

## **THE STORY OF AN ANGRY PERSON: A Journey to Change and Growth In My Own Words**

The following article is a composite of many of the stories of the people with whom I have worked since 1985. There are many paths to learning to handle your anger more effectively and this article can be used as a way to look for elements and themes that may fit with your personal experience and how you have dealt with the anger in your own life in the past and how you may be able to move forward and learn to do things differently at this point. This story may not be exactly what has occurred with you or what happens to you as you change (i.e. if you see a counselor in individual therapy), but if you are serious about wanting to address the anger that has been a problem in your day-to-day living, this article may give you some ways to think about the process you are embarking upon at this point. There are two endings to this story, both of which, when all is said and done, can be considered to be “successful.” The first involves remaining with a partner; the second involves moving on from the original relationship.

### **My “Wake-Up Call”**

Sadly, I didn't have a clue about how anger was really affecting me and the rest of my life. I didn't want to think about it so I just put it out of my mind. As far as I was concerned, my anger was everybody else's problem, especially my wife's. I truly believed, for most of our marriage, that she was the real reason I was so pissed off all the time. I wanted her to change and do things differently so I wouldn't get so mad around the house. I occasionally thought that I might not have been all that happy even before we met, but I assumed that this was just the way life was supposed to be. I had always figured that my wife was supposed to make me happy. But it didn't quite work out that way.

My “wake-up call” came when, after 14 years of marriage, my wife told me that our marriage was over unless I did something about my anger. At first, I couldn't believe that she was saying this to me. I guess we didn't have that great a relationship but I thought it was as good as most peoples'. We had a nice house in a good area of town. I had a decent job. We had two kids who were basically doing okay in school and in other areas of their lives. It just seemed crazy to me that she wanted to destroy everything that we had made together. At first, I got really pissed off about what she was saying. I figured she had no right to do this to me and the kids after all I had done for her. It seemed like a “lightning bolt out of the blue.” But she told me that she had tried to talk to me about my anger for most of the time we had been together. She said that, in the past, I had told her I would work on it and that “things would be different” but more recently that I had just “blown her off” and said that we had a “good life” and that she should just “get over it” because “it wasn't that bad for her or anybody else.” She also said that I had blamed her and told her that she was just “too sensitive” and that she should take me as I am and not try to change me. Fortunately, for me and my family, at this point I finally started to listen to her.

My wife said she was “sick and tired” of my blow-ups and “sick and tired” of feeling scared and anxious in her own house. She told me that anytime anything went wrong in my life, in our relationship, with our children, and around the house, I ended up taking it out on her and the kids. She told me she felt like she was “walking on eggshells” almost all the time. She said she hated the yelling that I did with her,

the kids, and the dog; the “ranting and raving” I did about a variety of things (I figured that I had a right to “go off” about my boss, the neighbors, and the “damn politicians” running the country); the name-calling and put-downs of her and others around us; my swearing and cussing; the “silent treatment” that could go on for days at a time ( I always denied it was happening when I was doing it but I knew I was really doing it “to get her back” for something I didn’t like that she had done); and when I pounded my fist on the table and slammed the door behind me when I left frustrated after having an argument with her. She especially hated the times when I followed her around the house or I actually stood in her way or grabbed her so she couldn’t leave the situation when I was talking to her. I always thought I didn’t have any other option because I felt like she wasn’t really hearing what I was saying and because she was treating me so “badly” at the time. After all, I always believed that I had the right to have my wife listen to me when I was talking to her about the things that were really important to me.

She told me that she was actually afraid of me and brought up one time in particular when we were arguing in the car three months earlier. She thought I had “gone crazy” and had completely “lost it.” She reminded me that I was screaming at the top of my lungs at her, speeding and swerving all over the road, and eventually I even reached out and grabbed her by her coat and shook her to get her to “back off,” shut up, and stop arguing with me. And, she said I did all this with the kids in the back seat, sitting there wide-eyed all the while watching and listening to what was going on. I didn’t really remember that time very well and I tried to tell her that it probably wasn’t as bad as what she was saying. But it sure seemed like she had reached the “breaking point” where she had had enough and she just wasn’t willing to back down anymore.

She also said that she didn’t like what was happening to our children and how they were being affected by my “rages.” She told me that the kids were scared of me and said that our 12-year-old boy was starting to treat her and his younger sister the same disrespectful and abusive way I was treating her. All of this was a complete shock to me. I had no idea that things were so bad for her. I didn’t show her at the time, and I really wanted to deny it to myself, but I really felt bad as I thought back about some of what the kids had probably seen and heard. Even at that point, there was a part of me that knew they didn’t deserve to have to be around me when I acted like I was “crazy.” I was really scared right then. I didn’t want to lose my wife and I sure as hell didn’t want to be a part-time dad. I asked if she had talked to an attorney; she said she hadn’t done that yet but I wasn’t so sure that I believed her. I had never seen her act this way around me before.

## **Starting The Counseling Process**

My wife said that I needed to get some counseling and start changing this part of myself or we needed to get separated. I told her that I “sure as hell” wasn’t going in to see some “damn counselor” by myself but that I would go in with her if that was what she really wanted me to do. I still believed that she was the biggest reason I got so mad and I wanted her to hear that from the counselor. I figured if she could just do things “right” and treat me the way I deserved to be treated, I wouldn’t have to get nearly as angry as I had been in the past. I expected the counselor to tell her that. But that sure wasn’t the message we got when we went in to see him.

I didn't like the guy at first. He acted like a "hard ass" and a "know-it-all." It seemed like he thought he had all the answers and he didn't set my wife straight about what her part was and how she needed to change what she was doing so I could react differently and be a less angry guy. I didn't realize it at the time, but the real reason I didn't like him very much was because he was being honest with me and holding me accountable for what I had said and done with her. He actually asked me if I was "okay" with calling her names, putting her down, swearing at her, and treating her the way she talked about in the first meeting (I told him I wasn't because I knew it wasn't right even though I had done it with her since we had begun to plan our wedding). I didn't have many people who acted the way the counselor did with me at that point in my life. I guess a lot of people were scared about telling me what they really thought of me (they probably thought I'd get mad and I probably would have).

The counselor told me that I was responsible for my blow-ups and that I probably learned what I was doing when I was younger. He also said that I wasn't "out of control" (as I had always thought to myself when I was in the middle of a "blow-up"). I did tell him that I'd never called my wife the "c" word or hit my wife. He pointed out that these were apparently "lines in the sand" I had actually drawn for myself and were examples of the clear choices that I had made even though I had been "pissed as hell" on lots of different occasions with her. He also said I could make different and better choices when I got angry in the future if I really wanted to work at doing something different.

I didn't like what I was hearing; I really felt backed into a corner. I wanted him and my wife to see that this wasn't all my fault. Nobody is 100% responsible for what happens in a relationship; but he told me that I was 100% responsible for how I responded when I got angry and explosive. It only seemed right to me that, if she did something different, then I would be "better" and "less angry" as a result. But I really didn't want to lose my marriage and my kids (I hated the idea of not seeing my kids every day). I didn't know how I could have handled something like that. He said that trying to do marriage therapy when I was this angry and acting it out in such destructive ways wouldn't do much good. He told us that it made much more sense to look at my anger first, get a handle on it, and then start to address and talk together about the other important issues in our relationship. I wanted to look at all the issues that my wife had that had made me so angry in the past, but he said that she and I would never be able to look effectively at our relationship issues until I did something about my disrespectful anger.

Needless to say, I wasn't very pleased with a lot of what he was saying. I wanted him to focus on my wife's issues that got me so pissed off: things like her constant "bitching" at me (I always had the sense that she didn't think I was "good enough" for her); her spending our money "frivolously," her always wanting me to do more to help around the house; her spending too much time with her parents, her sisters, and her friends; her lack of interest in our sex life; and her not being strict enough with the kids when they "sassed" her, acted up or didn't do the homework or chores they were supposed to do. But the counselor wasn't willing to do that. I thought "long and hard" about not even going back to see this guy after the first session, but he was supposed to be some kind of "expert" on anger management and my wife said she didn't want me seeing anyone else. I guess that actually made sense even though I didn't realize it at the time. We had already tried a couple of marriage counselors in the past and it went absolutely nowhere. We had just done the same thing in the counselors' offices that we did everywhere else, with me starting to get louder and blaming my wife for all our problems and her "pulling back into a shell." Neither of those counselors was very honest or straightforward about being concerned about my

anger and how I was expressing it, even in their offices. They didn't seem to want to address it directly either and so we just worked on our "communication problems" and they tried to give my wife some "guidance" on how to deal more effectively with my angry outbursts. And absolutely nothing really changed in our relationship as a result of that counseling. I usually got bored talking about this kind of stuff and convinced her that we were doing "fine" and pressured her to quit the counseling, which she eventually did.

After some "soul-searching," I decided that I was willing to start seeing the counselor by myself. I was pissed off about having to do this and felt like it really wasn't fair, but I didn't feel like I had much of a choice. He and I talked about my marriage and how my anger had played an important part in what was going on in my relationship and in my family life. He talked about how destructive and unproductive my anger was because of the way I was handling it and how families need to be a safe place for everyone there.

What was weird was that I also began to notice how angry I got in other parts of my life. I didn't always act on the anger I felt, but it sure was there. I always seemed to look at things in kind of a negative way. There were times when I used to get really ticked off when I was driving. I hated tailgaters and the jerks who would try to squeeze in front of me even when there wasn't any room to do it. I would try to control my reaction when my wife and kids were in the car but, if I was all alone, there were actually times when I flipped people off, shook my fist, and screamed at them. There were even a couple of times I followed other drivers and actually got out to "talk" with them about their "bad driving," which only led to getting into yelling matches with them. I didn't think much about this kind of behavior in the past but I started to realize that I could have gotten myself into some big trouble in those sorts of situations.

I also started noticing how angry I was at work. I worked for a boss who never seemed to think much of what I was doing for him and the company. He constantly criticized my work and I never felt like I was doing enough. I didn't say anything to my boss directly (I had enough sense not to "pop off" with him because I didn't want to get fired) but this anger and frustration I felt about my job just kept building. A lot of mornings, I didn't even want to get into the car to go to work. And a lot of evenings, I walked in the door pissed as hell about what had happened that day at work.

I would even get ticked as hell waiting in lines at stores when a customer was slow in paying, when a clerk was inept or inattentive, or when we didn't get in to eat right away at a restaurant. Sometimes I didn't say much about these situations either, but I would often glare at the person I didn't like and act pissed off by pouting and becoming quiet. I even ruined some really "romantic" times with my wife by acting this way when we went out to eat on a few special occasions.

What I started to see was that I probably ended up bringing the anger from these and other parts of my life directly home to my wife and family. The counselor said that it was like I was tense and agitated from the time when I got up in the morning until the time when I finally went to bed. He called this being "escalated." No matter what the situation was, I could turn it into something bad. I always just expected that other people were going to try to "mess with me" and that I was going to have to "deal with it." I had never paid much attention to all this before but it started to make more sense to me why I felt as lousy as I did so much of the time. I also started to see more clearly how my wife and kids got a lot of my

anger that, many times, wasn't even connected to them in any way. This was something completely new to me. I always thought they were the ones to blame for how bad I usually felt when I was around home.

The counselor also wanted to talk about my childhood and my relationship with my father. This made absolutely no sense to me when he first brought it up. Sure, my dad was an "asshole" when I was growing up (actually, he still is today), but I couldn't understand how this could have anything to do with who I was now. My father had a "short fuse" and blew up on a regular basis with me, my brothers and sisters, and my mother. It didn't get physical very often but he was still a scary guy. When I was a teenager, I tried to do whatever I could to be out of the house whenever he was supposed to be home just to stay away from him. But I thought that was just the way everyone's families were. What was really depressing for me was that I swore to myself that I would never end up treating my wife and family the same way he had acted with us. Unfortunately, I ended up very much like him. But even when I started to realize this, I still tried to tell myself that I wasn't nearly as bad as he was. So, to me, this had meant in the past that the way I acted was basically "okay."

My father ran a successful business and was a "pillar of the community," as he used to like to say about himself. Lots of people knew him and he seemed to be liked and respected by everyone around him. He worked long hours, made good money, and was a good provider. I guess he thought that was all he needed to do. But even back then I knew there was something wrong. He just didn't seem very happy and he always had that "short fuse" when things didn't go his way even though he was successful and smart and seemed to be good at what he did.

He was incredibly demanding with my mother and expected her to "wait on him hand and foot" even though she worked full-time as well. When he came home at the end of the day, we had to stay completely quiet so he wouldn't be "bothered" by us. It seemed like we were never quiet enough, though, and he often flew into rages about what "ungrateful little brats" we were. He constantly criticized us. It seemed like we could never do anything right and measure up to whatever he expected, even though I'm not sure I even knew what that was.

Sometimes my mother tried to protect us from his "blow-ups," and then he'd immediately "go off" on her. I can't remember how many times he yelled and screamed at her, but it was a regular part of my childhood. When this would happen, he would rant and rave about what a "stupid bitch" she was. I hated hearing him call her that but I ended up doing the exact same thing with my wife. When I got older, I tried to step in a few times when he was treating my mother like this, but then I'd usually end against a wall or a door, feeling scared as hell as he was screaming at me with his face bright red and the veins bulging out of his neck. I hated how he controlled me and my mother and our family. I guess I even thought to myself back then, "*when I get big enough, no one is ever going to treat me like shit again.*" When I left for college, I never looked back. I talk to my mom once in a while now, but I hardly have anything to do with my father (he never has anything to say on the phone anyway). He still acts like a jerk and I can't stand being around him for any period of time. I guess I'm pissed off at my mom too; she never left the "SOB" even though she told me that she had "thought about it" and she's still with him today even though he is disrespectful and abusive with her even in the present.

After a few counseling sessions, I started noticing, for the first time ever, that my anger "triggers" were popping off around me almost all the time. I never even knew they were there in the past. It seemed like I would just react without much thought at all. It was sort of like I was living on "auto pilot." Things

happened around me and I just went along for the ride. The counselor said that this awareness was a pretty important first step if I was ever going to handle my anger more effectively.

Two of my biggest triggers had to do with “fairness” and “respect.” I was constantly on the lookout for situations around me that were “unfair” and for people around me who I saw as “disrespectful” to me. Whenever I thought this was happening, I gave myself the “go-ahead” to react any way I wanted to address the “wrong” that was being done to me, which often meant becoming disrespectful and explosive myself.

Not surprisingly, “fairness” and “respect” were also huge issues in my marriage. When my wife disagreed with me, I saw her as being “disrespectful” to me. After all, I was the man and “I knew best” and I believed that if she didn’t agree with me, she didn’t really love and respect me. When my kids wouldn’t do what I told them to do or “back-talked,” then I thought they were being “disrespectful.” And if my wife and kids weren’t respecting me, then the whole situation was “unfair” (given everything that I was trying to do for them all the time). My wife and kids caught the brunt of the rage that had been inside me for a lot longer than I had been around them. I never realized until this point that I was responding to the “unfairness” and “disrespect” that I believed others were doing to me by becoming unfair and disrespectful myself, especially with the three people I really cared about in my life. I had never thought much about the idea that these two issues probably had a lot to do with how “unfair” and “disrespectful” my father actually was to me, my mother, and my siblings when I was a kid.

I also started to realize that I really did have choices and could actually do something different in situations that had been huge problems for me in the past. I always used to think that I was completely “out of control” and “didn’t know what I was doing” (after all, I often didn’t even remember what I had said or done the next day). But then I began to think about why I said and did certain things at certain times. I never got in trouble at work even though I had been pissed off about my job and with my boss for a long time. I usually didn’t act like a jerk out in public because I knew I might actually get in trouble doing that (someone might even call the cops). I never used some words that I thought were really demeaning with my wife (like the “c” word) even though I could get pissed as hell with her and use other bad ones (like the “b” word). And I never actually hit my wife even though I had been intimidating and violent with her in other ways. Those were all clear decisions that I was making even though I didn’t really understand it at the time that I was making them.

## **I Decide To Go To An Anger Management Class**

The next thing that happened was that the counselor recommended that I go into an anger management group counseling program. That seemed like a pretty dumb idea at first. I didn’t want other people knowing about my personal business and I wasn’t interested in anybody else’s either. I didn’t really have anyone at that point in my life who I talked with about personal things and I didn’t want to start doing this. In addition, he said it could last over a year and I didn’t really think I had the time to follow through with something like that (actually I wasn’t really sure that I even wanted to take the time to do the program). But he said that, if I really wanted to work to change this part of me, the group could be a much better way to look at this issue because I could see myself in other peoples’ stories and they could see themselves in mine. He also said it was a way to get some emotional support and a better way

to hold myself accountable with people who were going through a similar process. By this time, I had started to think that this guy might actually know what he was talking about. So I decided to give it a try.

My first night in the class was a pretty scary deal for me. I had absolutely no idea of what to expect. I thought the other guys would all be there because they'd beaten the hell out of their wives and had been arrested and forced by the court to be in the program. I guess I also thought they'd all be "low-lives," whatever that's supposed to mean, and I wouldn't have anything in common with any of them. I couldn't have been more wrong. Only three out of the other nine guys were court-ordered and even they didn't really seem all that different from me. In fact, one guy had done a lot less than I had done in the past and he had still gotten arrested and actually spent some time in jail. After only the first group, it felt like it made sense for me to be there. In fact, a couple of guys in the group even told me that after they heard me introduce myself at that first session.

The group turned out to be a pretty awesome experience for me. We had to do these written assignments and then present them to the other guys in the program. The first big one was an "escalation plan" to get me to start identifying my anger cues and triggers and then coming up with what I was going to do to handle them when they were "popping off" within or around me. We were told that other people and situations wouldn't necessarily change (even though this is what I thought I needed to have happen at first) but rather that we had the responsibility to figure out what we were going to do differently to handle our anger and our other feelings in those situations that were triggers for us. This was also where I learned that "being escalated" is a lot more than just being pissed as hell and screaming and yelling. A lot of my triggers had to do with feeling anxious and uncertain about what to do or how to be and even these feelings could eventually get converted into anger toward my wife and kids if I didn't recognize and take care of them. In addition, we did an assignment where we put together a "time-out plan" that we could use with our wives, our kids, and other people so that we didn't allow ourselves to get to the point of escalating to being explosive, punishing, or disrespectful. The time-out turned out to be a helpful first step for me; if I could leave and calm myself down when I was gone, my wife and I could have a much more productive talk when I got back to her. I did have to be careful, however, that I didn't just stew about what had happened prior to taking the time-out. My wife wasn't sure she liked the idea of a time-out at first; she was worried that I wouldn't come back and actually talk about whatever the issue was (I had stormed out plenty of times in the past and never returned to whatever we were talking about). But this time, I made a commitment to her and to myself that I wouldn't do it that way in the future.

The hardest assignments, though, came next. First, we needed to write out a history of any situation we could think of that involved us being disrespectful, threatening, or abusive with other people over the course of our whole lives. I always thought it was just my wife and kids who "tripped my trigger" but I started to see that I had been abusive with men and women long before I even met my wife. I began to recall situations in junior high where I bullied other kids, in college at parties and bars where I "got into it" with other guys who were doing things I didn't like, times with past girlfriends where I did the same kinds of things that I had done with my wife, and in lots of other situations where I got in other people's faces, even out in public. Sometimes these even led to pushing matches and fist fights. I started to see that this was really the way I had behaved my whole life. At one point when I was presenting my history, I talked about picking on other kids when I was younger. I felt good about being stronger and tougher than the other kids and I made sure that nobody disrespected me and got away with it. But in the

feedback I got at the end of my presentation, one guy who I liked said he was angry with me because I was just like the other boys who had pushed him around when he was a kid. Then the counselor said that, when we were abusive and disrespectful with our partners, we were doing the same kind of bullying in our families that I had done and the other guy had received when we were kids. I had never thought about being a bully with my wife and kids before. I began to really think about what I'd done to other people and how I'd affected them, especially past girlfriends and my wife and kids. I had never given much thought to how bad other people must have felt when I did the hurtful things I did around them. That was something brand new for me. I really didn't want to be a bully with my wife and kids. They were the most important people in my life to me.

This was also a time when my wife started talking more about how bad she had felt about the anger I had directed toward her (and I was finally more ready to listen to her). She said that she had always hated the times I had pushed or grabbed her but what really affected her was the verbal and "mental" abuse. She said the name-calling and the put-downs had left "scars on her heart" that were much more difficult to heal than the redness or the soreness that had occurred when I was actually got physical with her. When I was going off on her, I had never really given it much thought about how I was affecting her and how I made her feel inside about herself. I didn't learn much about thinking about other people when I grew up around my dad (it sure looked to me like he didn't care much about how he affected the people in his family). I also started to remember a lot more of what had actually happened with my wife and kids as I went through the group, listening to my wife and hearing other guys talk about what they had done with their partners. When I first did the intake for the group, I hadn't remembered (and maybe didn't want to admit) nearly as much as what had actually happened as far as my abusive behavior was concerned. When I wrote out and presented this history of my abuse, it really started to come back to me. It was hard to do this, but talking about it with the other guys and being more honest with myself about it helped me see what I had done and helped me take responsibility for it. I felt pretty bad about some of the things I had done in the past, but it really made me think a lot more about what I was doing in the present and how I wanted to treat other people.

The other assignment that really affected me was when I wrote and talked about my childhood. Before, I had always told myself that "it was just the past" and that I was "over it." It turned out that this just wasn't the case at all. I began to see how much of what I was doing with my wife, my kids, and everyone else had to do with what I saw and was taught as a kid by the father whom I had sworn I would never be like. In reality, I had ended up taking on far too many of his ways of looking at the world and I ended up acting these out with the very people who were closest to me in my life, just like he had done.

I hated how he treated my mom and me and, at some point, I must have told myself that no one was ever going to be able to do that to me again when I got big enough to go back at that other person. So whenever my wife criticized me or complained about something, it was like I was that little kid again, being put down and abused by my damn father. Only this time I was big and strong enough to get right back in her face and make her back down. She didn't deserve it, though. A lot of times, she was just bringing up how she felt about something that was going on in our lives. Sometimes, she was trying to be helpful and really cared about me and I didn't even see it. These blow-ups also didn't help me feel any better about myself. I felt self-righteous, "holier-than-thou," and powerful at the time I was so pissed off,

figuring that I was only putting her or someone else “in their place,” but I often felt bad later on (even though that didn’t make much difference in helping me change what I was doing at the time).

I guess I really didn’t have much respect for women generally either, because my mother was actually a pretty pathetic person. She still doesn’t stand up to my father and he still treats her like “shit.” I guess I came to expect that this was just the way things were supposed to be in a marriage. I thought I wanted someone who would listen to what I said and then back off and let me take the lead because I was the man. My wife isn’t like my mother, though. She has a mind of her own and I guess she just got sick of me constantly trying to push her around and convince her that my way was the “right” way and the “only” way to look at something.

I learned a lot from the assignments. They made me think about who I had been and who I truly wanted to be in my life. I also learned a lot from the education we got every week in the class. I started to notice the negative thoughts that I was having and how they had a lot to do with how pissed off I actually got. I worked pretty hard on catching myself when I was getting negative and then working to become a more positive person. I began to notice my feelings, not only my anger but lots of others, like sadness, hurt, and fear, that I had just tuned out in the past. I didn’t think guys were supposed to feel things like that (my dad sure didn’t seem to). I had always believed either that everything was alright or that I was completely pissed off. I discovered that there were lots of other things going on inside me besides just those two extremes. It was like I took myself off “auto pilot” and tuned into what was really going on. I learned ways to calm myself down when I was feeling “uptight” and even started a regular exercise program for the first time in years, which was one of the expectations in the class. In general, I guess I started to take better care of myself in lots of different ways.

Early in my time at group, a guy in the class had said that *“when we’re talking about anger management, what we’re really talking about is life management.”* That didn’t make much sense at first but it made a lot of sense to me later on in the process. As I went along, it became clear that changing this angry part of me is about much more than just “not blowing up.” I began to realize that I was constantly making decisions about where I would go with my anger and all the feelings I had and I started making some better choices. I started speaking up for myself, not just with my wife, but also with my boss, my father, and my friends. I tended to “stuff” a lot of what was important for me to say in the past because I didn’t want to “ruffle peoples’ feathers” and because I didn’t want to look like a “damn wimp” by acknowledging that I felt hurt or anxious. But, in the end, the feelings always found a way to get out, and guess where most of them ended up...by me “going off” on my wife or my kids!

Both the assignments and the education were important, but the thing that probably made the biggest difference for me was having the other guys in the class. I didn’t feel so alone anymore, thinking I was “crazy” and that nobody else had these kinds of problems. It was as if I could see myself and my situations in other guys when they would talk about what was going on with them and their lives. Sometimes this reminded me of what I didn’t want to do and sometimes it taught me how to handle things in a better way. I also felt a lot of support from the other guys. Part of the expectation in the group was that we were supposed to make phone calls to each other during the week. The other men were really there for me when I was going through some tough times in the group. I had never counted on anyone else in my life before going to the class. I didn’t think that guys could really be there for other guys. But

there were some men in the group who really came through for me. From what they told me, they felt the same way about me by the end of my time there.

## **I Experience Some “Bumps In The Road”**

Overall, I liked the class. But that doesn't mean that I didn't have some pretty rough times while I was there. There were even points when I thought about just giving up and quitting. There were two or three times when I was in the class when I really blew up at my wife about something that bothered me. We were supposed to bring things like this back to the class so I brought up the incidents. But I was pretty blaming toward her and I guess I was hoping other guys would side with me against her since I thought I had a pretty good case for her “provoking” me. That didn't happen though; the counselor and the other guys really pushed me to look at my part and what I could have done differently in the situations. I didn't like that very much and I left the class after those groups feeling pretty ticked off about the program and having to be there.

I was especially pissed one of the times when my wife called the counselor because she wasn't sure I'd be honest about what really happened between the two of us. I was embarrassed when the counselor confronted me about some of the things that I'd done that I left out when I talked about the incident in the group check-in. I knew that wives could call in to the counselor to talk about their concerns about our behavior as part of the program but I didn't think she would do that to me. I felt really betrayed by my wife until some of the other guys talked about what she had done as her caring about what I was doing in the program and her really wanting me to change and succeed in what I was doing to change. I didn't like what she did, but it made more sense after I listened to their feedback. I even went home and talked with my wife about it that night.

