

A SELF-GUIDED RELATIONSHIP WORKBOOK



Navigating Conflicts in Relationships

*Practical tools for calming anger, reducing conflict,
and building healthier relationships*

by Mark Spurlock, LMFT

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About the Author

DECADES OF CLINICAL PRACTICE AND TEACHING

Mark Spurlock is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT #45318) with over 25 years of clinical experience and a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology from Cal State Fullerton. He provides individual, couples, and family therapy through a secure statewide California telehealth practice at www.MarriageAndFamily.com.



Much of Mark's practice centers on individual counseling — particularly with men working through anger, depression, anxiety, ADHD, and the lasting impact of trauma.

He also specializes in Christian marriage counseling, working with couples through conflict, betrayal, communication breakdowns, emotional distance, and blended-family challenges.

Mark's clinical foundation runs deep. He spent years as a child and family therapist — stabilizing children of trauma in foster care, leading court-ordered abuse recovery groups, and training social workers statewide. He founded the Substance Abuse Committee of the San Diego Domestic Violence Council and served on its Executive Board, implementing programs across San Diego County's Courts, Probation, and Parole. Over sixteen years of private practice in San Diego under the Mark Spurlock MFT Child and Family Counseling Center — consistently recognized as one of the city's top marriage and family therapy practices — he gained a firsthand understanding of how childhood wounds surface in adult relationships. That range — from childhood trauma to domestic violence to addiction — informs every tool he builds.

His approach combines evidence-based clinical practices with sound and tested wisdom — including original frameworks developed across thousands of clinical hours. Clients and colleagues describe Mark as direct and compassionate: he tells the truth, holds the line, and stays in the room.

Helping individuals and Christian marriages across California through a secure statewide telehealth practice.

Learn more at www.MarriageAndFamily.com

Important Notice

This workbook is an educational resource designed to support healthier communication, anger management, and family life. It offers general skills and reflection exercises and is not a substitute for individual or couples therapy, medical or psychological treatment, or professional advice.

The tools here are intended for homes and relationships where everyone feels physically and emotionally safe. If you or anyone in your household is experiencing intimidation, threats, control, or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, these strategies are not appropriate and safety comes first. Please reach out to a qualified professional or, in an emergency, your local emergency services or a domestic-violence support line.

If anger or conflict feels persistent, painful, or beyond what self-guided tools can address, consider working with a licensed therapist. Using a workbook alongside professional support is often the most effective path.

How to get the most from this workbook

Work through it in order the first time — each section builds on the one before. Where possible, complete the agreements and signals together, in a calm moment. Treat the writing lines as your own — honesty matters more than neat answers. Return to your completed plan whenever tension rises. The point is to use it, not just read it.

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Filling this in digitally? A quick tip

This workbook can be typed into on a computer or phone, or printed and filled by hand. If you type your answers, save a copy or take a screenshot when you finish — some phone and browser PDF apps don't reliably save what you enter. Your reflections are worth keeping.

II EMERGENCY PAUSE · USE IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Use This Right Now

A ONE-PAGE GUIDE FOR THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

*If a conflict is escalating right now, don't read the workbook — use this page.
(Everything here is explained in Sections 2, 3, and 10.)*

Catch it early — your warning signs

- Voices rising, talking over each other
- Going in circles — same point, third time
- Heart pounding, jaw tight, hands clenched
- The thought “Here we go again”

Any one of these = time to pause.

The 6-step pause

- 1 Call the timeout.** Use your agreed signal — not “I’m done” or “Forget it.”
- 2 Name a return time.** “Can we take twenty minutes?” A pause, not a disappearance.
- 3 Leave gracefully.** No slammed door. No parting shot. No last word.
- 4 Calm your body — at least 20 minutes.** 30–45 is better. A flooded nervous system needs ~20 minutes to settle; the extra time allows a solid cool-down.
- 5 Do NOT build your case.** If you’re rehearsing your comeback, you’re not calming down — you’re reloading.
- 6 Come back on time.** Honoring the return is what makes the timeout trustworthy.

