Preface

Anger is a highly charged emotion that’s often difficult to understand. Destructive anger—especially if it has led to physical violence—can significantly strain relationships. By selecting this book, you’ve shown that you are well aware of its impact. Perhaps you blame your temper for a severed relationship with a family member, partner, or friend. Maybe your quickness to anger has caused you to lose a job or has endangered your career. Or, if you have children, your outbursts may have led them to withdraw from you in fear. Whatever the case may be, the greatest test when dealing with anger is to keep it from overwhelming you.

Few people have received instructions on how to manage anger constructively. As such, they often find it challenging. Regardless of how you currently handle your anger, Overcoming Destructive Anger: Strategies That Work will teach you the skills to address your challenges and answer your most trying questions. This book offers strategies to overcome anger that

- is overly intense,
- occurs frequently,
- lasts a long time, and
- is difficult to let go.

Overcoming Destructive Anger trains you to recognize and control the triggers that lead to anger. It will help you not only to overcome destructive anger but also to practice healthy anger on a regular basis. You’ll learn how to react less to anger, how to identify the unmet needs and desires that contribute to your anger, and how to relate to others so that you more readily meet these needs and desires.

My enduring interest in anger as an adult has been influenced, in part, by my own difficulties with anger as a child. Fortunately, my anger never resulted in serious harm to anyone. However, I did find myself quick to anger on several occasions when it could have caused serious injury and pain to others.

On one occasion, when I was eight years old, I had an altercation with my older brother. At the time, we lived in an apartment on the second
floor of a four-story building. We were home alone, and my brother had been teasing me about something. We began to wrestle with each other. He straddled my chest, held my hands to the floor, and pinned me down. I couldn’t find the strength to get him off, so I yelled as loud as I could. To be honest, I intended to embarrass him by alerting the neighbors. After wrestling and screaming for a few more minutes, however, I gave up and shouted “Uncle!” and he finally released me.

I may have appeared calm on the outside, but inside, I was furious. As I slowly walked away, I grabbed the heaviest shoe I could find and threw it at my brother’s head. With an enviable display of quick reflexes, he ducked. The shoe, however, continued its flight, shattering one of our living room windows and hitting the street below—along with pieces of glass.

I remember immediately feeling ashamed. I had broken the window and destroyed the set of blinds that had covered it, and I feared that the shards of glass might have fallen on someone below. That particular window, you see, was right above the entrance to our building. When I looked out another window, I fully expected to see someone injured as a result of my impulsive anger. Luckily, no one was entering or leaving the building at that moment.

This was just one in a series of events that helped me recognize my difficulty with anger and how quickly I could move from feeling annoyed to experiencing rage. Fortunately, I was also both highly self-conscious and reflective. Perhaps these were early signs of my becoming a therapist.

I eventually vowed to better control my anger, but I usually ended up stifling and trying to ignore it. I had somehow concluded that I shouldn’t show or even feel anger. As a result, my anger often escalated until I’d verbally explode and take it out on the next person or situation to cause me additional grief.

Years later, as a young adult, I taught in an elementary school in the South Bronx. During my six years there, I became interested in better understanding the children’s anger as well as my own. I obtained my master’s degree in psychology, then returned to school full-time for my doctoral degree. For several years afterward, I worked in a psychiatric inpatient setting. I developed workshops to help patients comprehend and control their anger. These early experiences helped me develop the approach I present in this book.

In the 1980s, I began offering workshops on anger management to
schools, parents, and businesses, while working in both outpatient and inpatient settings. I’ve offered monthly classes on anger management since 1994. Additionally, at my private practice, I focus on individual counseling and psychotherapy for the practice of healthy anger.

*Overcoming Destructive Anger* is for people of all ages. It offers exciting new approaches to anger management that have been developed since my 2003 book, *Healthy Anger: How to Help Children and Teens Manage Their Anger*, appeared. In the vignettes that accompany *Overcoming Destructive Anger*, people learn the causes of their anger and learn to apply the concepts in this book. The vignettes are based on some of my clients, though I’ve changed certain details to maintain their anonymity. Exercises at the end of each chapter will help reinforce the material, enhance your self-awareness, and cultivate healthy anger.

You can learn specific attitudes and skills to effectively address the full range of your anger, from slight to highly intense. And while you may make significant progress in a relatively short time, creating meaningful change requires commitment and patience. It requires a certain level of *frustration tolerance*: a resilience to endure the discomfort and tension that often arise when learning anything new. *Overcoming Destructive Anger* offers you a way to do this. I thank you for reading this book and wish you success in meeting this challenge.

I am very grateful to the many people who have contributed to the preparation of this book. Like any such venture, it has been supported by the efforts of a team.

Once again, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Nancy Rosenfeld, my friend, agent, and coauthor (with Jan Fawcett) of my first book. She has continued to provide support, feedback, inspiration, and both a gentle and a steady nudge whenever I needed one.

I am extremely grateful to Jacqueline Wehmueller, executive editor at Johns Hopkins University Press, for her consistent encouragement and support throughout. She asked questions and provided feedback that helped me to find direction and clarity in what I wanted to express. I also want to thank the editors who have worked on this project, including Linda Strange, Wendy Lawrence, and Tonya Woodworth. Each provided an invaluable addition toward improving this work. Their feedback has helped me to become a better writer. And I think I have finally come to realize that
“less is best.” I want to also thank Courtney Bond, production editor, for guiding the transformation of the manuscript into a book.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Patricia Robin, who patiently read the entire manuscript and provided clearly defined and honest feedback to help me further expand on and clarify my thoughts. I am also grateful for the ongoing support of colleagues with whom I share an office.

I have always believed that being a psychotherapist, I must also be a lifelong student. For this reason, I owe special thanks to the many researchers and practitioners whose work has informed my practice and the writing of this book.

Thanks, too, to the many clients with whom I have worked and who have shared of their personal lives.