Vic thought Judy's silence meant that she didn't care for him or was belittling his concerns, Vic would feel much angrier.

There is great individual variation in the type of event that elicits anger. One person may get angry standing in line and yet listen calmly to criticisms of job performance. A different person may be perfectly content to stand in line and yet quickly attack anyone who points out work flaws. The types of events that provoke our anger are usually linked to our past as well as to rules and beliefs that we hold.

For example, if we have been abused frequently or severely in the past, we may have a tendency to be "on guard" against future abuse. We have learned that it is adaptive to be alert and wary of abuse if others are frequently hurting us. Some people who have a long history of abuse are quick to see current events as abusive and may experience chronic anger, sometimes seemingly out of proportion to the events that provoke the anger.

The pattern of quick and frequent anger goes along with a belief that it is possible to protect ourselves by confronting abuse. What about people who have been frequently abused but who feel helpless to protect themselves? People who believe they are helpless often react to abuse not with anger but with resignation or depression. For these people, the challenge may be to learn to experience anger when someone is directly harming them, rather

than learning to control anger. Anger can be a problem, therefore, either because it is too frequent or because it is absent. It is normal to feel angry some-
times.

Exercise: Understanding Anger

To understand what happens when you are angry, remember a recent time when you felt angry or irritated. Describe the situation in column 1 of the Thought Record in Worksheet 12.1. On a 0-100 scale, with 100 being enraged, 50 being angry, and 10 being mildly irritated, rate your anger and describe it in a word or two in column 2.

At the point when you were most angry, what was going through your mind?

Write these thoughts (words, images, memories) in column 3.

If your anger reactions are troublesome to you, repeat this exercise for several other recent situations in which you have been angry. Describe the situations, rate the intensity of your anger, and then write down your thoughts, including any images you may have had. Once you have done this exercise for several situations, proceed to the next two sections, which describe a cognitive understanding of anger and outline approaches to help you harness your anger so that it can serve you constructively rather than destructively.

Cognitive Aspects of Anger

Anger is linked to a perception of damage or hurt and to a belief that important rules have been violated. We become angry if we think we have been treated unfairly, hurt unnecessarily, or prevented from obtaining something we expected to achieve. Notice the emphasis on fairness, reasonableness, and expectation. It is not simply the hurt or damage that makes us angry, but the violation of rules and expectations.

Imagine a man who loses his job. Does he feel angry? It depends. If the man loses his job and considers this a fair decision (perhaps because he broke company rules or the company went bankrupt), he is unlikely to feel angry.

However, if the man thinks his job loss was unfair (perhaps others broke rules and were not fired or only men of a certain race lost their jobs), then he probably feels very angry.

Similarly, if a child steps on your foot while you are riding on a bus, you feel pain. Whether or not you feel angry depends on your interpretation of

WORKSHEET 12.1: Understanding Anger

<p>1. Situation</p> <p>Who? What? When? Where?</p>	<p>2. Moods</p> <p>a. What did you feel? b. Rate each mood (0–100%).</p>	<p>3. Automatic Thoughts (Images)</p> <p>a. What was going through your mind just before you started to feel this way? Any other thoughts? Images? b. Circle the hot thought.</p>

the intent and reasonableness of the child's behavior. Your anger is likely to be quick if you think the injury was intentional. But if you think that the child stepped on your foot by accident when a server of the bus made the child lose balance, you wince in pain but probably do not feel anger. The probability of anger in response to an unintentional injury is related to your judgments of "reasonableness." For example, on an overcrowded bus, we overlook someone stepping on our foot more easily than we do on a nearly empty bus.

These rules of anger seem quite straightforward until you consider that people vary greatly in what they consider fair and reasonable expectations. Vic expected Judy to be attentive and supportive to him even when he was behaving in ways she considered hurtful. Judy expected Vic to speak calmly to her even when he was feeling enraged. Both Vic and Judy believed that their own expectations were reasonable and the other's expectations were too perfectionistic.