Another bad time was about eight months into the class. I thought I was doing pretty well and I really wanted to get some credit from my wife. After all, I thought I was doing all this work for her and our family. But she didn't see it that way. At this point, she was pretty “gun-shy” and didn't trust that the changes in me were real or would actually last (since I had promised to change in the past and had never actually done it). That really pissed me off and this was another time when I seriously thought about leaving the group. But, eventually, I brought it up in group and got some feedback. A lot of the guys had similar feelings to mine but, with their help, I started to realize that healing for women when there has been control, disrespect, threats, intimidation, and abuse in a relationship takes a long time. I had to decide if I wanted to continue to work on myself and to see if she could regain the trust and love she said she had once had for me. The counselor asked me to continue working on myself and to look for the support and encouragement from the other guys in class and from some of my friends who knew I was in the class instead of just expecting that my wife would provide it for me at that point.

## One Possible Ending To This Story

### My Wife Decides To Stay With Me And We Work On Our Relationship Together

By the time I completed the class, I had really begun to question how my thoughts and actions in the past were related to the values that I believed I had. I used to think that my angry reactions were completely justified because of how important the “issue” or “principle” was to me at the time (even though days or weeks later I often couldn’t even remember what my wife and I had been fighting about). I started to ask myself whether all the things I had been so uptight about and had allowed myself to get so pissed off about were really very important in the broader scheme of what the real priorities in my life were. I truly wanted to love and be loved by my wife and I truly wanted a family where my kids could feel safe and could grow into responsible and caring adults. On several occasions, I’ve heard people talk about “not sweating the small stuff.” I finally began to realize that most of life is “small stuff” and I no longer wanted my anger to interfere in the relationships with the people in my life who are most important to me. Life is just too short!

In the end, I was in the anger class for over a year. When I “graduated,” I was glad to be done. But I also felt kind of scared about being completely out on my own again. I didn’t want to start sliding back to what I had been before. My wife and I started marriage counseling and we’re actually doing better in our relationship. What the counselor is saying makes a lot more sense than what I heard from the other marriage counselors in the past (maybe that has to do with how I’m actually listening to what the counselor and my wife are saying now). One of the biggest changes is that I don’t get nearly as defensive as I used to. I’m a lot more able to listen and “take things in” rather than just reacting when the counselor, my wife, or anyone else tells me something that I don’t particularly like. And, for the first time in my life, I’m a lot more clear about how I’m responsible for what I’ve done in the past and for what I do in the present.

I still get angry with my wife and she still gets angry with me but we’ve got some much better ways to get through these times. We’ve worked hard on communicating better with each other and addressing and resolving conflicts when they do come up and we still take our time-outs whenever it’s necessary. It’s not nearly as important to “win” the arguments now and I’m a lot more willing to “agree to disagree” or to look for a compromise. Our marriage counselor told me that one researcher has said that, in long-term relationships, most couples will never “resolve” over two-thirds of the conflicts they have (and that this isn’t a bad thing; it’s just a “reality”). My kids don’t seem afraid of me now and sometimes they’ll even ask me if I need to take a time-out (I usually do need one when they say this to me). I really like that I’m a better role model for who a husband and a father can be.

I kept the information that I got from the class and, every once in a while, I still take it out and go over the different parts just to remind me of what I’ve learned and what I want to keep working on. I’ve decided that I need to keep thinking about this stuff. It’s all too easy, when I’m feeling stressed, tense, anxious, preoccupied, and overwhelmed in my own life, to start going back to the old ways of thinking and acting. I started this whole process wanting to stop myself from ever getting angry again. But that just isn’t the way it works. Anger is a part of life. My goal now is no

longer to try to completely get rid my anger but just to recognize it and work hard to deal with it in a more productive way when it does come up so it can become a useful and helpful force in my life.

The counselor said that handling anger is a lot like what they say in Alcoholics Anonymous about handling the urges to drink: “one day at a time.” At least that’s the way it works for me. When I get up in the morning now, I take the time to read some meditations that help me focus on what kind of day I want to have. I actually kept up that exercise program that I started in group (it’s really been helpful to me). I also “touch base” with friends and a couple of guys who were in the group with me. It’s a lot easier than it used to be. But it’s not automatic. It actually involves some pretty hard work. I still need to be aware of what’s going on, to really think about what’s happening and how I want to handle it, and then to make positive choices to actually do just that. I’m guessing that’s what I’ll have to do for the rest of my life. Sometimes that idea feels kind of overwhelming to me. But if it means living the way I want to live and being with the people I truly care about, I guess it’s worth it.

## **Another Possible Ending to This Story**

### **My Wife Decides To Leave Me And End Our Relationship**

The hardest point in the group came very near the end of my involvement with the program. I had been working at this for almost a year when, all of a sudden, my wife said that our marriage was over and that she had decided to file for divorce. She had been in therapy herself for almost as long as I had. She said she had already called an attorney and had actually started the process. It was also at that point that she asked me to move out of our home. I couldn’t believe that she was doing this to me. At first, I felt really depressed and completely devastated. What she was doing seemed like such a betrayal after all I had done for her and our family by getting involved with the counseling and really trying to look at myself and what I had done to hurt her and the kids in the past.

