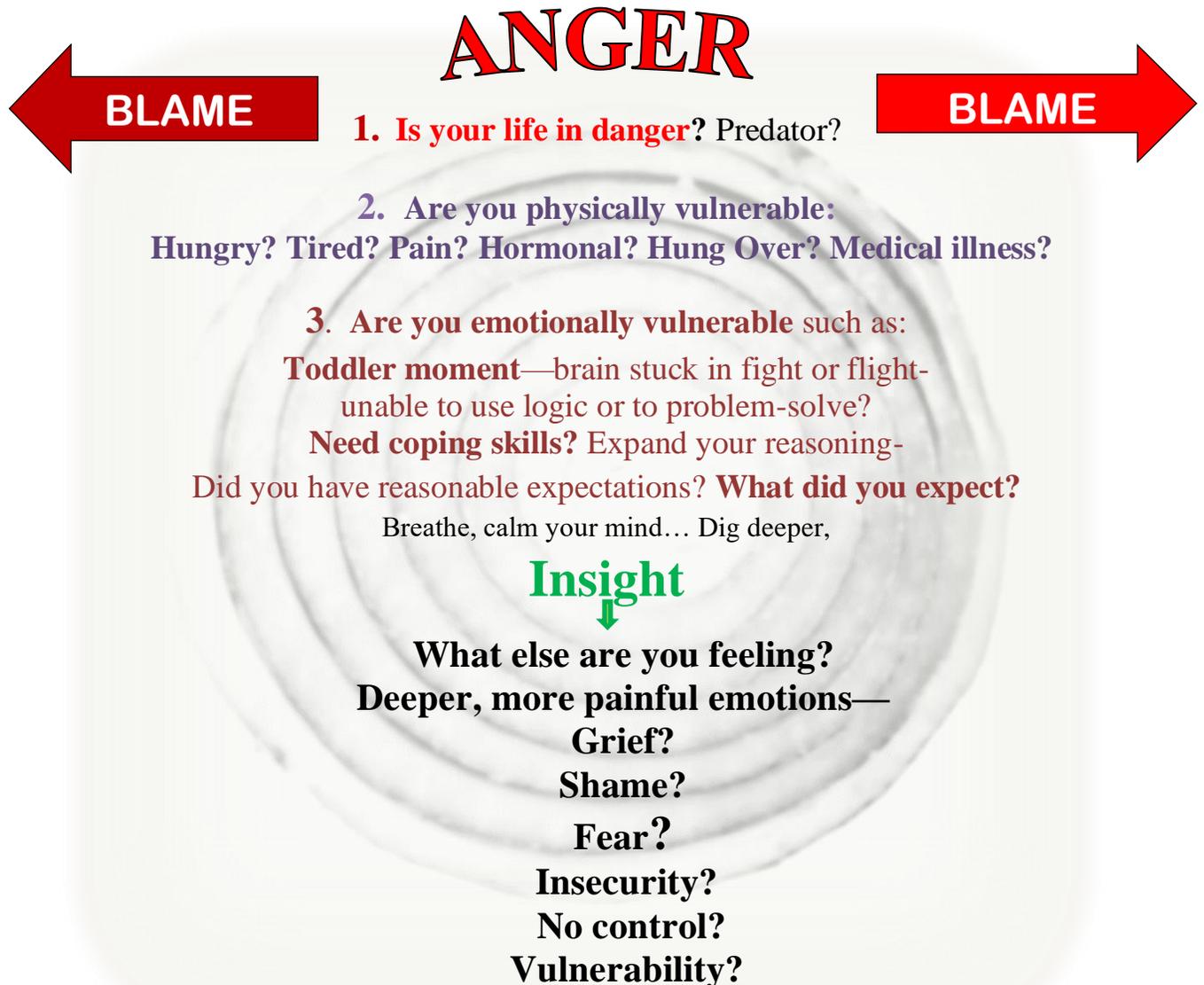


# Emotional Onion Tool

Transform anger to insight by peeling the layers with emotional intelligence



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**Storytelling, poems and quotes make tools easier to understand and remember. Use these stories begin your journey from anger to insight**

### Two Mean Dogs

A Native American tribal leader was describing his own inner struggles. He said, "There are two dogs inside me. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.

