CHAPTER 1. VICIOUS CIRCLES

Nature is an endless combination and repetition of a very few laws. She hums the old well-known air through innumerable variations.

–Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History”

Anger Addiction

When I was about seven, I got trapped on a Ferris wheel at the county fair. The operator had left for a break with the wheel still turning. When he returned fifteen minutes later, he didn’t offer an explanation. To me it seemed like hours. The ride had changed from an adventure to a queasy, monotonous nightmare. The ride operator had given me a taste of a universal experience. We have each been on that Ferris wheel—have glimpsed our lives as rat races, tailspins, broken records, whirlpools, same crap, different day. We are all hamsters scampering on the wheel, not getting anywhere.

In Hindu belief, each being has been born and reborn thousands of times, subject to almost endless cycles of reincarnation. Maybe I was born as a cat, then died and was reborn as a cockroach, then died, and was reborn as a human. In the western world, we may greet this idea as exciting—“I can’t wait to see what happens next!” However, in India this idea of reincarnation is seen as a curse. The goal of the Hindu spiritual path is frequently spoken of as moksha, “release” from the cycle of rebirth. However, these repetitive cycles need not be seen as something metaphysical. We can notice what Nietzsche called “eternal recurrence” within a single life. According to Sigmund Freud, one of the key characteristics of neurosis is the compulsion to repeat—the need to do something over and over. This remains one of the key characteristics of psychological problems—endless repetition that is both senseless and destructive. This repetition is found in
problems with anxiety, depression, and in various addictions: we are caught in a tailspin we can’t stop.

A. Addiction as Vicious Circle

An addiction is a Vicious Circle of behavior driven by a short-term kick and a long-term kick in the teeth. It establishes itself as an immediate remedy for discomfort. This release from discomfort is the “kick.” However, if the same behavior is repeated, the discomfort increases in the long run—the “kick in the teeth.” For example, a man feels stressed by a hard day’s work, and decides to stop off at a bar for some stress reduction. After one drink, the stress lifts, so he repeats this behavior several times to make sure the stress is gone for good. Stress managed at last, he gets into his car to drive home, only to be stopped by a state trooper, who increases his stress by arresting him for DWI. After spending the night in jail, he returns home to his wife, who has been worried sick. When she finds out about the DWI, she becomes upset. She criticizes him eloquently for his irresponsibility. Stress increases again. He decides to reduce stress again in the customary way of drinking, risking another arrest. Drinking initially reduced stress, but now it is causing stress to grow dramatically. The Vicious Circle is complete, and he is showing signs of addiction.

Obviously, there are addictions aside from those involving chemicals. A person may be addicted to chocolate, gambling, sex, risk, spending, or the Internet. In each case, there is an immediate reward followed by an eventual punishment, which sets one in search of the reward again. Addictions are made possible because we as humans are near-sighted. We generally focus on the immediate consequence of our actions—what we achieve in the first ten minutes—and neglect the long-term result. For us to work on an addiction, we must focus our attention on the long-term consequence, as well. The first step of addiction work is weighing
the short-term gains against the long-term losses: am I getting what I want?

Anger need not be addictive, any more than alcohol consumption is automatically addictive. However, anger may be addictive. What is the payoff I get from anger? The reward that drives anger addiction is the feeling of power that generally results from angry words and actions. The power I receive from anger is partly physical—the adrenaline rush which accompanies anger. But anger also brings a brief burst of social power—power over others. There is an old riddle: “Where does a 2000-pound gorilla sit?” Answer: “Anywhere he wants.” When I get angry, I may get anything I want, at least for a while. If anger did not produce this immediate reward of power, I would not take that path. As I will suggest in the examples given below, anger is an attempt to create some value—love, honor, order, freedom, justice, and the like. At times it may seem to generate these values, but this is only temporary. Anger destroys the very values that it was trying to create.