Our timeout signal is: _____

My calm-down spot is: _____

Re-opening the conversation

Lead with Comfort, not your argument:

“I’m sorry that I _____. That was wrong.”

Then listen first. The full repair script is in Section 10.

Remember: the goal of a timeout is not to win or even to resolve — it’s to return as two reasonable people.

If anyone in your home feels physically or emotionally unsafe, these tools are not the right fit — safety comes first. Reach out to a qualified professional or, in an emergency, your local emergency services or a domestic-violence support line.

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Before You Begin

Most of us don't struggle in our closest relationships because we lack love. We struggle because, when emotions run high, we fall into patterns that pull us apart instead of together. The good news: those patterns are learnable, and so are better ones.

This workbook gives you a set of concrete tools. Some help you cool a conflict that's already heated. Others help you understand the anger underneath, set fair boundaries at home, repair after a rupture, and reconnect when distance has crept in. None of them require anyone else to change first — you can begin with the parts that are yours alone.

A note on “mutual responsibility”

Taking responsibility for your part is not the same as taking the blame for everything. In nearly every recurring conflict, both partners contribute something to the cycle. Focusing on your own contribution is simply the only part you can actually control — and it's usually where change begins.

PART ONE

Calming Conflict With Your Partner

Tools to cool a heated argument, read the early warning signs, take responsibility for your part, and repair and reconnect afterward.

1 · Understanding the Pattern: Hot or Cold War?

UNDERSTAND THE PATTERN

Conflict in relationships tends to take two very different shapes, and each needs a different response. Using the wrong tool for the wrong type is one of the most common ways couples stay stuck.

The “Hot War”

This is conflict at full volume — raised voices, sharp words, fast escalation, the feeling that emotion has taken the wheel and rational conversation is no longer possible. In a hot war, almost nothing useful gets said. The goal here is not to win or to resolve in the moment. The goal is to cool down so you can return as two reasonable people. The tools in Sections 2–5 are built for this.

The “Cold War”

This is conflict gone quiet — distance, silence, sarcasm, withdrawal, a low hum of resentment. Nothing explodes, but warmth drains away and the gap widens. A cold war won’t be solved by cooling down, because it’s already cold. It calls for the opposite: deliberate warmth, turning toward each other, and respectful re-engagement. Section 6 focuses on this.

Think of it like a car overheating

The hot war is the engine red-lining. Steam is pouring from under the hood. You pull over — you have to. You can’t add coolant to a boiling radiator; you’ll burn yourself and crack the block. You wait. You let the system cool. Then you open the hood, add what’s needed, and get back on the road. That’s the timeout: a necessary pause so repair becomes possible.

The cold war is what happens when you pull the car over... and leave it there for three weeks. Nobody lifts the hood. Nobody adds the coolant. The car just sits on the side of the road. And when you finally come back? The tires have been stolen. Parts of the relationship you took for granted — trust, warmth, goodwill — quietly disappeared while no one was tending to them.

The hot war needs a pause. The cold war needs someone to come back and lift the hood.

Why it matters

Hot war → the skill is to de-escalate and pause.

Cold war → the skill is to re-engage with love and respect.

Many couples instinctively do the reverse: they push hard during a hot war and go silent during a cold one — and the cycle deepens.

Reflect

Think about the last few weeks. Which pattern shows up more often in your relationship — the hot war, the cold war, or a swing between them? Describe one recent example of each.

A recent “hot” moment:

A recent “cold” moment:

2 · The Timeout Agreement

A TOOL FOR THE HOT WAR

A timeout is a short, planned break from a conversation that has overheated — a way to step back before either of you says or does something that makes things worse. Done well, it's a graceful exit, not an escape.

The single most important rule is this: you agree on how timeouts work in advance, during a calm moment — never invent them mid-fight. When a break is requested for the first time in the heat of an argument, it can land as abandonment, stonewalling, or “walking away from me.” When it's a tool you both chose together beforehand, it becomes a sign of care rather than rejection.