Someone asked him which dog usually wins and after a moment's reflection, he answered, "The one I feed the most."

Native American tale as told by author Harold Kushner in *Living a Life That Matters*

### Nail in the Fence

There once was a little boy who had a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, he must hammer a nail into the back of the fence.

The first day the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as he learned to control his anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to control his temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally, the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to control his temper. The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all of the nails had been pulled from the fence.

The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said. "You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. No matter how many times you say you are sorry, the hole is still there."

*Author Unknown*

Application of Two Dogs Story: This story represents empowerment, mindfulness, and choice. You can't control the [stimulus](#)--In this example, the stimulus is the mean dog (negative thought)—automatic thoughts are not within our control--- but once aware, you can choose your response to the thought. Don't feed it. ([Choose dignity](#))

Application of Nail in the Fence: Insight may be blocked by [denial, rationalizations, and excuses](#). The fact that anger has consequences may inspire us to make necessary changes. Are you ready to make changes? Use the Emotional Onion to gain insight and understanding into your anger.

## Why do you get soooo angry? Three Reasons Why

How do you label the emotion that triggers your aggression? You might not call it anger. You may prefer to say that you get annoyed, irritated, cross, or impatient. Perhaps you describe your anger as salty, snippy, agitated, hot, heated, pissed-off, or furious. Whatever you call it, there are times when you lose your cool. We all do. Take a moment to reflect on the times when you are not calm....what triggers your “fight” response?

### What Makes You Mad? Check all that apply....

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other drivers/traffic  | <input type="checkbox"/> High prices        | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal failure        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stupid people          | <input type="checkbox"/> Phone solicitation | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of help            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mistakes, imperfection | <input type="checkbox"/> Disrespect         | <input type="checkbox"/> Misbehaved kids         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Computer trouble       | <input type="checkbox"/> Drinking           | <input type="checkbox"/> Bad bosses              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Messes, clutter        | <input type="checkbox"/> Tardiness          | <input type="checkbox"/> Bad employees           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Incompetence           | <input type="checkbox"/> Lies/liars         | <input type="checkbox"/> Social media            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unfairness             | <input type="checkbox"/> Being ignored      | <input type="checkbox"/> Inconsiderate people    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Favoritism             | <input type="checkbox"/> Hypocrites         | <input type="checkbox"/> Loud cell phone talkers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Misplaced, lost items  | <input type="checkbox"/> Interruptions      | <input type="checkbox"/> Racism, sexism, bias    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Waiting, delays        | <input type="checkbox"/> Laziness           | <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Politicians            | <input type="checkbox"/> Rudeness           | <input type="checkbox"/> Those “other” people    |

**The easiest way to learn why you get so angry is to think about your brain, biology, and survival.** The human fight, flight, or freeze response may trigger you or someone you love to react with that [reptile brain](#)—attacking first (verbally or physically) *without thinking*.



**1. Physical Danger:** We are a human. As a species, our anger response protects us during threats of physical danger when predators approach. **Danger shuts down the logic centers of the brain and reacts automatically** with a series of chemical reactions in the body that trigger “*fight, flight or freeze.*” As a predator attempts to kill and eat us, our anger response helps us move faster, fight harder or play dead. This anger response is primal, it is about survival. Without it, we quickly become lunch.

**2. Physical Vulnerability:** **Just like a wounded animal, when the human body is vulnerable, aggression serves as a protective device to distance predators.** Low blood sugar and changes in hormone levels, chronic pain and excessive fatigue are just a few conditions that create physical challenges. When humans become overly tired, uncomfortably hungry or suffer illness or chronic pain, our body chemistry signals aggression to protect this physical vulnerability. We sneer, snap, growl, and bark to distance others. Substance use disorders, mood disorders and other brain disorders create a physical vulnerability that often erupts in a range from impatience and irritability to tantrums, aggression or violence.