Let me show this vicious circle of anger addiction in a simple example. Hector, a 17-year-old, was challenged by a classmate Joshua. Joshua taunted him and called him a “child abuser” because he had phoned a thirteen-year-old girl and asked her out. Several peers observed this interchange between Joshua and Hector, and they joined Joshua in the taunting. Hector felt intense shame at the mockery, and at that moment was feeling one-down and inferior to Joshua and the others. Very quickly, he became furious, threatened Joshua, and then punched him in the mouth. Joshua got up off the floor and left, and the others immediately stopped the taunting. Hector had achieved the values of power and respect—at least short-term. As a result of his anger, there was a power-shift. He had been less powerful than Joshua when he was being ridiculed, but when he reacted with anger and violence, he had quickly achieved social dominance.
However, Hector’s story does not end there. Joshua’s friends witnessed Hector’s attack, and they encouraged Joshua to report this to the principal. He did so, and the principal phoned Hector’s parents and insisted on an emergency meeting the following morning. The school had a zero-tolerance policy around violence, so Hector was suspended for seven days, pending a hearing that would determine whether he would need an alternative school placement. In the meantime, Joshua’s parents filed charges of assault and battery against Hector. Hector’s parents felt it necessary to hire a lawyer to defend him. Because of the damage done to Joshua’s teeth, Joshua’s parents also threatened to sue for the cost of the dental work. Hector had achieved a brief period of power through use of his anger and violence, but the long-term result was the decrease of his power, due to the arrest, the school hearing, and the court involvement.

Imagine you buy an insecticide that promises to reduce the population of mosquitoes. You try this, and it works as promised, cutting the number of mosquitoes in your yard in half. After a few seasons of use, however, you notice that there are more mosquitoes than ever. What is worse, the swarm in your back yard now seems to be immune to the insecticide. You have actually managed to contribute to strengthening the mosquito population in your area by killing off the weak members of the species that were susceptible to chemical poisons, while the stronger mosquitoes have reproduced and thrived. Something similar happens with anger, as with the other addictions. I refer to the unintended negative consequence of the anger the recoil. The recoil is not just the occasional result of anger. When anger is used in its raw, unrefined form, the recoil is the rule rather than the exception. The pain and destruction which anger may produce are the result of this recoil. But we should not forget that the original intention of the anger—achieving a level of power and respect—was positive.
B. The Tree of Anger Addiction

There are several typical Vicious Circles of power addiction, which are similar to branches on a tree. Like branches, they are distinct from one another, yet at the same time different aspects of the same tree, joining together at the trunk. Each of the six is driven by a value that is admirable in its own right—love, justice, order, respect, peace, and freedom. These are six forms of power in a positive sense, because feeling empowered is a worthy goal. The German word for power is Macht, which comes from the root of machen, “to make.” Power is fundamentally an urge to make something—to create. However, each form of positive power gets subverted in the self-destructive whirlpool of the Vicious Circle, and the opposite of the original value is created. In the original story of Frankenstein, the title character was not simply a demented mad scientist. He was an idealist who had the aim of creating the perfect human being. The monster was an unintended consequence of a noble vision. It is the same with anger: a worthy vision turns sour.

Before I begin to describe these six Vicious Circles, let me make two clarifications: 1) These are not intended as mutually exclusive categories. They are general themes, and there is considerable overlap between them. It is possible that while reading these descriptions, you have the sense that the Vicious Circles are merely different ways of describing the same experiences. I believe that this may well be true. Often, a man may see himself reflected in several of these. 2) By describing six, I am not suggesting that there are only six. There may be ten, fifty, or seven thousand. These are descriptions of typical situations I have seen as a clinician over the twenty years I have spent working with anger issues. These descriptions may not line up exactly with your anger. They are intended to invite you to look at how your anger recoils. I urge you to ask yourself, “How does my anger backfire on me? What am I trying to gain in
getting angry? Is this working for me in my life?” This will help you understand the recoil that happens for your own anger.