What makes a timeout work

- Either partner can call it — it is never a punishment or a power move.
- **Name a return time.** A timeout is a pause, not a disappearance. “Can we take twenty minutes?” tells your partner you're coming back.
- **Leave gracefully.** No slammed doors, no parting shot, no last word.
- **Use the break to settle, not to build your case.** The aim is to calm your body, not to rehearse your next argument.
- **Come back.** Honoring the return time is what makes the tool trustworthy.

Self-soothing during the break

Slow your breathing, take a walk, drink some water, step outside. Physiologically, it takes about twenty minutes for a flooded nervous system to settle — give yourself at least that long before re-engaging.

Worksheet: Our Timeout Agreement

Fill this in together, calmly. This becomes a shared agreement you can both rely on.

Our agreement	Write your answer
Either of us may call a timeout when...	(e.g. voices are rising, we're going in circles, I feel flooded)
Our typical break length will be...	(e.g. 20–30 minutes; longer if needed, but we'll say so)
During the break, I will go...	(where each of us goes to settle down)
During the break, I will calm myself by...	(walk, breathe, music — not rehearsing the argument)
We commit to coming back by...	(how we'll signal we're ready; who reopens the conversation)

3 · Your Timeout Signal

MAKE THE PAUSE NEUTRAL

Even with an agreement in place, the words you use to call a timeout matter. “I’m done,” “Forget it,” or “I can’t talk to you” all sound like accusations or rejections — and they reignite the very fight you’re trying to pause.

The solution is a neutral, pre-agreed signal: a single word, short phrase, or simple hand gesture that both of you have chosen together to mean only one thing — “I need a short break so we don’t make this worse.” Because you picked it in advance, it carries no blame. It’s a shared shorthand, not a weapon.

Good signals tend to be...

Neutral or even slightly light — a made-up word, an inside joke, a calm hand gesture. Easy to say and hard to mistake for an insult. The same for both of you, so neither feels singled out.

Worksheet: Choosing Our Signal

Brainstorm a few options together, then circle the one you’ll use.

Words or phrases we might use:

A gesture we might use:

OUR SIGNAL IS: _____

The Timeout Contract

A FORMAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN PARTNERS

Sections 2 and 3 taught the timeout skill and your signal. This contract makes it official. Signing together — in a calm moment — turns the timeout from something you talked about into something you both committed to on paper. When tension rises, a signed agreement carries weight that a conversation alone may not.

1. The clues that my husband is getting angry:

Physical signs, tone changes, withdrawal patterns, facial expressions

2. The clues that my wife is getting angry:

Physical signs, tone changes, withdrawal patterns, facial expressions

3. The triggers we need to be aware of:

His:

Hers:

4. The neutral, non-blaming timeout signal we will use:

This should match the signal you chose in Section 3

5. When either of us gives the signal:

Husband will go to:

Wife will go to:

6. The timeout period will last:

At least 20 minutes — a flooded nervous system needs that long to settle

7. At the end of the timeout we will:

How you'll signal readiness, who reopens, where you'll sit together

8. During the timeout we will observe the following rules:

e.g. "No texting about the argument," "No involving the kids," "No building our case"

Husband

Wife

Witness (therapist, pastor, or trusted person)

Date

4 · The Four Channels of Communication

READ THE EARLY WARNING SIGNS

We communicate on four channels at once, and most escalation shows up on these channels long before things blow up. Often the words themselves are reasonable — it's the tone, the posture, or the distance that turns a conversation into a fight. Learning to read these channels, in yourself and your partner, lets you catch trouble early and steer it back down.

Channel	Cools things DOWN	Heats things UP
Body language	Open posture, soft eyes, nodding, turning toward, relaxed hands	Crossed arms, eye-rolling, looming, turning away, clenched jaw
Tone of voice	Warm, steady, lowered volume, genuine curiosity	Sharp, loud, sarcastic, mocking, cold and flat
Word choice	"I feel...", asking questions, repair words, naming needs	"You always...", blame, contempt, name-calling, threats
Physical proximity	Moving closer, gentle touch, sitting together	Looming over, invading space, or pulling far away / leaving

Reflect

When you start to escalate, which channel goes negative first — your tone, your body, your words, or your distance? This is your personal early-warning sign.

Which of your partner's channels do you tend to notice first when they're getting upset?