As Vic and Judy discovered, anger is most likely to emerge in close relationships. Whether with a love partner or a work colleague, anger is rarely so intense as when it is experienced with someone with whom we are in close contact. The link between anger and intimacy can be best understood by recognizing that each of us has multiple expectations for our friendships, love relationships, work partnerships, and so forth. We are less likely to have specific personal expectations for people we meet casually. The closer our relationship with someone, the more likely we are to have expectations of them. To complicate the picture, we rarely tell people about our expectations, or even become aware of them ourselves, until they have been broken. Then we feel hurt, disappointed, and often angry.

Anger Management Strategies

Cognitive Restructuring

The cognitive restructuring methods taught in *Mind Over Mood* (Chapters 4-7) often help reduce anger. Other methods that may help you control your anger include anticipating and preparing for events that place you at high risk for experiencing anger, recognizing the early warning signs of anger, timeouts, as-
section training and couples therapy.

Anticipating and Preparing for Events Using Imagery

You may find it helpful to anticipate situations in which you are likely to get angry and to prepare for them. The imagery methods to alleviate anxiety described in Chapter 11 can be helpful in minimizing the possibility of de-

destructive anger. It is best to use imagery before entering a situation. You may find it helpful to imagine yourself saying what you want to say, in the manner in which you want to say it, and getting the response you hope to get. Further, it may be helpful to imagine how you can handle problems that might occur in an effective and adaptive way. Imagery works, in part, because it helps you think through possible problem areas and design your response in advance. Further, it can be helpful to see yourself as effective and relaxed in a high-risk, stressful situation. Finally, it is helpful to construct an ideal image of how you want to respond; the image can help guide your responses in the actual situation.

If you can identify a situation that is going to be stressful and in which you are at high risk for experiencing anger, you have the opportunity to plan, write out, and rehearse exactly what you want to say and how you want to say it. This script can help you develop a strategy targeted to what you want to achieve and enter the situation with a greater degree of confidence.

Recognizing Early Warning Signs of Anger

In addition to the anticipation of situations in which you are likely to be angry, it is also helpful to recognize the signs that you are becoming angry or that your anger is getting out of control. By recognizing these signs, you have the opportunity to short-circuit any destructive anger. Since anger can be helpful or destructive, if you learn to recognize when you are beginning to move into the destructive zone, you can then utilize various methods to reassess control and make your anger work constructively.

For many people, early warning signs of destructive anger include shakiness, muscle tension, clenched jaw, chest pressure, yelling, clenched fists, and saying things that are not true. When you become aware of any of these signals, it is important to take a moment to remind yourself of your options. You can choose to be angry or to use some of the methods described here to calm down.

Timeouts

Timeouts can be an effective way to control your anger. Taking a timeout involves removing yourself from the situation you are in when the early warning signs indicate that your anger is going out of control. Taking a timeout helps you reclaim control over yourself and over the situation.

The effective use of timeouts involves recognizing the earliest signs that your anger is getting out of control or is becoming destructive. You can use

timeouts as athletes do to regroup, strategize, relax, or simply rest. Your timeout may be as short as 5 minutes or as long as 24 hours. The timeout is not used to avoid a situation but, rather, to approach the situation from a new angle and with a fresh start. The point of every timeout is to return to the situation and see it through.

You may want to enhance the timeout by using cognitive restructuring methods taught in this book (Chapters 4-7). At times, merely getting out of the situation helps to view it differently. You may also find it helpful to practice the relaxation exercises described in Chapter 11. Some people try to re-enter the situation with a new strategy to minimize the possibility of an angry blowup.

Assertion Training

Assertion training can reduce difficulties with anger. Assertion can reduce the frequency of being treated unfairly or being taken advantage of and, therefore, can prevent situations that give rise to anger.

Further, assertion training is helpful for people who hold anger in, internalizing the destructive effects of anger. For more information on learning to be assertive, not just angry, read *Your Perfect Right* by Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons (6th ed., 1990. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact).