**C. Vicious Circles**

**1. Vicious Circle: Mad about You**

Therapy works in the shadows of civilization, with the dark, pathological consequences of our cultural ideals. As a culture we believe in an ideal of career success, and into our therapy offices come those who feel that they always fall short, that they can never achieve enough. Our culture has an ideal of physical beauty, and in our waiting rooms are the grotesque anorexics who are obsessed with this ideal. Even the ideal of romantic love—that belief that I will fall in love with a single person who will be my everything—has its shadow that appears in the therapy office. Romantic love carries with it the shadows of romantic dependence, romantic jealousy, and romantic anger. If I expect one person to be everything, I place an expectation on her that is impossible to realize. To fulfill the ideal, that person needs to anticipate every need, to empathize with every feeling, to read every thought, to share every interest, etc. If that person falls short of these expectations, as they inevitably will, the consequence is often rage. In short, if a person is “my everything,” she may also become my emotional dumping ground. For the person on the receiving end of this dependent love, this is a recipe for burnout, because the expectations are impossible. This may lead to depression, somatic problems, and a sudden desire to end the relationship. The person who is relied upon to perfectly fill another’s needs gets robbed of her own personhood. She is no longer a Thou, in the language of Martin Buber. She becomes an “it,” deprived of dignity or free will.

**Renaldo.** After a 45-year marriage, Renaldo’s wife had suddenly gotten an apartment. Renaldo was desperate, struggling
with suicidal urges. “She’s everything to me,” he said to me. He had imagined that he and his wife would travel together in retirement, but without warning she had left him and was refusing contact. Renaldo admitted that he had been very angry over the years. He had been physically abusive to her on many occasions, although he claimed that in recent years his anger had been mainly verbal—swearing, berating her faults, and showing contempt. When we explored his anger, he told me that many times he had not been angry at her at the beginning. He had been angry at a neighbor, at a boss, at the world, and had taken it out on her. Now, after she left, he realized what he had done and what he was missing, and felt he would not be able to live without her. In many ways, Renaldo was living the romantic ideal that many of us dream about: one person is everything—one’s only sexual, physical, and emotional partner until death. But there is a deep, destructive shadow-aspect to this emotional ideal.

I never met Renaldo’s wife, but by his description she was in full flight from the relationship, having spent her adult life in the crosshairs of his dependency and anger. She had developed mysterious physical ailments beginning with the second decade of their relationship. She had experienced intense pain in her joints, and she reacted in pain every time he touched her. At times she was unable to walk, and Renaldo purchased a second-hand wheelchair to get her to appointments. The ailment had no medical basis, but one effect of her ailment on her relationship was that it made her safer, buffered his emotional and sexual demands. She was forced out of the role of maternal caretaker, and he was forced into a nurturing position as he made meals for her and pushed her wheelchair. But in spite of this role-shift, Renaldo kept up his emotional dumping, blaming her for every problem in his life in verbal tirades. Even the role of invalid was not enough to shield her from his attacks, and she at last found the courage and energy to leave him.
Renaldo’s involvement in therapy was half-hearted, at best. He was not coming with a full commitment to change—to renounce anger and emotional dependency. He was coming as a bargaining chip in the ongoing negotiations with his wife, in hopes that she would take him back. Renaldo was typical of a Mad About You person. As long as these are the terms for the man’s involvement in therapy, treatment might stop very quickly. His strong dependency on his wife or domestic partner may prevent his forming a strong working relationship with his therapist. He may disappear if either of these things happen: 1) she falls for his promises and takes him back, or 2) he becomes convinced that she won’t take him back.

Jerome. The danger in being a man’s “everything” is more than simply the danger of burnout. When a woman is a man’s “everything,” abandonment seems life-threatening to him. When an emotionally dependent man is faced with abandonment, his desperation may become violent. When I first met Jerome, he was furious because his parents had sold his car. Jerome was a high school student, and had been going out with Jessica for two years. It had been a passionate relationship—the first serious relationship for both of them. Recently, however, Jessica had been more distant, coming up with reasons for spending less time together. Jerome believed that she was just making excuses. They generally spent all day Saturday together, something they both had enjoyed early in their relationship. One Saturday they were together at Jerome’s house, but Jessica seemed preoccupied. Noticing her distraction, Jerome became upset, and insisted that she tell him what was going on. She said everything was fine; she was just in a funny mood. She told him she just wanted to go home to get some rest. He was suspicious, continued asking her what was wrong? She got up to leave, and he stood in her way. He accused her of cheating on him, insisted that she tell him whom she was seeing. She tried to push her way past him, and he shoved her back
violently, then slapped her and swore at her. Upstairs, his mother heard the commotion and called down to see if everything was all right. While Jerome stopped for a moment to reassure his mother, Jessica slipped past him and ran out the door to her car.

