



Chapter 8

How Strong Is My Emotional Immune System?

Your body knows how to fight a virus or infection. Your immune system recognizes the threat, mobilizes defenses, and builds resistance so the same infection can't devastate you again. It's an elegant system when it's working.

But what about emotional viruses? What protects you when anger keeps infecting your relationships, your peace, your future?

You understand the anatomy of an angry episode and the choices available at each stage. You've identified your anger styles. You've learned techniques for the moment the heat rises. You've gained strategies for dealing effectively with the anger of others. They all relate to what you do in the present when difficulties strike. They are essential skills, your first line of defense. Please continue absorbing and practicing what you've learned so far. But there's more. You can build powerful immunity to toxic anger and develop deep resilience that protects you.

Some people seem naturally resistant to toxic anger patterns, while others get infected repeatedly by the same “germs.” The difference isn’t willpower or intelligence or even desire to change. The difference is what I call “emotional immunity.”

Emotional immunity mimics the physical immunity that determines whether you catch every cold that goes around or whether you sail through flu season unscathed. Emotional immunity determines whether a criticism derails your entire day, or you process it and move on. Emotional immunity impacts whether a disappointment sends you into a rage spiral, or you adapt and redirect. Your emotional immune system helps to determine whether past wounds keep re-opening, or they actually heal.

Importantly, every single element of emotional immunity equips and enables you to withstand and effectively address the nasty behaviors of others without being consumed by anger, personalizing them, or letting them take you down.

The five emotional immunity boosters you’ll learn about in this section aren’t nice-to-haves. They form the foundation that makes everything else sustainable. You can learn all the anger management techniques in the world, but without these deeper protections, you’ll spend your life white-knuckling your way through triggers, exhausted from constant self-monitoring, wondering why change feels so hard.

The Emotional Immunity Inventory

The Emotional Immunity Inventory helps you assess your current immunity levels. The assessment ahead is honest medicine, revealing areas where you’re more vulnerable than you realized. That’s not a failure; it’s information. The weakest points in your immunity are exactly where anger finds its way in.

Take your time with this informal assessment I created for you. Answer honestly, indicating the way you are at this time, not the way you wish you were. The goal isn't to score perfectly; it's to see clearly. You can't fortify defenses you don't know are fragile.

On this scale, higher numbers mean that this item describes you. Lower numbers indicate that the statement does not describe you.

Definitely untrue of me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *Definitely true of me*

- _____ 1. I tend to see people or situations in black-and-white terms; it's all-or-nothing for me.
- _____ 2. When I look at my relationships, I see myself as a failure.
- _____ 3. I don't see that anything positive has come from the struggles I've had in life.
They've only weighed me down.
- _____ 4. When someone makes a suggestion, I immediately spot the problems in that plan.
- _____ 5. I tend to get stuck mentally after a hurt or emotional injury, and I fantasize about revenge.
- _____ 6. I don't know what my purpose in life is.
- _____ 7. When I look back on the traumatic experiences of my life, I feel angry, sad, or shameful.
- _____ 8. I often put myself down, and I usually believe that others do things better than I can.
- _____ 9. I can't let go and move on after a hurt because I have an obsessive need to pursue fairness, justice, and/or revenge.
- _____ 10. Often it feels as if my whole life's a mess.
- _____ 11. I hold onto it because they've never apologized.
- _____ 12. Through the difficult experiences in my life, any positive spiritual beliefs I once held have been permanently damaged.