5 · Radar Skills: Knowing Your Impact

RESPOND RATHER THAN REACT

“Radar skills” means staying aware of three things at once: what is happening inside you, what your partner is experiencing from you, and what pattern the two of you are in right now. Most people in conflict are tuned into only one of these — their own feelings. The other two channels go dark. Those blind channels are where most damage happens.

Building radar requires developing three distinct kinds of awareness. All three matter, but they are not the same thing — and most couples only practice one.

The Three Radar Skills



The Three Radar Skills

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is knowing what is happening inside you: your feelings, your triggers, and the stories you're telling yourself in the moment. It answers the question “What am I feeling right now?” This is the foundation. Without it, you can't name the hurt, fear, or frustration underneath your anger — and you can't choose how to respond. Most personal growth work starts here, and it's essential.

But self-awareness alone is not enough. A person can be deeply self-aware — fully in touch with their own pain — and still have no idea what their partner just experienced. That gap is where Impact Awareness comes in.

Impact Awareness

Impact Awareness is the ability to see yourself through your partner's eyes — to recognize the effect your words, tone, expression, and behavior are having on the person in front of you, in real time. It answers a harder question: “What is my partner experiencing from me right now?”

This is the weak spot in most couples' conflict. When emotions escalate, people lose the ability to see themselves. You don't hear how sharp your tone has become. You don't notice the look on your face. You don't register that your partner flinched, shut down, or started to cry — because you're locked inside your own experience. In that moment, you are impact-blind.

Impact blindness is not selfishness. It's a natural consequence of emotional flooding — the brain narrows its focus to protect you, and your partner's experience drops out of view. But the damage still lands. And the painful truth is this: your partner does not experience your intentions. They experience your impact. The gap between what you meant and what they felt is where most relationship wounds live.

What impact blindness looks like

“I wasn’t yelling.” — You may not have raised your voice, but your tone, posture, and face said something your partner heard loud and clear.

“I didn’t say anything wrong.” — The words may have been reasonable. But the eye roll, the sigh, or the silence that came with them carried the real message.

“I just needed space.” — You were taking care of yourself. Your partner experienced abandonment. Both are true at the same time.

“I was only trying to help.” — Your intention was good. Your partner felt controlled or criticized. Impact doesn’t ask about intent.

Situational Awareness

Situational Awareness is the ability to step back and read the moment itself — to recognize what is happening between the two of you, right now, as it’s unfolding. It answers the question: “What pattern are we in?”

Most recurring conflicts follow a script. The same trigger, the same escalation, the same shutdown, the same silence afterward. If you’ve ever had the thought “Here we go again” — that flash of recognition is Situational Awareness trying to break through. The problem is that most people have that thought and then fall right back into the pattern anyway, like the movie *Groundhog Day* — reliving the same fight over and over, reacting the same way, getting the same result.

Situational Awareness is what lets you catch the loop before it completes. It’s the moment you notice: “We’re doing the thing again. The dishes aren’t really about the dishes. This is the part where I shut down and she feels abandoned.” That recognition — seeing the pattern while you’re still inside it — is the opening where a different choice becomes possible.

The Groundhog Day test

If you could replay your last three arguments, how much of the script would be identical? The trigger, the tone, the escalation, the withdrawal, the cold silence afterward? Situational Awareness is the skill that lets you stop the replay. Not by suppressing the conflict, but by naming the pattern out loud: “I think we’re in the loop again. Can we try something different this time?” That one sentence can change the entire trajectory of a fight.

Respond rather than react

A reaction is automatic — driven by the trigger, not by choice. A response is intentional — a beat of awareness between what happens and what you do next. All three radar skills serve that beat: Self-Awareness names what you feel, Impact Awareness keeps your partner in view, and Situational Awareness catches the pattern before it runs. Together, they give you the space to choose.

Seeing the gap: The Johari Window

Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham mapped something couples discover the hard way: there is always a gap between what you know about yourself and what your partner can see. Their model, the Johari Window, organizes awareness into four areas.