Couples Therapy

If anger management strategies do not effectively help you handle anger in your love relationships, couples therapy can help. Perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts about your partner can fuel your anger. Therapy can teach couples how to communicate better, to increase positive interactions in the relationship, and to develop negotiation skills and strategies for identifying and altering expectations and rules. These skills can reduce relationship anger and improve the quality of your relationship with your partner. *Love Is Never Enough* by Aaron T. Beck (New York: Harper Collins, 1988) describes and outlines solutions to the difficulties couples frequently encounter.

GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt and shame are closely connected emotions. We tend to feel guilty when we have violated rules that are important to us or when we have not lived up to standards that we have set for ourselves. We feel guilty when we judge

ourselves to have done something wrong. If we think we "should" have behaved differently or that we "ought" to have done better, we are likely to feel guilt.

Shame involves the sense that we have done something wrong. However, when we feel ashamed we assume that what we have done wrong means that we are "flawed," "no good," "inadequate," "rotten," "awful," or "bad." Shame is usually connected to a highly negative view of ourselves. Secretiveness often surrounds shame. We may think, "If others knew this secret they would hate me or think less of me." For this reason the source of shame is rarely revealed and remains hidden and destructive. Shame often accompanies a family secret involving other family members, a secret such as alcoholism, sexual abuse, abortion, bankruptcy, or behavior considered dishonorable in the community.

Marissa's shame, for example, centered on her history of being sexually abused. Although the abuse began when she was 6 years old, Marissa never fully revealed the extent of her abuse until she was 26 years old. She attempted to tell her mother about the abuse when she was younger but was scolded and accused of lying. Whenever Marissa had memories of the sexual abuse she was overwhelmed by feelings of shame. While in therapy, Marissa started a Thought Record that demonstrated the connection between her thoughts and her shame (Figure 12.1 on page 199). This example demonstrates the secretive nature of shame ("I could never tell Julie this happened") as well as how shame is connected to Marissa's view of herself as "awful" and "despicable."

Overcoming Guilt and Shame

Overcoming guilt and shame does not necessarily mean letting yourself off the hook if you have done something wrong in your eyes. It does mean taking an appropriate amount of responsibility and coming to terms with whatever led you to feel this way. There are five aspects to overcoming guilt and shame: assessing the seriousness of your actions, weighing personal responsibility, breaking the silence, making reparations for any harm you caused, and self-forgiveness. Often only one or two of these steps are necessary to help us overcome guilt. Overcoming deep shame may require all five steps.

Assessing the Seriousness of Actions

We can feel guilty or ashamed about both large and small actions. How would you compare the seriousness of these three experiences?

<p>3. Automatic Thoughts (Images)</p> <p>a. What was going through your mind just before you started to feel this way? Any other thoughts? Images?</p> <p>b. Circle the hot thought.</p>	<p>2. Moods</p> <p>a. What did you feel?</p> <p>b. Rate each mood (0-100%).</p>	<p>1. Situation</p> <p>Who?</p> <p>What?</p> <p>When?</p> <p>Where?</p>
<p>Image memory of my father crawling into bed with me. I tried to pretend that I was asleep but that didn't stop him. Visual memories of the sexual abuse.</p> <p>I must be an awful person for this to have happened to me.</p> <p>I'm a despicable person.</p> <p>I could never tell Julie this happened. If she knew, she would think I'm terrible and would never want to be around me again.</p>	<p>Shame 100%</p>	<p>During home from a restaurant after having dinner with Julie. She was talking about her father's recent visit.</p>

FIGURE 12.1. Marissa's Thought Record: Shame.

1. Toby was tired at the end of the day. Her phone rang and she decided not to answer it because she didn't feel like talking to anyone. She heard her mother's voice on the answering machine saying, "Toby, are you there? I want to tell you about my vacation." Toby didn't answer the phone.

2. After Toby's mother had left her message, the phone rang again. When Toby heard her best friend's voice on the answering machine, she picked up the phone and chatted for 10 minutes.

3. The next day Toby told her mother that she had not been home when her mother called the night before.

Toby's three experiences describe fairly small events. Yet many people would judge the seriousness of these events differently. For which of these three events would you be likely to feel guilty? Why?