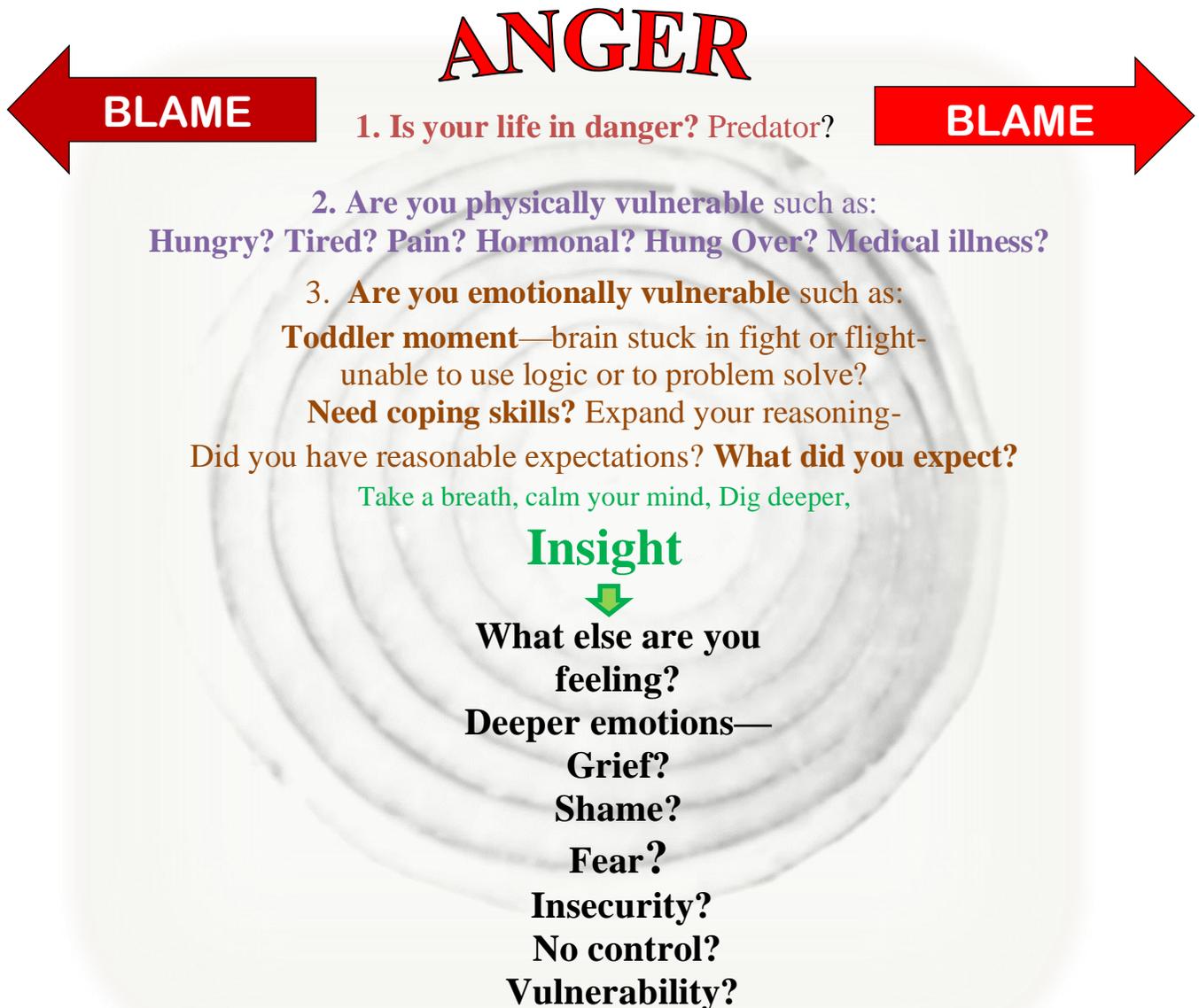
**3. Emotional Vulnerability:** In addition to physical protection, human anger also serves as an *emotional* protection. **By focusing attention outward, anger and blame create a defense** against identifying and experiencing more fragile and painful human emotions such as fear, anxiety, insecurity, shame, grief, depression, and hopelessness. Emotional vulnerability includes limited coping skills, unrealistic expectations, narcissistic entitlement, projection, displacement, and **deeper** emotionally painful **core issues**. Sound confusing? Need skills? Peel the Onion.