	Known to me	Not known to me
Known to my partner	OPEN Patterns we both see and can talk about. This is where honest conversation lives. The bigger this area, the stronger the relationship.	BLIND SPOT What my partner sees about me that I don't. My tone, my habits, the face I make when I shut down. This is the home of Impact Awareness — the part of me I can't see without my partner's help.
Not known to my partner	HIDDEN Feelings, fears, or triggers I carry but haven't shared. The hurt underneath my anger, the old wound I protect. Sharing these is what turns distance into intimacy.	UNKNOWN Patterns neither of us has seen yet. These surface through new experiences, stress, or professional support. They're not a failure — they're just undiscovered.

Growing your Open area

- **Shrink the Blind Spot (build Impact Awareness)** — Ask your partner: “What do I do that makes this worse?” Then listen without defending. Their answer is the data you can't get any other way.
- **Shrink the Hidden area (deepen Self-Awareness)** — Share what's underneath: “When that happens, I feel afraid that...” The more you reveal, the less your partner has to guess — and the less they fill the gap with the worst interpretation.

Both moves take courage. Both make your radar sharper and your relationship safer.

What amplifies reactivity

Triggers rarely come out of nowhere. Stress, exhaustion, hunger, hormonal shifts, and old wounds from the past can all make a person more sensitive and quicker to flood. Recognizing that your partner (or you) may be carrying extra load helps you meet a sharp reaction with compassion rather than counter-attack.

Worksheet: My Johari Window

Fill each quadrant honestly. For the Blind Spot, you'll need to ask your partner — that's the point.

OPEN — what we both know about me:	BLIND SPOT — ask your partner: “What do I do that I don’t seem to realize?”
HIDDEN — feelings or fears I haven’t shared yet:	UNKNOWN — patterns we might discover together:

Worksheet: Impact Awareness Check

Think of a recent conflict. Answer honestly — the goal is to see yourself clearly, not to judge yourself.

What I was feeling in the moment:	
What I believe my partner experienced from me:	
What my partner actually experienced (ask them):	
The gap between my intent and my impact:	

Worksheet: Mapping the Cycle

Pick a recurring argument and trace it honestly.

My partner’s common triggers (what tends to set them off):	My own common triggers:
Things I do that escalate it (my contribution):	One thing I could do differently next time:

6 · Warming the Cold War

RE-ENGAGE WITH LOVE AND RESPECT

Timeouts and signals cool a fire. But a cold war is the opposite problem: there's no fire left, only distance. The danger here is quieter — unspoken resentment hardening into disconnection. The remedy isn't a break; it's deliberate, repeated movement back toward each other.

This is the work of small things done consistently: a warm greeting, a genuine question, a thank-you, a moment of undivided attention. These tiny acts of turning toward your partner are what keep a relationship's reserves of goodwill full — and a full reserve is what lets a couple weather the hot wars without lasting damage.

Two anchors for every interaction

Love — am I showing warmth, affection, and care, even in small ways?

Respect — am I treating my partner as someone I value, even when we disagree?

When a conversation drifts, ask yourself which anchor has slipped, and reach for it.

Worksheet: Turning Toward

Name three small, doable things you could do this week to warm the connection — not grand gestures, just consistent ones.

7 · Repair Attempts

MEND THE MOMENT

A repair attempt is any move — large or small — that tries to soften a tense moment or reconnect after one: a bit of humor, a softened tone, reaching for a hand, “Can we start over?”, or a sincere “I’m sorry.” Strong couples aren’t the ones who never rupture; they’re the ones who repair well and often.

When repairs break down

A broken repair attempt is one that’s offered but missed or rejected — the joke is met with a glare, the apology is waved off, the outstretched hand is ignored. Each broken repair stings, deepens the distress, and makes both partners less willing to try again. Over time, people simply stop reaching out. Protecting repair attempts — both making them and receiving them — is some of the most important work a couple can do.

Receiving a repair

Repairs are often clumsy. A partner who jokes at the wrong moment or apologizes stiffly may still be genuinely trying to reconnect. Learning to recognize an awkward repair as a bid for peace — and to accept it — is just as vital as making one.

Worksheet: Our Repair Toolkit

List the repair attempts that actually land for each of you — the words, gestures, or jokes that help you soften.

