

## Chapter 3. The Emotional Gym

To change anger, I must change my life. That's the bad news. Anger is not a detachable part like a distributor in a car. It is part of my emotional ecology. I am an organism, which means that all parts of me are interdependent. It is impossible for me to work on my anger without working on all parts of my psychological and physical being simultaneously. Some may have the misconception that anger management only addresses anger, and not the whole person. In fact, changing anger means approaching everything differently. The good news is that the shift in my relationship with anger can have repercussions for my physical health, my relationships with family and friends, and my sense of value and my mission in the world. The good news is that when I change my anger, I change my whole life as a man.

What I'm trying to say is that this book is not just about changing anger. It's about something bigger—emotional conditioning, the development of character and integrity, becoming a man. That last sentence makes me cringe a bit. Actually, it makes me cringe a lot. I worry that it sounds pompous and preachy and Boy Scout, and that you'll roll your eyes with a give-me-a-break look. I worry that it will seem meaningless, using words like *integrity* and *character* that have largely left our vocabulary, except for military recruiting commercials. I worry that you will stop reading. But stay with me a bit longer while I struggle to explain what I mean.

This manual outlines a program of emotional conditioning. What is emotional conditioning? It's analogous to physical conditioning. I define emotional conditioning as the gradual process of shaping one's character through small, repetitive, intentional action. Filling out an entry in the Anger Record is an example of an exercise aimed at conditioning my emotions. Progress in emotional conditioning can't be measured with a

stopwatch or by notches on a weight machine. However, a lot depends on how we manage this task: the degree of our happiness, the health of our relationships, and the congruence of our lives with our values. Getting in physical shape has four basic aims: increasing 1) strength, 2) flexibility, 3) coordination, and 4) endurance. The aims of emotional conditioning are comparable to these aims: we try to develop emotional power, emotional flexibility, emotional coordination, and emotional endurance.

**Emotional power.** A man with emotional power is not simply a man with strong emotions. On the contrary, a person with a potent temper or intense anxiety may feel weak, frequently overwhelmed by the energy of his moods. Emotions can be like rivers—sometimes quiet, sometimes overwhelmingly strong, overflowing their banks, sweeping everything away. The word *emotion* contains the word *motion*: when moved deeply by the current of a powerful feeling, I can easily get carried away. I don't feel powerful then, I feel like an insignificant victim. Power is energy made usable. When we put a hydroelectric dam on a river, the energy of the river is contained, steadied, and regulated. A man of emotional power is one who has achieved the ability to convert the emotions into energy—energy that can be directed, regulated, and put into service.

The emotionally powerful man is not one who is oblivious to feelings. On the contrary, he is particularly aware of his variations of mood, and relies on these as his connection to himself and the world. He is reliably caring of his own internal condition, and responsive to it. Despite the changes of mood, he is able to maintain a relatively consistent bearing, holding a serenity at his center. This steady calmness provides something like a shock absorber that smoothes his ride through life. A person with emotional power is also able to maintain a consistent sense of purpose in spite of frequent distractions, challenges and setbacks. Emotional power is what we call the will, the capacity to act with

intention, to push through obstacles to achieve a goal. A man with emotional power is able to make commitments and keep them. He takes leadership in his life, and is able to shape himself and his world. This means living with principles at the center, and making decisions, moment to moment, which are congruent with those principles. He guides himself not by momentary impulses, but according to what he determines is important in the long run.

A man of emotional power must have a carefully developed vision—a goal for the kind of man he intends to be, and the kind of world he desires to create. Below in section III we will describe the vision more thoroughly. There I will suggest that it is crucial that the vision not be egotistical. When I embrace a vision in an egotistical way, I am attempting to achieve a particular value just for me and mine. For example, I may be focused on getting love just for me, unconcerned with whether others gain more love. My desire for love may turn into a search for a person who can offer me the most perfect love. If I identify a woman who, I judge, can offer me this love, it is necessary that I win her away from rivals. My qualms about this egotistical approach are entirely pragmatic. When I pursue a value in this way, the value I achieve is extraordinarily unstable. I may temporarily experience an increase in love, but this may quickly turn into rivalry, conflict, and hatred.

If I have strength without vision, I can be a dangerous man. I would be living a reactive life, simply responding to impulses of the moment. In that case I can manipulate others, control their behavior, bully my family to get what I want in the moment. I would be like a soldier of fortune in the forest, without a clear mission. This kind of man is missing in action, doing things but not really knowing why, not shaping his life according to a clear vision. When I am a man who is principle-focused, I have the ability to sacrifice my impulses of the moment for the sake of my larger values.

Earlier, when we discussed the Vicious Circles, we noticed that anger always has a vision within it, but it achieves that vision only temporarily. I may get a brief reward of peace, order, love, freedom, justice, or respect. The reward, however, falls apart quickly. In the long run, when I use anger to achieve my vision, I have created a world with less love, peace, and freedom than before. Anger is something like a brief muscle spasm that masquerades as strength. A man with emotional power is built for the long haul. He asks the questions, "How can I create a life where I live my values in a sustainable way? How can I work to create a world where my values endure?"

If I have a vision, but lack emotional strength, my vision never becomes real. In that case, I'm just a dreamer, and I do not effectively change my life or the world. A dream is a wonderful thing, and the foundation stone of a life vision. But unless I couple this with practical action, it remains a dream. Sometimes dreamers become deluded, and believe that dreaming is enough. I once worked with a 14-year-old who dreamed of becoming a professional baseball pitcher, and developed facial expressions and mannerisms of his favorite pitcher, Greg Maddux. He told me vivid fantasies of being the winning pitcher in the World Series. I asked him if he played baseball, if he had pitched in Little League or in games with his neighborhood friends. He said no, he hadn't ever played the game, but was sure he would be good at it. Needless to say, when he finally tried out for his high school team without any prior experience, he was a miserable failure when it came to actually throwing the ball. He had a vision without a plan of action.

The Greek scientist Archimedes once said, "Give me a lever, show me where to stand, and I can move the universe." A lever is useless unless it has a place for the fulcrum to stand. A vision of changing the universe is useless if I don't have a down-to-earth arena of action, a place where I can begin the world-changing

work. It is crucial that I break this world-changing work into very small steps. I will not write the Great American Novel in a night of work, will not transform my relationship with my son in a single conversation, will not make myself into a great baseball pitcher with a single throw. Mother Teresa once said, "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love." Doing small things with great love means moving the fulcrum very close to the world I wish to move, for developing greater patience, and for keeping the eyes alert for very small changes.

If I am trying to develop physical strength, it is important that I accept completely my present strength level, then begin with very small challenges that nudge my strength to the next level. If I am able to lift 100 pounds ten times, it would be a mistake to try to push myself to lift 150 pounds ten times. It is likely I will fail, which would decrease the likelihood that I would continue weight lifting. It is also possible that I would injure myself-tear a muscle or tendon. A more effective plan would be to increase the weight to 102, and do ten repetitions three times a week for a week. If I meet that goal, I can continue to increase the weight in small increments, and after several months I may be able to lift 150 pounds without great difficulty. When I am trying to increase my emotional power, a similar plan is best. I could set a goal to improve my relationship with my son, and set a small challenge to myself of spending ten minutes with him asking about his interests twice in the next week. It is best if I make the goals specific, measurable behaviors, so that I will know whether I have succeeded or not. If I set a general goal—"have fun with my son"—I may not know if I accomplished this at the end of a week. But if I set a specific behavioral target—offer to take him fishing, or "praise two things about his school work"—I will know whether I have done these or not.

A person develops emotional strength almost exactly as he develops physical strength: repetitive work against resistance. As in working with weights, developing emotional power is gradual, monotonous, and sometimes painful. It can also be rewarding—the beginning of a new, more mature life, with a sense of self-respect that can come only from living respectably. You can do it. But to develop emotional strength, you must push not against weights, but against something within yourself. What is this "something" we must work against? We might call it habit, addiction to power, or Vicious Circles of behavior. But the name we give it doesn't matter to the work we do at the start. Let's not worry about theory now, not concern ourselves about what this "something" is. Let's look at how it acts, how it affects our lives.

To improve emotional power, I could challenge myself in many areas—family relationships, work relationships, etc. For purposes of this work, I encourage you to set yourself the challenge of making at least one entry per day in the anger record. There are approximately one thousand minutes in a waking day. It takes approximately one minute to make an entry in the anger record. Ask yourself if this is a reasonable expectation—one tenth of one percent of your waking time to begin the process of emotional conditioning. I mean this—without sarcasm or irony. I have worked with many people in the process of self-change, and know this: change is very difficult. Even minor change—one-tenth of one percent—takes considerable commitment.

**Emotional flexibility.** Emotional flexibility is the capacity to adapt emotionally to a wide range of situations. It gives a person the quality of resiliency, something like an emotional shock absorber that smoothes the bumps of experience. Emotional flexibility is not the same thing as being rational or cool in a crisis. A person who adopts a cool, rational stance often does so by cutting off from emotions. An emotionally flexible person is very aware of the moods and feelings that arise, and is able to fully

experience those feelings. However, there is a core of relaxation in the midst of the agitation, like the calm at the center of a hurricane.

An emotionally inflexible person is one who needs things a certain way, whose emotions get out of control very quickly if a situation isn't to his liking. For this person, stubbornness often masks as strength. He is rigid without resiliency. An emotional eruption is analogous to a sprain, a sign that his character is not as supple as it needs to be. With some men, it doesn't take much to sprain the emotions, and it is caused when they are stretched beyond their comfort zone and haven't developed their flexibility enough to tolerate this. Emotionally inflexible men expect others in their lives to adapt to their rigidity. Others in our lives often know very well our areas of inflexibility—we can't stand a messy counter top, we can't tolerate noise, we don't react well when we need to deal with family responsibilities immediately after work. An emotionally rigid person will often say things like, "She knows it upsets me to be left with the kids without much notice." "I can never relax when there's noise in the room." In these situations, we are not doing the work we need to do to change. We expect others to do the changing, demand that they flex so that we may remain rigid. "If only my boss. . .," "If only my wife. . ." To develop emotional flexibility, I must see these as my issues, not the fault of others.

**Aaron.** Aaron worked as a lineman for a power company. Generally, his job meant that he could go home each night to his family. Occasionally, during power emergencies in neighboring cities and states, his supervisor asked the lineman to travel out of town for a few days. The linemen would stay in a motel for several nights. Many of the linemen welcomed this, because it offered a chance for significant overtime. Aaron, however, would often refuse to consider it. The more his boss challenged him on the issue with logic or threats, the more rigid he would become.

On one occasion, this situation degenerated into a fistfight, resulting in Aaron's suspension from his job. The core issue for him was fear: he was terrified that his wife would have an affair if he stayed away from home for even one night. I asked Aaron if his wife had ever been unfaithful, and he said that he didn't think she had. But even though he had no reasons to believe that his wife would cheat on him if he left town, Aaron couldn't shake the fear, and therefore couldn't shake the rigidity of his behavior.

Emotional flexibility does not happen by magic. It is developed by repetitive work. We must know where our limits are, must pay clear attention to when we are beginning to experience physical or emotional pain. It does no good if my wife is the expert at where my limits are, if she sees me as a person bristling with testiness in many areas. Her awareness may help increase her emotional flexibility, but I would remain as rigid as ever. Our goal is emotional flexibility, so we work on stretching our limits. This is done by going to the edge of one's comfort zone and pushing gently but firmly to expand the range of what we can tolerate emotionally. It is also helpful to hold ourselves at our emotional limits and relax, to tell ourselves to breathe into the discomfort, to lean towards the pain. If I have great difficulty surviving in a messy environment, if I usually react angrily when the living room is messy, it would help develop my emotional flexibility if I took this as an opportunity to stretch my limits. I might challenge myself to sit in the messy room and relax my tense muscles, to reassure myself that this is not a big deal, that I can survive this fine.

Emotional inflexibility is held in place by a rigid belief system. For example, suppose my son is talking back to me when I tell him to do his homework. I may believe that children ought to do what their parents tell them to do without questioning it. This inflexibility of belief can become the launching pad for arguments. A key task of emotional conditioning is developing more

flexibility in my beliefs about how the world should operate. We need first to explore different possible interpretations of the data, then spend some time looking at the data from these new vantage points. In the example above, I might explore the belief that a child talking back to his father is an important step in his moral development, because he insists on testing what he is told, not just accepting it passively. Seeing the data from this different angle will help me see that different people might experience this data differently, without making them wrong or crazy. I might even start to look forward to my debates with my son about homework, because it gives him a chance to think through his values about education and authority. We will return to this issue later in this book, when we discuss the inflammatory thoughts we call Shoulds.

**Emotional coordination.** We are born with a certain natural physical coordination, determined by our genetic heritage. However, if I practice doing something like riding a bike, dancing, or playing basketball, my coordination can get significantly better. When a child first tries to throw a ball, it usually sails erratically off his fingertips, not traveling the intended direction. When he first tries to catch a ball flying towards him, he generally misjudges the arc or speed, or he doesn't open the glove at the right time. With practice, he can learn to play catch without needing any longer to think about the complex mechanics involved in catching and throwing with precision.

Emotional coordination is similar. By emotional coordination, I mean the ability to express my emotional truth precisely and elegantly—something similar to hand-eye coordination in the physical realm. It also means the ability to read the nuance in another person's emotions with accuracy. Emotional coordination means effective use of language in expressing my emotional situation, and in understanding the emotions of others.

My father coached me carefully in how to catch a ground ball, but never taught me anything about how to catch someone's meaning. He taught me how to throw, but never instructed me how to express my emotions and my needs with grace and precision. Without this thorough training, my emotional expression is likely to be erratic, blunt, and imprecise. My understanding of others' emotions is likely to be inaccurate and clumsy. In our emotional lives, we often lack coordination between the ear, the heart, and the tongue. We misread the arc of the other person's meaning, causing his subtle signals to sail over our heads, or we either minimize or exaggerate his meaning. When I try to express my emotions, I may also lack precision, and my real intention may be entirely lost. I may sound angry when my real feeling is shame, worry, or envy. Packing emotional expression into anger is a common indication of undeveloped emotional coordination. If I develop emotional coordination, I learn to say exactly what I intend to—no more, no less—with precise timing and efficiency of movement.

Aristotle wrote, "Anyone can get angry. But to get angry at the right person, at the right time, in the right way, and to the right degree—that is the art of anger." This is a description of well-coordinated emotional expression. It is impossible to *not* express emotion. Even if I intend to hide it, I express emotions through my body language, through the look in my eye, through the tone of my voice. My emotion may come out sideways, or in a delayed way, or may be expressed to the wrong person. This is anger used as a blunt instrument, a sledgehammer when a Philips screwdriver is the appropriate tool. The anger may indeed do *something*, but it is unlikely that it accomplishes its specific task. For instance, if I feel anger because I wish to be treated with love, my anger may come out in such a way that I get even less love. My anger has not fixed the social situation—it has made it worse.

It is even possible that I may be unaware of which emotions I am feeling. This is an old paradox in psychology—that I may have feelings and thoughts that are unconscious.

**Emotional endurance.** Anger is suffering that I can't hold. If I can't endure my suffering, I will make it overflow onto you, and cause you suffering. This is not dealing with my emotions with courage and integrity. Letting my discomfort spill over onto you is like expecting you to pay my debts for me. If I am able to endure suffering, it remains simple, sharp discomfort that I may experience fully and bravely. You are responsible for your debts, and I am responsible for mine, and it is the same with emotions. An anger outburst must be seen as a sign that I have broken down, quit. I've stopped the marathon and am sitting on the curb. I've turned in my pads and spikes, just quit the team.

Enduring suffering is not the same as denying or cutting off from discomfort. Men often develop the ability to “suck it up” and perform by blocking out pain. I worked recently with Ken, who had been hospitalized for bipolar disorder. After his discharge, I encouraged him to work with me on a plan where we would monitor his moods carefully, so that we could head off any manic or depressive stages before they required hospitalization again. He came in regularly, but when I would ask him about moods, he would generally respond, “No moods. Everything is fine.” Try as I might, I could not convince him that there is no such thing as no feeling, any more than it is possible to have an object with no shape. The shape of an object might be difficult to describe, but it has a shape nevertheless. He had developed a habit of ignoring feelings and discomfort altogether. The result of this strategy was that he would miss all the signals that his bipolar disorder was worsening, and he would suddenly get blindsided by the equivalent of an emotional lightning bolt. Sure enough, in spite of his report of no emotions, no problem, Ken began to isolate

again. He eventually re-entered the hospital with a full-blown manic episode.

We spend considerable energy dodging suffering. We shelter ourselves from the storm of discomfort through eating, smoking, shopping, tuning out with TV or computer, deadening pain through drinking and medication. We even use anger to eliminate suffering through waging war on what we believe is the cause. We could almost see all of human culture as a fortification we have built to keep us away from suffering. Enduring suffering means really *feeling* the suffering, moment-to-moment. It means being awake, welcoming this suffering, right now. This strategy goes against our grain. It takes great courage to move quietly and gently towards pain, to weather the raw elements of difficult emotions. But I may gradually learn that I can venture out into the storm of suffering without protection, and I am not torn apart.