I had worked hard in this program. I believed that things had really started to change for the better. She even acknowledged this at times but she also said that, after all the pain she had experienced with me, she no longer loved me and didn’t want to work on making things better with me anymore. Feeling really depressed lasted for a couple of weeks and then I got incredibly pissed off at her. What she was doing was so unfair and it made no sense at all to me. I truly wanted our family to be together and for the kids to have both of us and not have to go through a divorce themselves; I was really worried about what a divorce would do to the kids (and to my relationship with them). I actually thought about quitting the group at that point, even though I was just about done. I didn’t even go to group the first week after she told me she was planning to leave me. But I did manage to call some of the guys and they also called me just to “touch base” and I started to feel pretty lucky that I had them to talk to while all this was going on. Part of me wanted to fight her about this and to try to convince her that breaking up the family was just plain wrong. I even thought about getting a lawyer who could “rake her over the coals” and make the divorce as miserable as I could for her to make her regret what she was doing.

## **I Choose To Continue This Process I Have Started Anyway**

But then I started to reassess what I was thinking about doing to her. Fortunately, for me and probably for her as well, I had come too far to go back to where I'd been in the past. What I was thinking about doing was "the old me." Trying to make her miserable for divorcing me just didn't make much sense to me at this point. I guess, in reality, I had learned my lessons in the program too well. I really didn't want to return to the controlling and abusive person who I had been for so many years. I really didn't want to throw everything away that I had been working on for all this time. I still needed and wanted to be a caring and loving father to my kids. I truly wanted to have a better relationship with them and I didn't want them to have to go through what I had gone through when they got to be adults. I wanted them to be responsible and caring human beings and I still had the ability to be a strong and positive influence on them if I chose to continue to use what I had already learned in the counseling.

This didn't mean that I wasn't still angry with my wife and that I didn't feel bad about the divorce. But, with the help of other group members, my friends and family, and my counselor, I chose to handle the escalations with her as they came up and to get myself through the process without trying to get "revenge" on her for what she was doing. It hurt a lot, but I didn't shut down or just convert the hurt, sadness, disappointment, and fear to hostility, disrespect, and rage this time around. And I really started to understand how much I had actually hurt her in the past for her to get to the point where she did what she was doing now. I actually felt sad for her, my kids, and myself. The support I got from other group members was absolutely essential for me. Even after I completed the group, I kept in touch with some of the other guys who were in the program with me.

I kept the information from the class and, every once in a while, I still take it out and go over the different parts. I've decided that I need to keep thinking about this stuff. It's all too easy, when I'm feeling stressed, tense, anxious, and overwhelmed in my own life, to start going back to the old ways of thinking and acting. I'm a lot better dad now and I'm feel good about that. My kids aren't afraid of me anymore and our relationships are a lot closer, even when problems do come up between us. I started dating occasionally six months after my wife and I split up. I wasn't really sure I'd ever want to be in a relationship again, partly because I was so hurt and partly because I didn't want to get controlling and abusive again (some guys in the program said they had been with three or four different partners where they had been abusive). But now I'm a lot more clear about what I'm looking for in a partner and I'm a lot more aware of when I start wanting to control someone else. I'm responding very differently from what I did in the past. I really do want to make a strong connection with a woman I can love. I think I've learned that that's what life is all about. I had been unhappy most of my life. I learned that this isn't the way life is supposed to be. I'm sure it won't be easy when I do get into a new relationship, but I now believe that I have the awareness, the knowledge, and the tools to create a better and healthier relationship and a more fulfilling and satisfying life for myself.

I started this whole process wanting to stop myself from ever being angry again. But that just isn't the way it works. My goal now is no longer to try to completely get rid my anger but just to recognize it and deal with it in a more productive way when it does come up (as it always will). The counselor said that handling anger is a lot like what they say in Alcoholics Anonymous about handling the urges to drink again: "one day at a time." At least that's the way it works for me. When I get up in

the morning now, I take some time to read some meditations that help me focus on what kind of day I want to have. I actually kept up that exercise program that I started in group (it's really been helpful to me). I also stay in contact with friends and a couple of guys who were in the group with me. It's a lot easier than it used to be. But it's not automatic. I still need to be aware of what's going on and to really focus on it. I'm thinking that's probably what I'll have to do for the rest of my life. Sometimes that idea feels kind of overwhelming to me. But if it means living the way I want to live and being with the people I really care about, I guess it's worth it.