*“Anger is a tool for change when it challenges us  
to become more of an expert on the self  
and less of an expert on others.”*

Harriet Lerner PhD. Author of *Dance of Anger*

## Peel the layers of the emotional onion. Transform anger into insight.

Using the list from the previous page, notice what causes you to feel irritated, annoyed, mad or angry—whatever word you use for feelings from mild disturbance to full blown aggression. Anger is triggered by your brain’s “fight or flight” response. Anger usually also triggers blame. **Notice when you blame others for your brain’s fight or flight response.** Work through the series of questions below to discover what personal insights hide beneath your blame. Ask yourself: “What made me mad?” Start with a reality check, was your life in danger? Move on to deeper, more emotional insights when you are calm enough to do so.



## Emotional Onion Tool

To improve your ability to manage stress, aggression, anxiety and other distressing, disturbing emotions, three things need to happen.

1.) **You must be safe.** (Resolve physical danger). Humans will not relax and remain calm when hunted by predators. If your life is in danger, seek safety before working on emotional management skills.

2.) **You must address your physical needs...aka health.** This includes brain health. If you have mood, concentration, or thought disturbance that requires medication, then taking meds as prescribed is **essential**. Get enough rest. Stop excessive use of caffeine, sugar, alcohol, marijuana and illegal drugs. Practice good nutrition and maintain an active, healthy, lifestyle. Adults who fail to address physical health and wellness needs eventually devolve into emotional toddlers who tantrum until they have a nap and a snack.



3.) **You must raise your emotional intelligence (EI) and practice [emotional self-regulation \(stress management\)](#).** As you increase your [emotional intelligence](#), you practice more self-regulation and you decrease your toddler moments.

**Emotional Dysregulation (ED):** is the fancy pants term for a **toddler moment** (over-reacting, hot temper or melting down into a puddle of emotions.) These outbursts do not fall within the normal range of mature responses. ED is more commonly known as **mood swings**. Examples: angry outbursts (yelling, screaming) or tantrums (slamming, banging, throwing or destroying objects). ED may escalate to aggression toward others including pushing, slapping— aggressive physical violence or threats of harm toward self or others. These variations may occur within seconds, minutes or hours. Emotional dysregulation may lead to behavioral problems that interfere with social interactions and relationships at home, school or work.

The **Emotional Onion tool** guides you through a checklist of questions (peeling the layers) designed to transform distressing emotions such as blame, worry, frustration and anger into opportunities for insight and self-awareness. Just like peeling an onion, as you work through the layers, tears may flow.

[First calming yourself down](#), then asking yourself the right questions (peeling the layers of the emotional onion) requires an ability to use your logic and reasoning skills. Accessing your logic and reasoning allows you to rise above the fight or flight response. Taking a few deep breaths brings oxygen to the brain, calming it enough so that it can think rationally....becoming more human and much less beastie.

Assuming that your life is not in danger, which requires immediate fight or flight, you can practice logic and reasoning skills by thinking through your layers of other protective defenses. Review your own patterns.

## What events or thoughts trigger your anger?

Use this check-in, checklist each time you feel anger. Teach your children to do the same.

**❑ 1. Physical vulnerability:** Do you need more oxygen to your brain— time to breathe? Are you exhausted, hungry, suffering low blood sugar, chronic pain, chemical or hormonal imbalance or other medical problem? Hungover or hyper-caffeinated? Too many hours doing chores or confined indoors? Too sedentary? All work and no play? Need a nap or a cookie?

**❑ 2. Emotional vulnerability:** Are you using blame to protect yourself from addressing more difficult, uncomfortable, conflictual, or painful emotions such as fear, insecurity, shame, or grief?