Your evaluation of the seriousness of an action or thought depends on your own internal rules and values. Many people say that they would feel more guilty about the direct lie in the third Toby example than about not answering the phone in the first example. Some people say that they would feel equally guilty in all three examples.

Frequent guilt and shame either mean that you are living your life in a way that violates your principles (e.g., having an affair when you believe in monogamous marriage) or that you are judging too many small actions as serious. To evaluate the seriousness of your actions leading to guilt and shame, you can complete a Thought Record as you learned to do in Chapters 4-7 and weigh all the evidence to see if your behavior or thoughts warrant the degree of guilt or shame you are feeling.

The Hint Box on the next page lists questions you can ask yourself to assess the seriousness of your actions. These questions encourage you to look at the situation from different perspectives. This will be particularly helpful if you tend to feel guilt or shame in many situations, even when others with similar values do not feel that way. Perspective-shifting questions can help evaluate the seriousness of your actions. Ask yourself, "How important will this seem in five years?" "Having an affair will almost certainly still seem like a big violation of a monogamous relationship in five years. Arriving home late for dinner three nights in a row will not seem important in five years, even if it is a distressing event for you or your partner now. Therefore, last-arriving home late for dinner would make more sense than lasting guilt about arriving home late for dinner.

HELPFUL HINTS



Questions to Evaluate Guilt/Shame Experiences

- Do other people consider this experience to be as serious as I do?
- Do some people consider it less serious? Why?
- How serious would I consider the experience if my best friend was responsible instead of me?
- How important will this experience seem in one month? One year? Five years?
- How serious would I consider the experience if someone did it to me?
- Did I know ahead of time the meaning or consequences of my actions (or thoughts)? Based on what I knew at the time, do my current judgments apply?
- Can any damage that occurred be corrected? How long will this take?
- Was there an even worse action I considered and avoided (e.g., considered lying but instead avoided the phone)?

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Weighing Personal Responsibility

Once you have assessed the seriousness of your actions, it is helpful to weigh how much of the violation is your sole, personal responsibility. Marissa felt ashamed that she was molested as a child. The molestation was certainly a serious event in her life, but was she responsible for it? Vic felt guilty that he blew up in anger at his wife, Judy, one night when she started complaining about their overdue credit card bills. Was he responsible for his angry reaction?

A good way to weigh personal responsibility is to construct a "responsibility pie." To do this, list all the people and aspects of a situation that contributed to an event about which you feel guilty or ashamed. Include yourself on the list. Then draw a pie and assign slices of the responsibility for the event in sizes that reflect relative responsibility. Draw your own slice last so that you do not prematurely assign too much responsibility to yourself.

