

Now imagine for a moment that all these harsh, judgmental thoughts, intense anger feelings, and strong impulses are connected. They form one big piece of armor—the kind of heavy armor that knights used to wear to protect their whole body. You're in it. Feel how heavy it is and how hard it is for you to move.

Anger is like wearing heavy armor. The armor masks the pain and vulnerability we all have by simple virtue of being human. Behind the pain, there may be something you're attached to, something you're holding on to. What is it in your case? See whether you can identify what you're trying to protect or defend with your anger armor. There might be feelings of guilt . . . shame . . . hurt . . . fear . . . loss . . . helplessness . . . rejection . . . inadequacy . . . unworthiness. Or perhaps it's your reputation, image, the approval of others, rules, beliefs, past mistakes, missed opportunities, or decisions that did not go right. It could also be that you fear losing a person, or a possession, or place, or money. See if you can identify what exactly fuels your anger.

Every time the pain and hurt touch the inside of the armor, they corrode it. Your armor begins to weaken, pit, and rust from the inside. And as it rusts, you begin to feel vulnerable. To keep yourself protected and safe, you've been fixing the rusty parts and holes that start to show through by welding new patches of metal onto the old ones, so the armor gets heavier and heavier. It weighs on you, dragging you down physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. You don't seem to be able to do much except clank around in your armor. The burden is tremendous. Movement is difficult.

Next, imagine yourself stepping out of the armor and putting it right next to you. Imagine yourself standing there just looking at your anger armor. If it helps, try to visualize looking at yourself and the armor in a mirror. You and anyone around you can finally see who you are. You're standing there with your naked emotions and imperfections for everyone to see. You're exposed and vulnerable. See whether you can stay with this feeling.

Notice how much lighter you feel now. Without the armor, you're no longer tied down by all that weight. You can move more easily and more quickly than before. Your hands, arms, and feet are free. By stepping out of the armor and just observing it, you have gained flexibility and freedom of movement.

The lightness that comes from acceptance won't develop overnight. It's like learning to ride a bike—sometimes you will fall. You will occasionally reach again for the armor and spend your time patching and repairing it, because it makes you feel safe when hurts show up. As you learn acceptance, your need to hide from pain and hurt inside the anger armor will gradually decrease. Accepting yourself and being patient with all your flaws, weaknesses, strengths, and talents—the whole package—involves taking many small steps in that general direction. You're on the right track as long as you keep practicing and stay committed to that path.

Step 4: Respond with Forgiveness and Compassion

Acceptance is about opening up to the pain inside you with kindness, love, patience, and compassion. For this reason, we need to address the pains and hurts—what anger is helping you protect. We're not going after your pain with cheap fixes or more patches. Instead, we're going to expose it for what it is and meet it with acceptance, compassion, and patience.

Accept and Forgive Yourself First

Accepting yourself is the most important and often the most difficult first step. It pulls the rug out from underneath your anger and helps you focus your energy on what is important to you and what you can do and change. The prize here is a life—your life!

It's useful to acknowledge having feelings of anger, worthlessness, and failure, but putting yourself down for them only leads to more resentment and self-hatred. That is never helpful.

Take the case of Jillian, a thirty-seven-year-old mother of two daughters (seven and ten years old). Her father sexually and physically abused her until her parents separated when she was twelve. She went to college, majored in English, and started to work for a regional newspaper where she met her husband. They divorced two years ago. Jillian came into therapy after a social worker suggested she seek help with her anger problem if she didn't want to lose custody of her kids: