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The Dance of ANGER

A WOMAN'S GUIDE TO
CHANGING THE PATTERNS OF
INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

• WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR •

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The Dance of Anger Harriet Lerner

"Anger is a signal and one worth listening to," writes Dr. Harriet Lerner, in her renowned classic that has transformed the lives of millions of readers. While anger deserves our attention and respect, women still learn to silence our anger, to deny it entirely, or to vent it in a way that leaves us feeling helpless and powerless. In this engaging and eminently wise book, Dr. Lerner teaches women to identify the true sources of our anger and to use anger as a powerful vehicle for creating lasting change.

The Dance of Anger Details

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From Reader Review The Dance of Anger for online ebook

Rebecca Waring-Crane says

A gem of a read especially for any woman who has ever been told, "You shouldn't feel that way!"

"Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to. Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right. Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing an important emotional issue in our lives, or that too much of our self -- our beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions -- is being compromised in a relationship. Our anger may be a signal that we are doing more and giving more than we can comfortably do or give. Or our anger may warn us that others are doing too much for us, at the expense of our own competence and growth."

"The taboos against our feeling and expressing anger are so powerful that even *knowing* when we are angry is not a simple matter. When a woman shows her anger, she is likely to be dismissed as irrational or worse."

"Anger is inevitable when our lives consist of giving in and going along; when we assume responsibility for other people's feelings and reactions; when we relinquish our primary responsibility to proceed with our own growth and ensure the quality of our own lives; when we behave as if having a relationship is more important than having a self."

"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."

"We are responsible for our own behavior. But we are not responsible for other people's reactions; nor are they responsible for ours. Women often learn to reverse this order of things: *We put our energy into taking responsibility for other people's feelings, thoughts, and behavior and hand over to others responsibility for our own.*"

Lerner addresses the longstanding social constraints that inhibit women from understanding anger and using it as a positive tool to improve their most important relationships. Engaging writing and timeless wisdom. I only wish I'd read it when it first came out nearly 30 years ago.

K says

Wow. This was a really great book, one which I appreciated on both a personal and a professional level. Written in a deceptively simple self-help/pop psych style, this book had the advantages of being highly readable, practical, and almost entertaining, appealing to a lay audience. At the same time, this book was based on solid Bowen theory and was far from superficial or facile.

This book clarified a lot of things for me that I've been working on with my supervisor, and has been helping me function more effectively as a therapist. It has also been eye-opening for me in giving me a new way to look at many of the different relationships within my own family.

One minor difficulty I have with the book is that its thesis could potentially justify a lot of selfish behavior.

The basic premise of the book (which I am greatly oversimplifying for the purposes of this review) is that people need to accept responsibility for their own behavior and reactions within a relationship, and work on changing those things rather than on changing the other person. Sounds good, right? But a corollary to that is not allowing someone with expectations of you to make you feel guilty, because their expectations are **THEIR** problem, not yours -- an attitude which might be taken too far.

Although Lerner attempted to provide a balanced view, I felt that her feminist agenda caused her to err on the side of empowering women to put their own needs first. For example, she described the case of a woman with a needy, demanding 72-year-old father. As a therapist, she helped this woman shift from complaining about her father's behavior to evaluating her own -- how could she set new limits with her father which would allow her to give to him without feeling resentful?

Happily, Katy's decision was one which I actually felt was reasonable -- she told her father she could only meet him for dinner twice a week instead of three times a week, and that she could shop for him once a week but not on an on-call basis. I liked the balance in this particular example; Katy didn't abdicate her responsibilities as a daughter; she simply found a way to continue giving that she could live with better. However, I felt that the idea of setting limits in a relationship was emphasized far more than the aspect of finding limits that allow you to continue giving.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to understand relationships better, and their own functioning in relationships. It's a quick, easy read but not a superficial one and great for discussion.

imane says

Ladiibbug says

** A Life Changing Book **

Read years ago. This book made a huge impact on my life, and changed my life dramatically for the better.

The Dance of Anger, recommended by a therapist, will show the reader how to express anger -- and deal with anger being directed toward you -- without yelling, screaming, name calling, etc.

This was literally the first clue I ever got about how to express anger in a calm way and to actually RESOLVE an issue, without constantly exploding over it, or being the "explodee".

Elyse says

Read this years ago ... my older daughter too.
Absolutely valuable....
The authors new book out this year sounds even more powerful.

Angie says

This book has been quoted to me for many years and my boss recently recommended it.

It is one of the first self help books on the topic and it took years of rejection for Harriet Lerner to get it published. While it is targeted to women, it applies to everyone.

I liked the opportunity to use anger to define self and I appreciated the context of societal roles by gender even though I tend to be more "masculine" in my expression of anger.