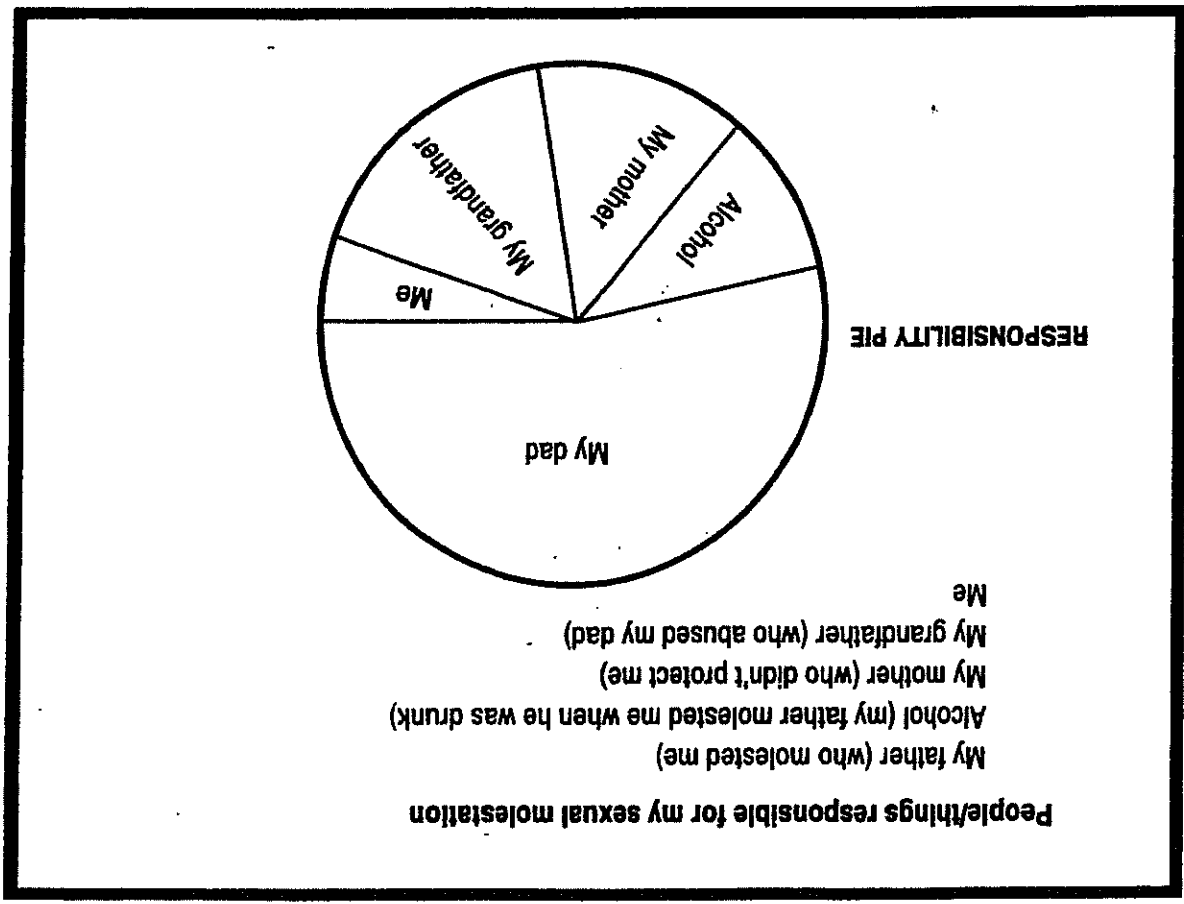


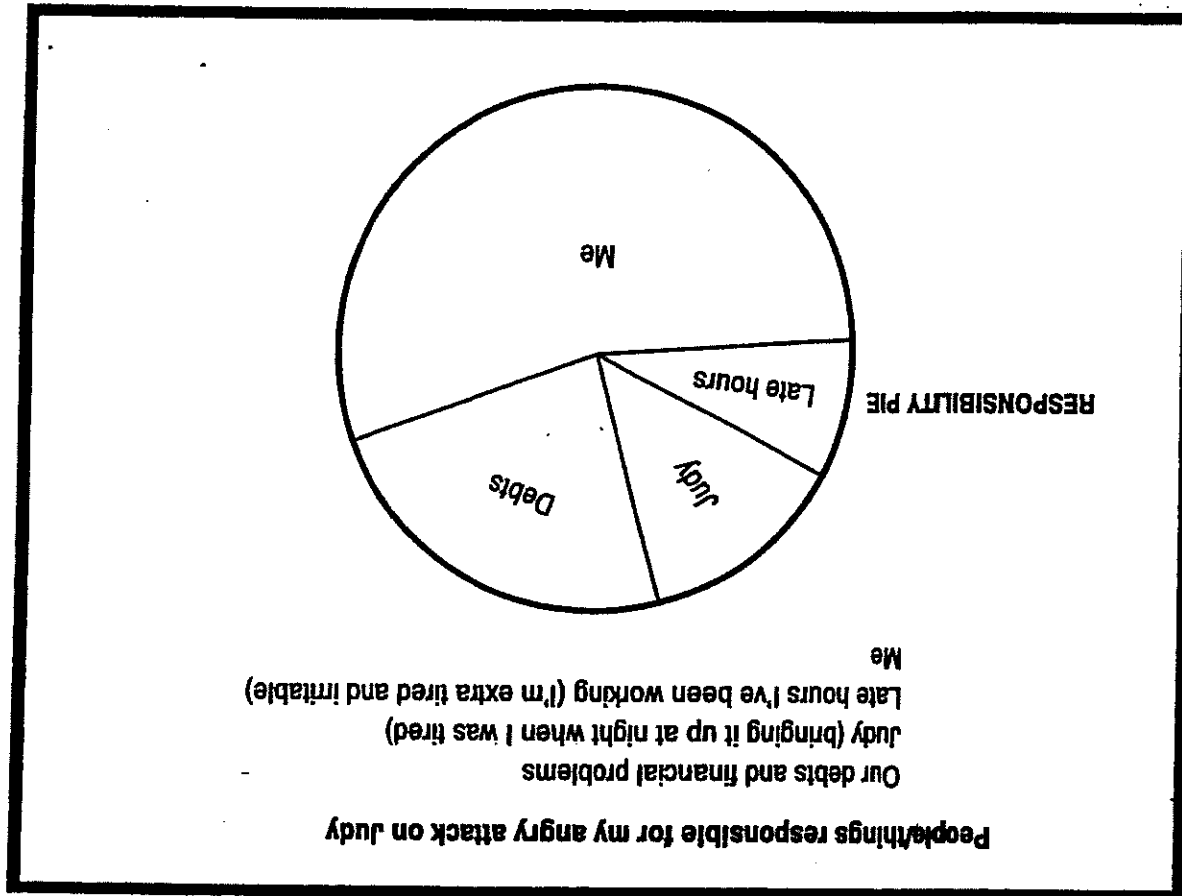
FIGURE 12.2. Marissa's responsibility pie.