- _____ 13. My work does not spark any excitement or passion in me.
- _____ 14. I'm prone to holding a grudge.
- _____ 15. I have strong "radar" and readily assume that people are trying to demean me.
- _____ 16. I have experienced trauma (emotional, physical, or sexual), but I've avoided thinking about it. The trauma never affected me.
- _____ 17. When something goes wrong, I immediately assume that I must have done something to cause the problems.
- _____ 18. I don't believe I contribute to the world in any meaningful way.
- _____ 19. The adversity in my life has made me weaker, not stronger.
- _____ 20. I am constantly battling my habit of seeing what's wrong with everything.
- _____ 21. There are people in my past that I can never forgive.
- _____ 22. When I look back on my life, I question whether what I've done really counts for anything.
- _____ 23. I have a sense of hopelessness about most areas of my life.
- _____ 24. A significant person in my past was highly critical of me. I couldn't seem to do anything right. I came to believe what was said.
- _____ 25. I do not have meaningful spiritual experiences that help me through stressful times and provide a sense of purpose to it all.

Score It

Transfer your scores into the columns below, add the numbers in each category, and multiply your subtotals by 2.

Practical Optimism

1. _____

4. _____

10. _____

20. _____

23. _____

Sub _____

× 2

TOT _____

Self-Worth

2. _____

8. _____

15. _____

17. _____

24. _____

Sub _____

× 2

TOT _____

Post-Traumatic Growth

3. _____

7. _____

12. _____

16. _____

19. _____

Sub _____

× 2

TOT _____

Forgiveness

5. _____

9. _____

11. _____

14. _____

21. _____

Sub _____

× 2

TOT _____

Purpose

6. _____

13. _____

18. _____

22. _____

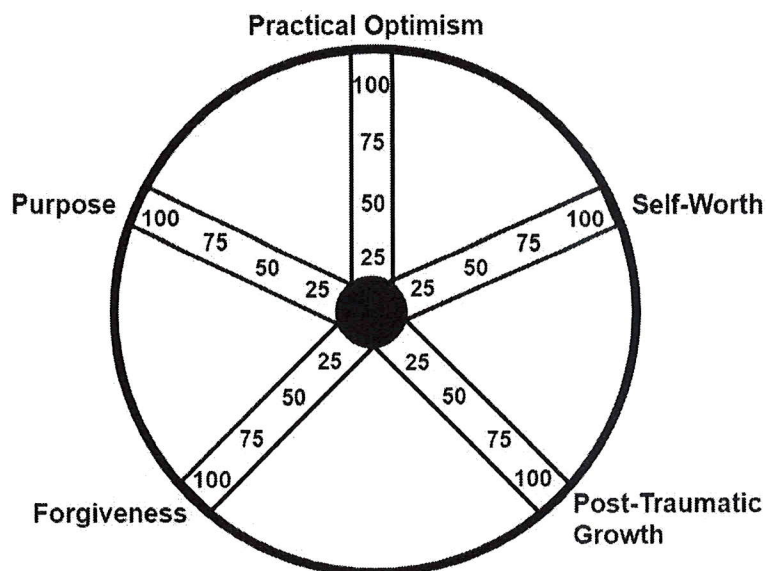
25. _____

Sub _____

× 2

TOT _____

Now plot your scores on this graph, and connect the dots.



[GRAPH: Emotional Immunity Profile — insert graphic here]

Reading Your Results

Let's look at your results. Remember, all five of these either reduce or increase your susceptibility to toxic anger of all kinds. Your strengths suggest that this factor is working for you, protecting your emotional system from poisonous anger.

- **Lower scores indicate *less need for development work*.** These are your current emotional **strengths**, the ones where you are functioning best and need the least improvement. How can you emphasize and deploy those in your current difficult situations?
- **Next, look at your challenges.** These are your high-middle-to-high scores. Which of your immunity boosters need the most attention? Your highest scores represent your greatest current toxic anger **risk factors**, and thus your best opportunities for change!

The chapters that follow guide you on the path to reclaiming personal peace and gaining greater emotional and physical well-being. I'll give you a brief preview of the five immunity boosters before we begin our journey through them.

Practical Optimism.

