

Step 3: Identify the Hurt, Fear, and Judgment

This step is about identifying what is fueling the flames of anger—the hurt and judgment that underlie it—so that you can start the process of letting go of them. It's about discovering which of your buttons has been pushed, what hurts you, or what's scaring you. It's particularly important to notice what evaluative statements your mind machine is coming up with about you, the people in your life, and the current situation.

Let's look at the experience of David, a thirty-three-year-old engineer working for a construction company. David made several important discoveries about his struggle with anger.

David's Story

I've always had anger, but lately I've come to see it as a problem. I get angry about everything, and I fixate on whatever got me angry. I'm fuming mad! It's the little things that tick me off. It seems like not one day can go by without me being angry at something. I feel like I really hurt the people around me with my blowups. And doing that makes me feel bad about myself. I've always disliked angry people, and it seems like everything I don't like, I am. I don't want people to avoid me or think of me as being mean because I can't control my anger. I've put so much effort into dealing with my doubts and insecurities about myself. For the last six years, life has felt like a chore. I can't get through a day without feeling sick or scared. My life feels like a job because I'm always working so hard at it. But I'm still alone and get paid only in Pepto-Bismol. I'm angry because I don't know where all these bad feelings come from. I'm angry because I don't know how to fix them. I'm also mad because I thought they would be gone by now, given how much I've worked on them. Now I'm scared that I'll always have these feelings about myself. When will I be free?

This sad story may resonate with the experiences of many people who struggle with problem anger. Yet David is ahead of the game in one important respect: he discovered that being angry is very much about him rather than other people. Being angry has to do with his

negative feelings about himself (for example, doubts about his abilities) and his tendency to beat himself up for having those feelings and not being able to resolve his anger.

The following exercise is about helping you recognize what fuels your anger so you can learn to accept the sources of your anger and start taking better care of them. Be mindful that the quality of pain and hurt can change from anger episode to anger episode, from situation to situation, and from person to person.

This exercise will take a bit longer than the previous ones. Since you can't read and close your eyes at the same time, we recommend that you read through the following script a few times first. Then close your eyes and follow the instructions. You can also record the script on an audio cassette and play it back to yourself while you practice.

THE ANGER ARMOR

Go ahead and get in a comfortable position in your chair. Sit upright with your feet flat on the floor, your arms and legs uncrossed, and your hands resting in your lap (palms up or down, whichever is more comfortable). Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Relax. Allow your body to rest without drifting off to sleep.

To get started, we would like you to re-create a real image of yourself being angry. Think of a recent example when someone pushed your buttons and you got angry—perhaps you can refer back to the anger map exercise in chapter 3. Think of the moment. Notice the anger coming and all the surging bodily changes. Notice the trigger thoughts your evaluative mind comes up with. Enter into the whole image as best as you can. Watch as the feeling grows and notice how quickly it is there in full force. Also notice how quickly you want to do something about the anger feeling, and what it makes you want to do. For instance, do you have any impulses to speak out or act on your anger? Be aware of the evaluative thoughts you're having about the event or yourself. Hold those thoughts clearly in your mind, put them into sentences, and watch them as if you were watching them in a mirror. Keep focusing on what you're feeling. Notice how your body and mind harden, consumed by anger. It's everywhere.