Figure 12.2 shows what people and things Marissa identified as partly responsible for her sexual molestation and how she completed her first responsibility pie. Although Marissa had always felt personally responsible for being molested, she learned that her part of the responsibility was actually very small. She decided that she felt responsible only for not saying no to her dad. Most of the responsibility for what happened was her father's, and even the slices representing her mother, grandfather, and alcohol were larger than Marissa's.

When Marissa showed her responsibility pie to her therapist, they discussed further her "responsibility" for the molestation. After a number of sessions, Marissa came to understand and believe that she was not at all responsible for being molested. She learned that molestation is entirely an adult responsibility; like most children, she did not have the knowledge or

security to say no at age 6 or even at age 13. When she did finally say no at age 14, the molestation stopped. But stopping her father at age 14 did not mean that she had the ability to do this all along. Her father may have been unwilling to risk confrontation with her as an older child. But he would have had no trouble overpowering her when she was younger. Even if she had said no when she was younger, it probably would not have stopped him. The responsibility pie helped Marissa resolve her guilt.

Vic completed a responsibility pie (Figure 12.3) when he felt guilty about blowing up at Judy when she complained to him about overdue credit card bills. His anger was a serious violation of his promise to Judy that he would not attack her in anger. Although he did not hit or shove Judy, he physically intimidated her by standing close to her and shouting in her face.



As you see, Vic decided that he was primarily responsible for his anger outbreak. Although Judy, their debts, and his late work hours contributed to his anger, he felt that he could have handled the situation in a less intimidating fashion. Therefore, Vic decided that he should make reparations to Judy for what he had done and to work to change his anger response.

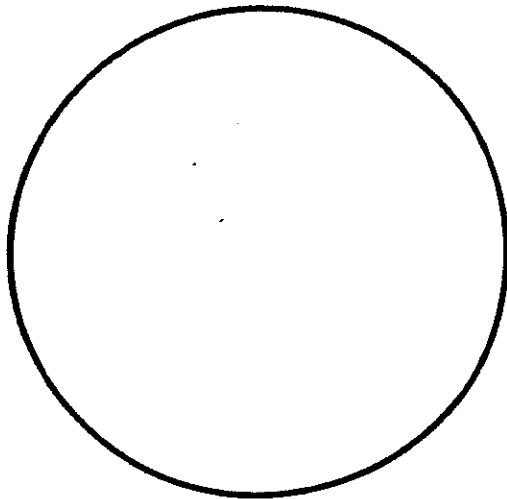
As the Marissa and Vic examples illustrate, responsibility pies can help you evaluate the levels of responsibility of each of the contributors to a situation. People who often feel guilty over small things find that responsibility pies help them recognize that they are not 100% responsible for the undesirable things that happen. People who feel guilt or shame when they have caused harm to others can use a responsibility pie to evaluate their role in any damage that was done before making reparations.