*“When I point out her flaws, I feel a bit superior.”*

*“I’ve always been insecure; controlling everything makes me feel in control.”*

*“I use anger at my siblings to avoid the grief I feel over the loss of our parents.”*

**❑ 3. Unrealistic expectations:** Failure to think, notice, adapt, and learn may result in frustrated anger. Did you fail to take a moment to think first, using logic and reason based on facts? Notice when you get stressed or upset by routine, predictable events such as:

*The baby was fussy before nap, a toddler wet the bed, a teenager had an attitude.*

*A dishonest person told another lie, a disorganized person made another mess.*

*Traffic was backed up AGAIN. They were late AGAIN or drunk AGAIN.*

*The media broadcasted “outrage bait” and you were triggered AGAIN.*

**If it happened before, actually it happens a lot, why are you still getting upset each and every time? What did you expect?**

**❑ 4. Limited coping skills: (AKA Toddler Moment)** Do you shut-down or blow-up rather than problem-solve? Examples: *Pouting, yelling, screaming, smashing, hitting, or running away when stressed out or when something does not go your way.*

**❑ 5. Narcissistic entitlement:** Are you stressed out or irritated when you must accommodate others, wait, share, or take turns? Examples: *Intolerance, impatience, and irritability when rules and regulations, mask mandates, delays, long lines, traffic, being told “NO” and other peoples’ human rights get in YOUR way.*

**❑ 6. Projected emotions:** Rather than identify your own emotions or thoughts, do you instead project your emotions and thoughts onto others? Example: *“they think I am stupid.” “They hate me.” “They think I am fat, ugly or not good enough.”*

**❑ 7. Displaced emotions:** Do you take your emotions out on someone or something that is safe or convenient, rather than the actual source? Example: *Directing anger toward your child when angry with your ex-spouse. Focusing frustration on your partner or your siblings due to issues with your parents or employer.*

**❑ 8. “Taking things personally”:** Do you take things personally? According to Don Miguel Ruiz’s book, The Four Agreements *“Even when a situation seems so personal, even if others insult you directly, it has nothing to do with you. What they say, what they do, and the opinions they give are according to the agreements they have in their own minds.”*

- **9. Deeper Core Issues:** Anger and blame protect you from feeling your most distressing, fragile, and vulnerable emotions. Fragile emotions may also be triggered by unrealistic expectations or limited coping skills.

**Deeper Core Issues continued: Examples of painful, fragile and vulnerable emotions:**

**Grief and loss** → *Denial, bargaining and anger* are normal emotional stages in the grieving process. Remaining stuck in anger and blame blocks the grieving process. Transforming anger into grief filled insight allows the healing to begin.

**Fear of not having control** → Perfectionism and the desire to maintain control over everything protects you from feelings of *vulnerability, fear, helpless, anxiety and shame*.

**Abandonment** → Although adults cannot be “abandoned”— abandonment only applies to property, minors and pets, “feelings” of abandonment are triggered by fear of separation from a love source. Becoming responsible for generating love toward yourself eliminates a fear of being left alone. “Alone” means “with yourself,” and you can become great company for yourself!

**Inadequacy and inferiority: “not----enough”** → Not— *good, smart, attractive, rich, thin, strong, popular, successful or perfect*—enough creates jealousy, insecurity, guilt, shame, depression, anxiety and unworthiness, until the core issue is healed.

**Deep shame:** → Deeper feelings of humiliation, disgrace, inferiority, unworthiness all turned inward to core belief of unworthiness of love, *unlovable*.

## Transforming Blame into Insight Understanding Big Emotions

*It’s only fair when I yell at you, she said to me once.  
You had a better childhood.” Brian Andreas*

Anger and blame may feel “right”... even when anger and blame are not emotionally intelligent. As you attempt to work through your emotional onion tool, **you may notice that you still feel stuck in a pattern of blame and complain**. Attempting to search deeper into *why you are really so upset* may result in a circular pattern that sounds like this: **I want to work through my own emotions, but I can’t because...**



*“I am right! My emotion is justified! That person really is the bad one!”  
“It’s not my fault, look at what I have to put up with!”  
“They push my buttons!” “They deserved it!”  
“I wouldn’t get so mad, if they weren’t so stupid!”  
“It’s REALLY not fair!”*

**Blame provides immediate relief.** As long as you blame others, you do not experience the emotional pain of deeper, more uncomfortable insights about yourself.