The day after the violent episode (which Jerome insisted on calling an “argument”), he tried to approach her in school to apologize and discuss getting back together. She fled when he approached, terrified that he would become violent again. She talked with the school guidance counselor, who called her parents. Horrified at the violence, her parents insisted that Jessica take out a restraining order. Jerome ignored the restraining order and called her on the phone, certain that they could reunite if only they could talk things out. She did not call the police about the phone calls, as she could have. She simply told him again that she needed space, but wasn’t going to be seeing any guys right now. Jerome didn’t believe her, and began tailing her in his car. One night he spotted Jessica riding around with another guy. He gave chase, pulled into the left lane, and then forced them off the road. She called the police and reported the violation of the restraining order. Jerome was arrested and charged with stalking her, but continued his attempts to call her. Alarmed at the obsessive, shameless, self-destructive quality of his reactions to the breakup, Jerome’s parents sold his car and denied him telephone and Internet privileges. They also brought him to see me for treatment.

For the first several weeks of our time together, Jerome used his sessions to ask advice about how he could get back together with Jessica. He continued to believe that he only needed a few minutes alone with her to convince her to stop the restraining order and resume their relationship. He asked whether I could arrange a couple’s session for him and Jessica, and I explained that I could not and would not. After a few court dates, the severity of his legal situation began to dawn on him. He became less impulsive, but more depressed. He still had desires to see Jessica or call her
on the telephone, but we began to identify these times as “opportunities to develop emotional muscle.” Emotional muscle is developed in exactly the same way physical muscle is developed: repetitive work against resistance. When he felt the desire to call her, he would push firmly against this desire, and tell himself that the longing he felt was the pain that always accompanies muscle development. Gradually, Jerome began to need her less, and became more emotionally independent.

The launching pad for this Vicious Circle is a feeling of anxiety over abandonment. Being alone often causes a sense of emptiness or panic. It is an understatement to say that this person feels “dependent” on another person, because that term implies that he depends on another for something—money, self-esteem, or physical organization. The Mad About You man often feels that he would cease to exist if the partner stopped loving him. He is a relationship addict, completely immersed in the world of this relationship, and unable to imagine himself outside it. If he breaks up, it is generally not for solitude or peace—it is for another relationship. He then re-immerses himself in the new one. Like any addict he goes drunk and dry, and has difficulty with moderation. He desires another to know him very well—so well his partner is able to read his mind, to know his needs before he knows them himself. This may cause him to try to control his partner in an effort to stave off the abandonment he fears. Relationships tend to be intense and stormy, and this is alternately sublimely gratifying and frustrating.

One of the most intolerable situations for this type of person is sexual betrayal—discovering his wife or girlfriend cheating on him with someone else. This man believes that he owns his intimate partner—his wife, his girlfriend. Slavery ended in this country well over a century ago, but in spite of this, he believes he has property rights, which entitle him to do whatever he wishes to what belongs to him. This sense of sexual and emotional
ownership may continue long after separation and divorce. He may continue to stalk, ruminate about her betrayal, call on the telephone, violate restraining orders, or war with her over the children—“his” children.

Anger here is an attempt to create love, and short-term, it may seem to work. To Jerome, his emotional outbursts had seemed to cause his girlfriend to reassure him and express her love and loyalty. However, what seemed like expressions of love were only indications of compliance. In reality, Jessica was feeling trapped, fear, and hatred. She may have placated Jerome during his angry episodes, but in general it is rare that anyone would wish intimacy with a person who is threatening, dangerous, and explosive. The angry person’s partner keeps secrets out of fear, and this creates yet more distance and alienation in the relationship, causing the circle to turn again.

**Vince.** For Jerome, the lessons about the dangers of anger in a relationship came quickly and with dramatic force—within the space of a few weeks. For him, the events seemed structured like a fable, driving to a clear, simple moral to the tale. For Vince, the story unfolded slowly, over the course of a 25-year marriage. Event built upon event with a gradual inevitability, as in a novel. The consequences of anger in his relationship seemed invisible at first, but over time the effects became more palpable. Early in his marriage to Karen, he drank excessively, but with the help of AA had gotten sober in his twenties and had been relapse-free for over twenty years. He worked in a factory, and had a responsible position as the supervisor of a shift. He had adopted the old-world values of his Italian parents, where the husband was the boss and sex was his right. Often, Vince would insist that his wife have sex with him immediately when he got home from work, even before he had showered. On the rare occasion when she refused his sexual advances or seemed cold and withdrawn, Vince would become furious. He often exploded verbally or physically towards
her—shouting, pushing, or hitting. For many years, she tolerated the abuse silently. She never called the police, never got a restraining order, and never spoke about the abuse with her family or friends. During her forties, she began to attend a women’s group. With the group’s encouragement, Karen began to practice assertiveness with Vince. She refused his sexual advances, saying that she felt angry and unsafe with him. Vince reacted at first with anger, but Karen threatened divorce. Terrified, Vince started to repent the damage he had caused during their 25 years, and at first did his best to tolerate her need for physical distance. He attempted to be sensitive to her needs, and tried to be understanding when she rejected his sexual advances. However, when he was under stress, he was still susceptible to emotional explosions when she was not responsive to his sexual needs. He considered leaving the marriage due to his dissatisfactions, but said he still loved his wife and could not imagine being attracted to another woman.

Vince’s situation did not end in marital separation. The marriage stayed intact, but it was clear to him that his anger had caused severe damage. Vince gave Karen space, but would secretly keep score of the positive and responsive things he was doing, and then became very frustrated when his wife still did not respond with sexual intimacy. Early on, he had controlled her sexual behavior through anger. When this ceased to work, he tried to develop a second strategy. He attempted to be sensitive and attentive, but his goal was still to control her sexual behavior. He had replaced his addiction to alcohol with an addiction to sex. While alcohol is a substance and its loyalty can be relied on, Karen could not be controlled in the same way. She reacted to Vince’s attempts to control her sexual behavior through boundary-setting and withdrawal.

Vince approached therapy as an opportunity to consult over ways of getting his wife to have sex more often. This was his Plan
A. Again and again, he said to me, “I give her space, I help clean the house, and I let her buy anything she wants. But she still won’t forgive me for the way I acted fifteen years ago. What else can I do?” I held out the hope that Vince would eventually develop emotional independence, that he would wean himself from his preoccupation with their sexual relationship. Sadly, he abruptly stopped working with me when I failed to produce effective techniques for convincing Karen to take care of his sexual and emotional needs.

An alternative for Vince might have been what I call emotional birth. A man may use a relationship with a woman as shelter from the storm, a substitute for developing an independent emotional life. Instead of feeling his suffering and taking ownership of his emotions, he turns his feelings into needs and demands. Instead of feeling sadness, he might demand sex from his wife, or the right lunch in his lunchbox, or a clean kitchen floor. As long as she is attentive and compliant, these things can protect him from sadness, like a five-mile-per hour bumper between him and his own despair. His relationship contains an implied contract where the partner is supposed to take his pain away, so if he feels suffering, this is a sign that the contract has been breached—someone has messed up. The man fell out of the womb of the family into the womb of relationships, and emotionally he had never been born. If the relationship ends, the man may go into emotional emergency—experiencing rage, fear, sadness, loneliness, and shame that can seem overwhelming. This is a period of high danger—of violence, addiction, and suicide. But it can also be a time of opportunity. The would-be man may begin his first steps across the plain of his own suffering—by himself, without the protection or mediation of his partner. And the prize at the far end of this journey? He may become a man of emotional integrity. He may develop a deep friendship with himself that can make possible deeper friendships with others.
And by opening himself to the abyss of his despair, he may gain the capacity for joy that he has never known.

2. Vicious Circle: Rage for Order

John. I sometimes get an idea of what drives a man’s anger before I meet him. That was the story with John. I got a call from his lawyer, asking details about the anger management group I was running at the time. The judge was prepared to mandate that John take a 40-session batterer’s program, and John was negotiating through his lawyer for a better deal. John wanted to know every detail about the group in advance, as if this were a labor agreement or a multi-million dollar business contract. Even without meeting John, I could sense that he had a major issue with control.

John was the owner of a small air cargo company, quite successful for a man in his late thirties. He had been charged with assault and battery against his teenage stepdaughter. She had been using marijuana, and had been on the verge of dropping out of school. His wife, he insisted, was an ineffective parent, and he had stepped forward to help keep his stepdaughter in line. He was determined to keep her in school, and there had been several confrontations around her continued marijuana use and skipping class. During one of the confrontations, he had hit her across the face. The hit had been a powerful one, because the marks were still visible a day later when she returned to school. The school nurse reported the injuries to the Department of Social Services, and when they questioned her, she had very willingly described the abuse. When the police questioned John’s wife, she corroborated her daughter’s story, and charges of assault were filed against John. Furious with his wife over the betrayal, John decided that this was the final straw. He left the house and sued her for divorce. In his view, whatever physical injury he had inflicted on his stepdaughter was unintentional, and his behavior
was justified by his need to get her under control. Ironically, the consequences of his actions caused more chaos, not more order.

**Tom.** Tom was obsessed with rationality. Unlike John, who seemed focused primarily on the ordering the external world, Tom was focused on his internal sense of order—he needed to know why. He wanted the world to operate according to reason. Tom wasn’t a college professor or scientist, as one might imagine. He had a high school diploma, and had worked for twenty years for a tree service. However, Tom had great difficulty tolerating irrational behavior of any kind. When someone did something that didn’t make sense to him, Tom often obsessed on the behavior and began to get angry. His anger was made worse by the fact that he didn’t understand his own reaction, either.

A few months before I met him, Tom and his wife attended a rock concert with several friends. At the beginning of the evening, he had felt relaxed, sociable, and happy to be listening to music. During the concert he noticed that the guitarist in the band changed instruments at the end of nearly every song. It occurred to him that the band could organize their performance to play all of the songs arranged for one guitar in a single set, and then play the songs arranged for the other guitar in a different set. This plan made complete sense to Tom, but he reminded himself that he wasn’t a musician. Maybe there was some other explanation. He considered some possible reasons for the band’s organization of their play list. Perhaps they ordered the songs to give the drummer some rest after high-intensity songs. Perhaps they chose that sequence to build the audience’s emotional energy gradually. These explanations seemed possible to Tom. However, they did not calm his anger, because he wasn’t certain these reasons were right. Unable to enjoy the performance, Tom soon left the concert. He knew that his wife would wonder why he was agitated. He would need to explain his behavior to her, but he
couldn’t make sense it, so he became even more agitated as a result.

Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder is a psychiatric disorder where a person has obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behavior, often focused around order, cleanliness, or “doing things right.” We reviewed Tom’s behavior for obsessions and compulsions. He reported that he was very perfectionistic about doing his job “the way it should be done.” At work, he would often get furious when co-workers did work that he regarded as shoddy. At home, he was obsessed with organized closets. He would spend time daily pairing the shoes and placing them on the shelves according to owner. Tom also had a preoccupation with being on time, and would often experience anxiety and anger if things slowed him from making it to one of our appointments.

John’s and Tom’s stories are examples of the Vicious Circle called Rage for Order. The goal that this person pursues is order or control. Faced with disorder, this person experiences anxiety that is very difficult to simply endure. A person caught in this circle often has strong opinions of how the world and the people in it should operate, and his anger emerges when things fall short of this ideal. Anger may emerge towards others who are judged to be responsible for chaos—employees, other drivers, co-workers, or children. The Rage for Order person may also direct his rage towards objects that aren’t functioning properly, especially machines: the car that won’t start, or the computer that won’t boot up. It is a major challenge for this person to simply let things go, to serenely accept what cannot be changed.