Repairs that help ME soften:	Repairs that help MY PARTNER soften:

My commitment

When my partner offers a repair — even an awkward one — I will try to receive it rather than reject it. I will treat a clumsy reach as a sign they want things to be better.

PART TWO

Anger, Expectations & Your Home

Tools to understand what drives your anger, master it instead of being driven by it, set fair boundaries, and bring more calm to family life.

8 · Understanding Anger

WHAT YOUR ANGER IS REALLY TELLING YOU

Anger is almost always a secondary emotion — the outer layer over something more vulnerable. Beneath a flash of anger there is usually hurt, fear, or frustration, and very often an expectation that went unmet. The shouting is the smoke; those feelings are the fire.

This matters because you can't resolve a feeling you won't name. "I'm furious" keeps you locked in attack mode. "I'm hurt that I felt ignored" opens a door — to yourself, and to the other person.

The three roots of anger

Hurt — something wounded you: you felt dismissed, disrespected, or unappreciated.

Fear — something felt threatening or unsafe: of losing control, of being let down, of not mattering.

Frustration — something blocked you, very often an expectation that wasn't met.

Worksheet: Looking Underneath

Recall a recent flash of anger and trace it honestly.

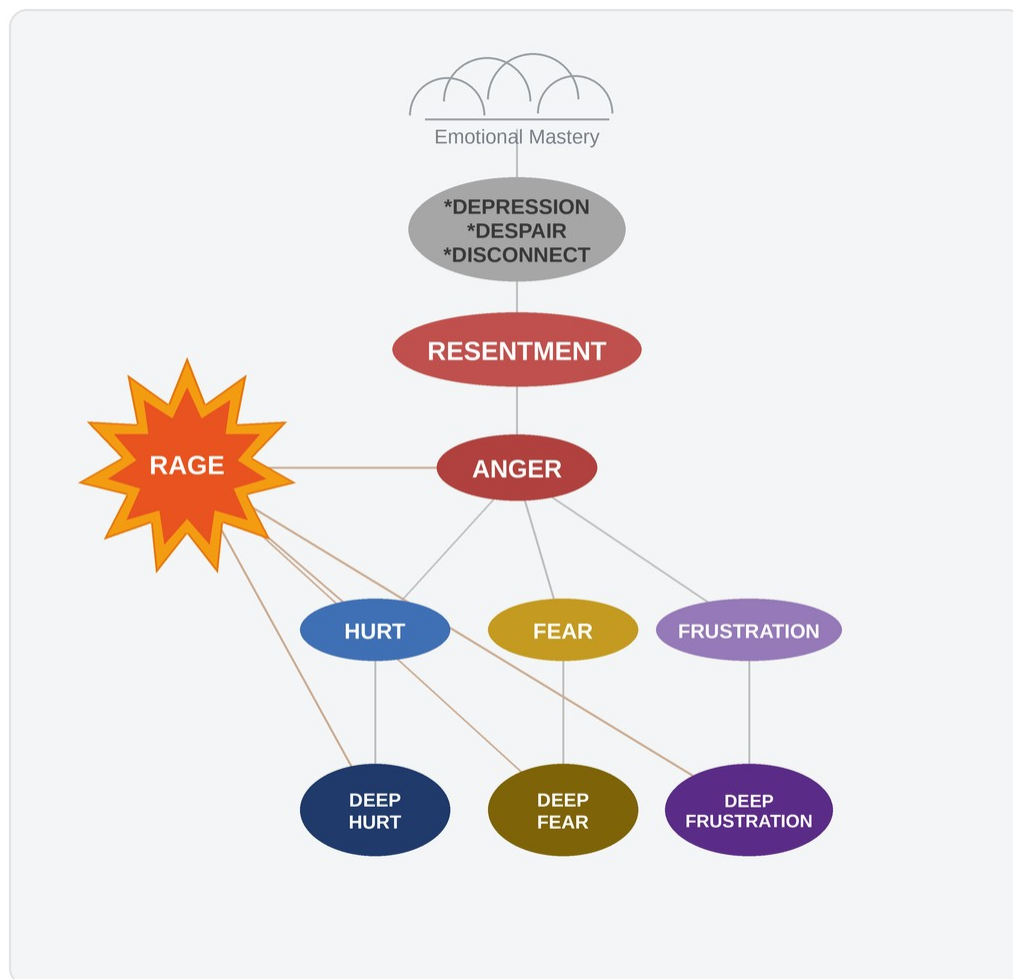
The trigger	What I showed (anger)	What was underneath	The unmet expectation