**Blaming others** for your emotional wounds, irritability, temper or stress **feels better** than taking responsibility for *your* emotions *your* actions *your* values.

**Blaming others** allows you to **feel superior** and righteous instead of inferior or vulnerable.

**Blaming others is easier** than self-regulating your own emotions, actions and values.

**Blaming and complaining is faster** than doing the work required for problem-solving.

### Still stuck in blame?

**I know! This is a challenging tool! I hear you thinking:**

*“If I’m not mad—then they got away with it! My anger punishes them!”*

*“I am upset with them for taking advantage of me. They never consider my needs.”*

*“Sure, I blame them—but wouldn’t anyone?”*

Your anger only punishes you by increasing your stress cortisol, it does not punish *them*. Working through your emotions requires that you stop blaming *them* for YOUR emotions.

**“Remaining angry, it is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”**

Anne Lamonte

It is true that people, circumstances, and life is not always fair.

It may be true that you are right, and they are wrong.

Perhaps they really did rotten, terrible things. Let’s agree that they did!

Now what? What is your intention?

Do you want to justify, defend and excuse your yelling, blaming, shaming, name calling and verbal abuse? Continue your tantrums?

Do you intend to remain stuck in anger, blame and resentment? Become the victim or hostage — waiting for *them* to repent and change?

Or

Do you want to raise your emotional intelligence above the toddler tantrum level?

Would you like to improve your ability to calm down, think clearly and problem solve?

Would you rather use insight to transform your anger into a learning opportunity?

YOUR CHOICE

**Let’s practice transforming the rest of that blame into insight by digging deeper.**

**Ask yourself again:**

- 1. Is my life threatened or in danger?** If not, dig deeper into why you got so mad.
- 2. Anything medical or physical going on?** What’s my pain level? Am I addressing my body’s sleep and nutrition needs? If not, improved self-care and attention to physical needs may be the solution.
- 3. Do I have realistic expectations?** If not, [reasonable predictions](#) and [“good to know file”](#) may help.
- 4. What else am I feeling?** Do I need to expand my emotional vocabulary?  
*“I feel impatient, negative, and judgmental. Anger erupts when I’m afraid I will fail.”*  
*“My anger reflects my stress level, it’s not really about them, it’s about my coping.”*

*“I feel out of control and helpless when I can’t make them listen.”*

*“I worry all the time about everything. Anger and blame hide my anxiety.”*

*“I blow-up because I feel jealous, insecure, embarrassed and ashamed of myself.”*

**What begins as upset with *THEM* slowly transforms into emotional pain *WITHIN*.**

**Now let’s replace anger, blame, hurt and helplessness with coping skills by problem-solving.** Once you understand that blame serves to protect your more vulnerable emotions, you can address those emotions. **Choose to problem-solve. Choose self-compassion. Choose to heal.**

*“As long as I blame them, I fail to improve myself. Today I focus on my best self.”*

*“I waited for them to change, hoping they would fix my problem. I need to step up.”*

*“I will focus on the person I want to be, replacing complaining with coping.”*

*“I will give myself compassion instead of unrealistic expectations. I deserve peace.”*

**You are no longer stuck in “blame or blow-up”.**

**C**reate inner calm by taking another moment to breathe, relax your muscles, slow your thoughts.

**A**llow oxygen to fill the nostrils, the lungs, and the brain. Oxygen calms the beastie brain.

**L**et deep breathing soothe tight muscles, impatience, irritation, annoyance, and anger.

**M**indfully peel the layers of the emotional onion to transform your anger to insight.

You just transformed blame into insight. Spend a few minutes reflecting on how your blame protects your deeper, more painful feelings. If YOUR blame protects YOUR pain, what does that tell you about your angry teenager? Your critical parent or partner? Your difficult in-law, neighbor, co-worker or supervisor?

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking an interest in this material. Remember that the ability to manage emotions is a brain thing. Your brain is a complicated organ. Psychiatric and neurological conditions, brain injuries, and other medical conditions may impact anger and irritability. For best results, consult with a healthcare professional. Use the [testing tools](#) on this site to clarify symptoms. [Additional resources](#) are also listed on this website.

*Telka*