EXERCISE: Using a Responsibility Pie for Guilt or Shame

(1) Think of a negative event or situation in your life for which you think you are responsible (and, therefore, feel guilt or shame). (2) List below all the people and circumstances which could have contributed to the outcome. Place yourself on the bottom of the list. (3) Starting at the top of your list, divide the pie below into slices, labeling these slices with the names of the people or circumstances on your list. Assign bigger pieces to people or circumstances which you think have greater responsibility for the event or situation examined. (4) When you are finished, notice how much responsibility is yours alone and how much you share with others.

WORKSHEET 12.2: Using a Responsibility Pie for Guilt or Shame

- 1. Negative event or situation leading to guilt or shame: _____
- 2. People and circumstances which could have contributed to this outcome:



4. Are you 100% responsible? How does this responsibility pie affect your feelings of guilt and shame? Is there some action you can take to make amends if you are mostly responsible?

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When secretiveness surrounds shame, it may be important to talk to a trusted person about what occurred. The need to keep silent is often based on the anticipation that revealing the secret will result in condemnation, criticism, or rejection by others. It is not unusual for people who have carried a secret for a lifetime to be surprised at the acceptance they receive when they reveal their secret. Acceptance runs counter to the anticipated rejection and forces a reassessment of the meaning of the secret.

Although you may not trust anyone fully, it is important to reveal your secret to the people you trust the most. You may tell people how anxious it makes you feel to reveal your secret and how difficult it is for you to do. Be sure to talk to someone when you will have adequate time to say everything you need to say and to talk about the feedback you get.

Self-Forgiveness

Being a good person doesn't mean that you will never do any bad things. Part of being human is making mistakes. If, after careful evaluation, you conclude that you have done some things wrong, then self-forgiveness may help alleviate some of your guilt or shame.

No one is perfect. All of us, at one point or another, have violated our own principles or standards. We feel guilty and ashamed if we believe that what we did means that we are bad. But violations do not necessarily mean that we are bad. Our actions may have been linked to a particular situation or to a specific time in our lives.

Self-forgiveness results in a change in interpretation of the meaning of the violation or mistake we made. Our understanding may change from "I made this mistake because I'm an awful person" to "I made this mistake during an awful time in my life when I didn't care if I behaved this way" or from "I was abused because I deserved it" to "I was abused because my parents were out-of-control alcoholics." Self-forgiveness also involves recognizing your own imperfections and mistakes and accepting yourself, shortcomings and all, and recognizing that life has not been one mistake or violation after another. Self-forgiveness includes recognizing our good and bad qualities, our strengths as well as weaknesses, assets as well as liabilities.

If you have injured another person, it is important to make amends for your actions. Asking to repair the damage you have done can be an important component in healing yourself and the relationship. Making amends involves recognizing your transgression, being courageous enough to face the person you have hurt, asking forgiveness, and determining what you can do to repair the hurt you caused.

CHAPTER 12 SUMMARY

- Anger is characterized by muscle tension, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and defensiveness or attack.
- The cognitive component of anger involves the perception of being mistreated or perceiving others as being hurtful or unfair.
- Anger can range from mild irritation to rage.
- Methods that are effective in controlling anger include cognitive restructuring, preparing for events in which you are at high risk for experiencing anger, imagery, recognizing the early warning signs of anger, timeouts, assertion training, and couples therapy.
- We feel guilty when we believe that we have done something wrong.
- Guilt is often accompanied by thoughts containing the words "should" and "ought."
- Shame involves the perception that we have done something wrong that we need to keep it a secret, and that what we have done means something terrible about us.
- Guilt and shame can be lessened or eliminated by assessing the seriousness of your actions, weighing personal responsibility, breaking the silence, self-forgiveness, and making reparations.