9 · From Awareness to Mastery

AWARENESS OF THE CLIMB — AND THE POWER TO INTERRUPT IT

Anger itself isn't the problem — what you do with it is. The Emotional Awareness to Mastery chart below maps how unmanaged emotion travels. At the roots are the vulnerable feelings — hurt, fear, and frustration. In the present moment, these feed upward into anger. But each can also sink into a deeper, older form: deep hurt, deep fear, and deep frustration.

Those deep feelings are survival-based memory, held in the brain's threat center — the amygdala. When something in the present triggers one of them, the response isn't ordinary anger; it's rage. That is why rage so often feels far bigger than the moment that set it off: it's reacting to an old wound, not just the here and now. Anger and rage then harden into resentment, and resentment, left to settle, sinks into depression, despair, and disconnection.



The Emotional Awareness to Mastery chart

Anger vs. rage: why rage feels “too big”

Anger is a response to what's happening now. Rage is what erupts when a present trigger lands on an old, deep wound — survival-based memory stored in the amygdala, the brain's threat center. In that moment, the thinking brain goes briefly offline and the body reacts as if to a genuine threat. Recognizing a rage reaction as an amygdala-driven survival response

— not a fair measure of the present — is the first step to calming it. The move is to pause and let the thinking brain catch back up before you act or speak.

Awareness, then mastery

Awareness is the knowing — being able to name what you feel and see where it sits on the chart. Mastery is the managing — using that knowing to soothe the feeling and choose your response. The earlier you catch it, down at the roots, the more choice you have. That is where mitigation begins.

Reflect

Think of a recent strong reaction. How far up the chart did it travel — anger, rage, resentment, further? If it tipped into rage, what older hurt or fear might have been triggered — and what would have helped you pause and tend to it?

10 • The CAN Healing Agents

SPEAK TO THE HURT, NOT THE HEAT

Once you understand that anger sits on top of hurt, fear, or frustration, you can aim your words at what's underneath instead of at the person. Three healing agents — Comfort, Assurance, and New Agreement (CAN) — turn a confrontation into a repair.

- **Comfort** — Soothe the hurt with an overt signal: name what you did wrong and own it. “I’m sorry I said that — that was wrong.” Comfort isn’t just reflecting back a feeling; it’s taking clear responsibility so the other person knows you see the wound you caused.
- **Assurance** — Soothe the fear by showing you are now aware of the pattern. “Let me assure you, that is not what I meant,” or “I can see that what I did was unloving and disrespectful.” Assurance tells the other person you recognize the negative pattern — not just this one moment — and that you’re choosing differently.
- **New Agreement** — Create a new pathway together. Rather than leaving the repair in the past, a new agreement addresses the unmet expectation or recurring obstacle head-on: “Going forward, when this comes up, let’s agree to handle it this way.” It gives the relationship a shared path that replaces the old one.

How CAN meets the three roots

Hurt → Comfort · Fear → Assurance · Frustration → New Agreement

Each healing agent answers a different root. Name which root is loudest, and lead with the agent that meets it.

Order matters

Comfort and Assurance come first. Jumping straight to a “new agreement” before the hurt is owned and the fear is calmed tends to feel like being managed — not loved. Own it, then show awareness, then build the new path.

Worksheet: A CAN Repair Script

Fill in the blanks for a real situation, then say it out loud once before you use it.

Comfort (soothe the hurt)

"I'm sorry that I _____. That was wrong."

Assurance (soothe the fear)

"I want you to know that I can see _____. That is not who I want to be."

New Agreement (create a new pathway)

"Going forward, when _____ comes up, let's agree to _____."