Practical optimism goes far beyond silly rose-colored glasses. This immunity booster enhances your awareness of opportunities for change. You learn to see the realistic best in people, situations, and yourself so that your optimism fuels your best actions. You stir up confidence to tackle new challenges, to refuse negative voices in your head, and to encourage yourself along the way. Practical optimism habits are crucial to your overall mental health. When you hold realistically positive beliefs about yourself and others, habitually look for and find the resources you do have available, and take action on all that's within your control, unhealthy anger will take a back seat to your practical, positive attitude.

Self-Worth.

When you build true self-worth, you'll let go of the need to prove your value or to put anyone else down. You won't have to mask insecurities with false bravado or over-achievement. You'll possess the awareness and the capability of detecting and hushing internal messages that sabotage your confidence and your success. You'll neither think too highly nor too little of yourself. You'll appreciate your uniqueness, recognize your strengths, and open yourself to feedback for improvement. You'll learn to value yourself while valuing others, the sweet spot for building strength. Every one of these benefits has power to strengthen your reserves so that you deal with difficult, angry people more skillfully. When you grow in self-respect and self-confidence, bullies and saboteurs lose a potential victim. You're also less likely to allow personal anger to infuse the soul you've come to love – yourself.

Post-Traumatic Growth.

If you've experienced life trauma, and you carry an easily-ignited fuse, you may have symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD needs to be treated and healed. Post-Traumatic Growth takes healing further, mitigates PTSD, and serves as a powerful deterrent to toxic anger. In PTG, you grow and become stronger after trauma. Intentional thoughts and practices help you bring good out of the most unwelcome circumstances. You're going to learn about the five pillars of Post-Traumatic Growth. You learn and become stronger, not just in spite of the trauma, but in a strange way, because of it.

Forgiveness.

This immunity booster enables you to gain your freedom from the clutches of anger. When you push past mistaken beliefs and embrace forgiveness, your life will change for the

better. You're going to learn the step-by-step processes to: 1) prepare your heart for this game-changing spiritual experience, 2) implement the decision to forgive, and 3) deal with the difficulties in the aftermath. You'll not only make the *decision* to forgive, you'll persist through the *healing* from the injuries.

Purpose.

Research confirms that when you develop a strong sense of purpose, unhealthy anger diminishes. You'll have no need to prove anything, to fight others for territory, or to put yourself or others down. Rather, you're focused on fulfilling your contributions to make the world a better place. The awareness and activation of your life purpose is game-changing. Once you identify purpose, you'll know that you're here, at this exact time, for a reason. Who has time for anger when you're living on purpose, engaged in what you were designed to do and loving it?

Does your assessment suggest that you could use some work on one or more? Well, welcome to the human race. We'll go there momentarily, but first, a heads-up.

Spoiler Alert

You will notice a shift in tone in what is shared by the people who are about to open up to you about their lives. They'll be talking about more intimate, often more spiritual, aspects of their lives. That's for two good reasons.

First, by nature, the immunity boosters involve mental, emotional, and spiritual processes that are "invisible" but deeply influential. They include driving forces that impact what we say and what we do. This goes beyond our skill in looking good and sounding good. The emotional immunity boosters live closer to the heart.

Second, the people I interviewed often named faith as a major contributor to their recovery and peace. I honor their vulnerability and willingness to share their private experiences, and I present their perspectives, unedited. However, even if you come from a different faith perspective or profess no faith, the principles we'll explore work. Not only are the personal anecdotes powerful, but the scientific research supporting them is compelling.

Finally, a heads-up for you that these five immunity boosters require harder work on habit change than anything we've talked about before. This is partially because they aren't simply overt behaviors, which are easier to notice and adapt. In Part 2, we explored how to communicate, what to say, and why. All good. Necessary. You can stop there if you're satisfied. However, if you want transformation that lasts, you'll need to take this deeper dive into the roots of your reactions. That can be a little scary, but the investment for the long-term pay-off in emotional health is so worth it.

Like I did when I nervously toppled into the ocean backward from that boat, let's dive in.