The best part about the book is the simple how-to examples of how every relationship is a dance and the only way to change the dance is to change YOUR steps. The advice to prepare for Change Back reactions was very helpful and I loved how it was all about speaking in "I" terms and being realistic about the fact that you can change YOU but changing other people is an exercise in futility.

For those with a short attention span, you will be happy to hear that the book can be read in one day.

Many self help books are downers but this was light enough that it felt realistic to implement some of the changes. Unlike Oprah's challenge to LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE. This felt like something I could accomplish. If you often feel overwhelmed by the maintenance of relationships, this book may help you set boundaries.

My favorite passage from the book is this, "If we do not know about our family history, we are more likely to repeat past patterns or mindlessly rebel against them, without much clarity about who we really are, how we are similar to and different from other family members , and how we might best proceed in our own life."

Nastja Belkov says

This book was recommended to me by a therapist who supervises our group of counsellors. He told us that this book is incredibly helpful not only to his clients but also to mental health professionals who want to gain a better understanding of relationship problems and how to deal with them. I was intrigued and decided to remember the title, so I could read the book and find some useful information on how to counsel people with relationship and anger issues. For some reason I really didn't think this book would be a truly useful read for myself. I have no idea why I was deceiving myself in such a way, because I found some really great explanations, quotes, thoughts and examples that are relatable, easy to understand and very necessary to analyze and remember. I started noticing some patterns in my own behaviour and in that of my closest ones, and the relationships we have. Anger truly is one of the most complex emotions to understand, and expressing it in a healthy way is an even bigger challenge. I hope I will be able to break some patterns and

habits, for my own sake as well as for others'. Luckily my self-monitoring skills are getting better by the day, so I'm very optimistic.

I do have to say that one of the examples in the book didn't sit well with me at all. I even felt a bit of anger while reading it. The case I'm talking about is the one where the father of the family has a lot of fights with his son, whereas the mother tends to be the one protecting the son - creating a triangle where nothing gets solved and the problems persist. The solution the author offers is basically this: the mother has to trust her husband, distance herself from the fights between father and son, not criticize the father's raising methods and thus break the habit of being in a relationship triangle. The problem is - after mother has done that, the father starts punishing his child by beating him with a belt. The author, however, doesn't seem to see this as a problem - she even says that as long as there is no violence, the mother can stay away. So how is using a belt to beat your child as a form of punishment not considered violence? I was truly appalled by this example. I really don't think it fits well with the concept of the book or any of the other examples - everyone else is equal to each other, they're adults and there is really no need for relationship triangles and a third person having a say in a relationship between two equal adults who can make decision for themselves, even if the decision is to leave the relationship. Here, however, we have a 8-year-old child, who by no means is an equal to his father, nor does he have a clear understanding of what is normal in a relationship with an adult. The parents are setting an example for him, and if the example is that one of the parents distances themselves from problematic situations, whereas the other uses his dominant position as a means of asserting his power even more, punishing the child and treating in an unacceptable way, it is a very fucking bad example. Yes, the relationship between the father and the son is personal and they have to communicate, but I think that removing the mother from the equation is a very wrong step at this point. The fights can get even bigger, because the father might feel that he has gained absolute power and nobody will stop him from doing whatever he wants, especially his son who is fuckin 8 YEARS OLD. This is not an equal relationship where two parties will solve their problems on their own. The parents have to communicate, the mother has the right to express her opinion on the other parent's punishment methods, and the child should not be left alone like that. In the future, the child will resent his mother for not speaking up and "leaving the father and the son to figure their relationship out on their own". Let them figure it out when BOTH of them are able to do that, when BOTH are able to express their true opinions and know what their boundaries are. The child might not yet be aware of all of this at such a young age. They need adults' protection and support. This example was so wrong to me on so many levels that my opinion of the book was really under attack at that point.

Overall, I still really recommend reading it, but please remember that children are not on the same level as adults and should not be left alone - they still need the support and the advice of adults.

Rosemarie Donzanti says

My second reading of this book...first time was a very long time ago. Many great techniques for effectively setting boundaries with people, especially those closest to us. Now problem with self-help books is if you never practice what they preach then nothing gained. Trying a few things with Dad but he just laughs when I try to change things. Oh well, little by little, inch by inch I go.

Rebecca says

constantly re-reading this one since 2004.

seriously. this is a great book to keep on your bookshelves amongst literary fiction and a few aesthetically pleasing picture books...it really makes people do a double-take. ...even though they'd never admit it. I actually love how awfully self-help this book looks.

If you get in fights with your mother--or your partner--or strangers (and maybe sometimes the fights stay in your head)...this is the book for you.

If I were a dancer I'd totally choreograph The Dance of Anger. and showcase it in some wretched performance-art loft-space. because that would be hilarious.