"Can we also agree that when one of us feels _____, we will _____ instead of _____?"

11 · The Three E's: Establish, Educate, Enforce

SET RULES AND BOUNDARIES THAT HOLD

Much household conflict comes from rules that were never clearly set, never clearly explained, or never consistently kept. The Three E's give a boundary a fair chance to actually work.

- **Establish** — Decide the rule or boundary thoughtfully, with wisdom. Is it fair, clear, and necessary? A boundary you haven't thought through won't survive its first challenge.
- **Educate** — Communicate it calmly, so everyone understands both the what and the why. People follow rules they understand far better than rules sprung on them.
- **Enforce** — Follow through, consistently and without drama. Inconsistent enforcement quietly teaches everyone that the rule isn't really real.

Where it usually breaks down

Most boundaries fail at Educate or Enforce, not Establish. We set the rule in our own heads, never fully explain it, then feel angry when it's crossed. Slow down on the middle and last E.

Worksheet: Run One Issue Through the Three E's

Pick a single household issue and work it through.

Establish	<i>The rule or boundary, stated clearly and fairly:</i>
Educate	<i>How and when I'll explain it — and the "why" behind it:</i>
Enforce	<i>What consistent, calm follow-through will look like:</i>

12 • Managing Expectations

MAKE THE UNSPOKEN SPOKEN

A surprising share of anger is really disappointed expectation — and many of those expectations were never said out loud. We assume others know what we want, then feel let down when they don't deliver on a rule they never heard. Naming expectations clearly, and keeping them realistic, removes much of the fuel before a fire can start.

Predictable routines do the same work, quietly. When chores and responsibilities run on an agreed schedule — ideally paired with a reward or a natural result — there's far less to nag, argue, or resent about. The routine carries the expectation, so you don't have to.

Worksheet: Routines & Rewards

Map a few recurring responsibilities so they run on agreement rather than reminders.

Task / responsibility	Who	When	Reward / result

Reflect

Name one expectation you've been holding silently that you could make explicit this week — and to whom.

Daily & Weekly Trackers

KEEP THE PRACTICE GOING

Skills fade without reps. These two trackers turn the workbook into a daily habit: a quick daily log to catch anger early and name what was underneath, and a short weekly review to spot patterns. Make copies of these pages, or use a fresh one each week — they're built to be repeated.

Daily Pause Log

One line a day. The goal is noticing, not judging — the earlier you catch it, the more choice you have.

Day	Trigger	Where it landed (anger / rage / resentment)	What I did	What I'd do next time
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Weekly Reflection

Which root showed up most this week? (hurt / fear / frustration)
A repair I made — or wish I had:
One time I paused before reacting:
My focus for next week:

Drawing on Your Values

A SOURCE OF STEADINESS

Lasting change is easier when it's anchored to something bigger than the heat of the moment. Many people draw strength from their faith, their values, or a sense of purpose — a verse, a prayer, a principle, or a simple phrase they return to when things get hard.

This page is optional. If that kind of anchor matters to you, name it here and keep it close. When you feel yourself climbing toward an outburst, it can be the thing that helps you pause and choose.

A few examples to spark your own

A scripture or verse — e.g. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

A gratitude practice — e.g. "I'll count my blessings 1 to 10 and gain an attitude of gratitude."

A steadying principle — e.g. "Be slow to anger" or "This moment is not the whole story."

An anchor I want to return to

A value, verse, prayer, or phrase that steadies me:

Your Personal Plan

Pull it all together on one page. Fill this in and keep it somewhere you'll see it — the goal is to reach for these tools before a conflict takes over, not after.

One situation where I will respond rather than react:	
Our timeout signal is...	
When I feel myself escalating, my first warning sign is...	
Beneath my anger, I most often find... (hurt / fear / frustration)	
A repair I can lead with (Comfort & Assurance) is...	
One household rule I'll run through the Three E's is...	
This week, I will turn toward my family by...	

A closing thought

Change in a relationship rarely arrives all at once. It comes from small, repeated choices — one graceful pause, one received apology, one warm gesture at a time. You don't have to do it perfectly. You just have to keep turning back toward each other.