

*“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.

Think of the last time you felt 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.

# ANGER

**BLAME**

**BLAME**

1. Is your life in danger? Predator?
2. Are you physically vulnerable such as:  
**Hungry? Tired? Pain? Hormonal? Hung Over? Medical illness?**
3. Are you emotionally vulnerable such as:  
**Toddler moment**—brain stuck- unable to use logic or to problem solve?  
**Need coping skills?** Expand your reasoning-  
Did you have reasonable expectations? **What did you expect?**

**Insight**



- What else are you feeling?**  
**Deeper emotions—**  
**Grief?**  
**Shame?**  
**Fear?**  
**Insecurity?**  
**No control?**  
**Vulnerability?**

Assuming that your anger was not triggered by a death threat, which requires immediate fight or flight, you can practice logic and reasoning skills by thinking through your layers of protective defenses. Review your own patterns. **What events or thoughts trigger your anger?**

- ❑ **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 notice, adapt, and learn may result in frustrated anger. Did you fail to take a moment to think first, making a reasonable prediction based on facts? Notice when you get stressed or upset by normal, predictable events such as:
  - The baby was fussy before nap, a toddler wet the bed, and a teenager had an attitude.*
  - A dishonest person told a lie, a disorganized person made a mess, a loud person made noise. 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: *Putting, 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’ civil 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 don’t like me”... “they think I am fat, ugly or annoying.”*
- ❑ **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 because you are angry with your ex-spouse. Focusing frustration toward your partner or your siblings because of issues with your parents.*
- 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.

Examples of deeper, more 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 can't be "abandoned"- that only applies to minors and pets, "feelings" of abandonment are fear of separation from a love source.* Becoming your own love source eliminates a fear of being left alone. Alone becomes loving company.

**Inadequacy and inferiority: "not----enough"** → Not— *good, smart, attractive, rich, thin, strong, popular, successful or perfect*—enough creates jealousy, 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*.

## □ 10. Understanding Emotions: Transforming Blame into Insight

As you attempt to work through your emotional onion tool, **you may notice that you still feel stuck in a pattern of blame.** 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!"*  
*"I wouldn't get so mad, if they weren't so stupid!"*  
*"They were asking for it!" "They deserved it!"*  
*"It's REALLY not fair!"*

1. **Blame** provides immediate physiological relief. Relief blocks insight regarding own limitations. As long as you blame others, you do not experience the pain of deeper, more uncomfortable insights about yourself.
2. **Blaming others** for your emotional wounds, irritability, temper or stress **feels better** than taking responsibility for *your* emotions *your* actions *your* values.
3. **Blaming** others allows you to **feel superior** and righteous instead of inferior or vulnerable.
4. **Blaming others is easier** than self-regulating your own emotions, actions and values.
5. **Blaming others is quicker** than problem-solving.

**Still stuck in blame?** I know! This is a challenging tool! I hear you saying:

*“I am upset with them for taking advantage of me. They never consider my needs.  
“They never help me. They don’t listen. Sure I blame them—but wouldn’t anyone?”  
“If I’m not mad—then they got away with it! I need to punish them with my anger!”*

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

**Yes, they triggered the mood in YOUR body,  
but YOUR mood, inside YOUR brain  
belongs to YOU....**

- Rather than assigning blame or fault to anyone, try problem-solving instead! Take personal responsibility for managing your brain, your emotions, your choices and your actions.

**Let’s practice transforming blame into insight. Ask yourself again:**

1. Is my life threatened or in danger? If not, dig deeper into why you got so mad.
2. Anything medical going on? Am I addressing sleep, nutritional, emotional, spiritual, social and recreational needs?
3. Do I have realistic expectations?
4. What else am I feeling? Do I need a bigger emotional vocabulary?

*“I feel impatient, negative, and judgmental. I am afraid I will fail.”*

*“My anger reflects my stress level, honestly, it’s not about them.”*

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

*“I worry all the time about everything. Angry and blame hide my inner worry.”*

*“I feel jealous, insecure, embarrassed...ashamed, not good enough, unworthy.”*

**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 focus on what I could do to improve myself.”*

*“I guess I waited for them to change because I wanted them to fix my problem.”*

*“Now I understand that I can’t blame them for my feelings. I’m done playing victim”.*

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

*“I will build confidence in myself, by showing up for myself with compassion.”*

*“I can become the best friend to myself, I know how to be a best friend, I’m good at it!”*

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

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?