Just thinking of that makes me think maybe I'll start working on dance, and making friends who squat in abandoned lofts. ...just to make that possible.

Kathrynn says

I think this author produced a well-thought out book. It focuses on helping women move away from unproductive anger and learning to be angry with positive, effective results.

There is a section on women who don't "allow" themselves to be angry that I didn't spend much time on because never felt I wasn't allowed to be angry. There is another portion on "de-selfing" which involves a person (male/female) allowing another in their relationship to walk all over them and I didn't spend much time on this, either. A case was presented in which a woman was not "allowed" to attend the author's anger workshop because her husband said no.

The author presented several "real cases" then proceeded to explain how she helped the person or persons work through their anger issues. There was a couple that had problem(s) with the husbands parents and the husband did not "deal" with the issue while the wife became more and more irate. Interesting way to handle it; however, I am a firm believer that it is the responsibility of the person related to "handle" his/her family, not the spouse.

There was a young (new) mother who had repeated conflicts with her over-controlling mother that escalated when the two mom's parenting styles clashed. I'm not sure I agree with how that was handled, either.

There was a couple that the wife thought their infant was not developing properly and the husband blew off her thoughts, which caused the wife to focus more intently on her point(s) and the husband to back further away. (This went on for almost a year!) I thought she made a good point in that when one pushes hard in a certain direction the other can often push even harder the opposite direction...however, it bugged me that she suggested that if the woman had waited until the man was more "receptive" (like after "snuggling", i.e., sex) then approached him with her concerns, he may have acted differently. (Yikes, timing is important, but dang!)

There was another couple that complained that the man was uninvolved in the family and the woman was too emotional and too involved in the children's lives. I did not care for her resolution here and thought she missed the boat completely by not suggesting the couple were and had grown apart and that they needed to work on their relationship and focus on reconnecting. As it was, the husband dreaded coming home for fear she would "hound" him about her day.

In any event, the author does open the door of thought to help guide disruptive anger. For me, there was not much that I haven't already figured out in my almost 50 years of age, but for someone younger or still struggling there may be some good suggestions found in this book about focusing on productive anger. I hoped it offered tidbits on helping bitter, angry people work through their issues and that wasn't between the pages of this read.

One thing worth mentioning that I had not realized: There isn't one unflattering term used to describe men who vent their anger at women. Women are called bitches, shrews, man-haters, witches, etc while men are called bastards, son of a bitch--words that still place the blame on his mother. (Well, how about that?)

Dana says

Excellent book for women of all walks to read!! It's not what it sounds like. I know we all are programmed away from anger. Anger is BAAAAAAAD, right? Well, this is one of Harriet Lerner's fabulous books that teaches women how to use our emotions in a positive way to get our needs met. It's a book about boundaries and using our anger...recognizing it as a gps system. Our anger is valid and it is always telling us something.

This is not a book about venting or blowing off steam. It's a book about realizing what it is that is making you angry and taking care of yourself to resolve it.

An eye opening book for those of us who were raised to "be nice" little girls.

Skylar Burris says

I recently heard a sermon on anger at my church. When I saw the sermon topic printed in the bulletin, I felt reluctant. I expected to hear what you sometimes do in Christian circles, that anger is bad and one should avoid becoming angry. I was not eager to hear this message, as I had been feeling strong anger about some personal injuries I had experienced, but I prayed I would receive the message with an open mind. The rector, however, said nothing of anger being either bad or good; he said, rather, that our anger reveals what we truly value. We become angry, he observed, when something happens that does not match up with the way we think the world SHOULD be. This insight remained in the back of my mind as I read Harriet Lerner's "Dance of Anger."

Anger, says Learner, is neither bad or good: it simply IS. But our expression of anger can be – and often is – ineffectual. We become engaged in a “dance of anger” with our spouses, parents, children, co-workers, and others rather than using that energy to clearly define our values and take action to get for ourselves what we need. We tend, she says, to “see people rather than patterns as the problem.” To break ineffective patterns, which are often perpetuated by the way we either express or repress our anger, we need instead to use our anger to affect change. Rather than wasting our energy trying to change the opinions and values and actions of other people, over which we have no actual control, we should use our energy to clearly determine and state our own values and what action we will take on our own behalf to resolve our own problems. (The objective is not to be manipulative, however.) We also need to identify the true (and sometimes multiple) sources of our anger so that it is not misplaced. This requires changing old, familiar patterns in relationships and can therefore be difficult or frightening for any or all parties involved.

Much in “The Dance of Anger” resonated with me, and the basic premise is useful, but I was initially put off by the feminist thrust of the opening pages. Dr. Lerner seemed to define expressions of anger more in terms of sex roles, societal oppression of women, and the like rather than in terms of individual personality and life circumstances, which seems to me to have as much to do with how people express (or repress) anger as gender does. Indeed, I think (in romantic relationships, at least) that perhaps men just as often fail to admit their anger and resentment for fear of jeopardizing a relationship as do women.

It was ironic to read Lerner’s suggestion that it’s not useful to worry about who is to blame for a given situation, and then later to read her response to a question in a particular situation: “Was Melisa, then, the cause of the problem? Of course not. If Melissa had been in an institution where women were truly empowered and where she, as a female, was not a numerically scarce commodity at the top, her behavior would have been quite different. In fact, research indicates that women who hold positions of authority in male-dominated settings are not able to clearly define their own selves...” These sorts of mini feminist rants, even when I didn’t disagree with them, occasionally distracted me from the author’s overall thesis. Fortunately, they are brief and widely dispersed.

Another caution I have is that she speaks a lot of “deselfing,” and although I certainly think this sort of thing does go on for women (and yes, even sometimes men too!), there is a fine line here that must be walked, between refusing to “deself” one’s self and simply being SELFISH. And that’s a line that can be very blurry for a lot of people, myself included. I think Dr. Learner’s advice may have a tendency to push some women over onto the selfish side of that line. In her outlook, there is very little moral judgment necessary. Feelings just are, and women just need to figure out what’s best for them, personally, and take action to resolve their own problems and satisfy their own needs. “Maybe I am selfish, but...” seems to be a refrain. Really, what’s wrong with taking the time to contemplate whether or not our guilt is, in fact, telling us we’re being selfish, rather than simply overcoming it and moving on to realize our needs for ourselves? And if we can really learn to live with our feelings of guilt in order to fulfill our needs, couldn’t we just as easily learn to live with our feelings of anger and resentment in order to fulfill the needs of other people? And, if so, which SHOULD we do? I don’t think these sorts of questions can be so easily dismissed.

Perhaps the guilt/anger dilemma is so difficult for me because of my religious background. Christianity emphasizes not just sins of action but sins of the heart. “You have heard it said, don’t commit adultery, but I say, don’t even lust. You have heard it said, don’t murder, but I say, don’t even be angry with your brother without a cause.” And so forth. It’s not that Christianity claims anger itself is wrong (rather, “Be angry, yet sin not.”), it’s just that it’s sometimes difficult for me to tell when anger morphs into sinful expressions of anger, or when anger is justified and when it is “without a cause.” So I found this book quite fascinating because, given my religious confusion, the “dance of anger” has been a particularly difficult issue for me. Selflessness (some might even go so far as to say something not terribly unlike “deselfing”) and peace are both seen as virtues in Christianity, and yet, there also exists the traditional Christian concept of the virtue of righteous anger (a concept perhaps too much de-emphasized in modern times). What Learner did for me in this book was to focus my mind on a different and probably more useful question: not, is my anger GOOD or BAD, but, rather, is my anger ACCOMPLISHING anything positive? And, if not, how can I USE it to accomplish something positive? This, I felt, was a helpful mental re-direction for me.

Kathie M says

I know my friends are sick of hearing about her, but Harriet Lerner is a genius and my own personal guru

(from afar). I never really thought I'd read a self-help book (especially one on relationships, eek), but I've re-read this one three times at different points in my life. The books (there's a Dance series) are easy to read, her case studies are good because the examples are ones that everyone can find in their own lives, and her advice is really sound. The basic premise is that if you're unhappy in any relationship, romantic or otherwise, you're the one who has to change things, that you're wasting your time if you're trying to change someone else. And she gives good ways, really specific ways to do that. Anyway, I just think she's brilliant and I actually enjoy reading the books. Just give 'em a try.

Chris says

Great book and a worthwhile read for women and men. From my own experience, I was battling my ex for over a year to get our divorce settled. After I read the book, I changed my approach from being more emotional and pursuing, to being more cool and detached. Within 3 weeks, we had our divorce settlement finalized and signed by lawyers. Why? Because the book taught me that if I want the opposite reaction of my partner, I had to do the opposite of what she was doing. And it worked perfectly!

Jeremy says

Helpful book. Guys may be turned off due to the subtitle: "A Woman's Guide...", but Lerner's principles aptly apply to men too. Also, anger may be the topic, but a healthier relationship is the goal. She helps break down how anger, instead of causing endless cycles of frustration, can be used as a tool to deepen our relationships with loved ones and to better understand our true selves.

Some stuff Lerner discusses: misconceptions of anger (ch 1); marital discord and breaking the cycle (ch 3; also reminds me of Love and Respect by Emerson Eggerichs); asserting yourself; taking responsibility in relationships (ch 7); communication skills; developing your identity; relational triangles (ch 8).