The Rage for Order is often at the core of corporal punishment. To adults, children often represent the forces of physical and emotional chaos. Murray Straus, one of the most important figures in family violence research over the past half-century, points out that parents often justify corporal punishment by claiming that it
makes children better citizens, more responsible members of society. If I reason in a linear way, it makes sense that a child might avoid violence if he knows that he will be physically punished as a consequence. However, Straus has found that children on the receiving end of corporal punishment are actually less likely to become good, responsible citizens in adulthood. They are more likely to spend time in jail, more likely to commit violent crimes, more likely to drop out of school, more likely to abuse their spouses and children, and more likely to get divorced as adults. Whereas the use of corporal punishment may provide a short-term result of better behavior control, the long-term result is greater social chaos.

As for the other Vicious Circles, the goal in Rage for Order is a noble value. The search for an orderly world and an orderly life is quite positive. This urge lies at the root of science, philosophy, and the forces of civilization—every human endeavor that has sought to make the world more rational and systematic. Short-term, the Rage For Order person may achieve the feeling of control. The children may pick up their room, the lazy employee may get to work on time, and the spouse may promise to do the laundry. However, the long-term result—the recoil—is very different. Anger does not eliminate chaos—it contributes to it. When things become more chaotic and unreasonable, this can become a launching pad for even more anger.

3. Vicious Circle: The Shame Game

The trigger for anger in this situation is shame—shame over appearing foolish, over not being strong enough, mature enough, big enough—enough in general. Shame is a feeling of public powerlessness—the pilgrim in the stocks with the sign around his neck. When a person is caught in the Shame Game, his biggest nightmare is the jeering crowd or the patronizing pat on the head. When a person is in this one-down position of shame, anger
appears at first to be a remedy. When I am angry, I experience a short-term burst of power, and momentarily I am in the dominant role of The Strong One. However, this becomes a vicious circle when my angry acts violate social boundaries and themselves become humiliating.

Recoil may come from outside—additional public humiliation—or from within. In internal recoil, anger provokes guilt, and guilt causes a person to crawl back and beg forgiveness. “I can’t believe what I did, what I said. Please forgive me—I’ll never do that again.” But the submissive role leads again to shame, and the circle continues to spin. An example of this Vicious Circle is found in Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire. Stanley Kowalski, playing cards with friends, tells his wife Stella and her sister Blanche to turn down the radio. He loses a hand of poker, then jumps up from his chair in annoyance, stalks into the room where Stella and Blanche are listening to music, and smashes the radio. When Stella tries to stop him, he hits her. She flees with Blanche and goes upstairs to the neighbor’s apartment. It is then that Stanley, racked with guilt, screams out his classic “Stella!” from the street. Stella slowly descends the stairs, and Stanley weeps, hugging her in the submissive position. But two scenes later in the play, Stanley has forgotten his submission and his promises, and is again angrily abusive. The submissive position is not a stable one for the shame-triggered person, because it is the position of shame and inferiority, and this is intolerable for him.

**Geraldo.** Let’s look at the other type of shame-game, where the recoil happens not because of an internal process of recognizing one’s offenses, but from outside. Anger itself becomes shameful, and one is humiliated publicly—arrested, disciplined, one’s reputation smeared. Shame is feeling smaller, inadequate in comparison with others. Anger is often an attempt to restore power and status in an immediate way. For example, I worked
with Geraldo, a man from a small town about twenty miles from my office. He had gotten into an argument with his wife in their home over her failure to back him up in disciplining his stepson. His stepson always confronted him with the statement, “You’re not my father,” which he regarded as disrespectful. He had been trying to remedy his inferior condition with anger. He had gotten quite agitated during the argument with his wife, so she had threatened to call the police. Terrified of the potential humiliation in front of the townspeople who knew him well, he had wrestled with her for the phone. He reported to me that he had let go suddenly, and the telephone had hit her in the face. (I was skeptical about this story, but his wife corroborated this, much to my surprise. It is possible, however, that she corroborated Geraldo’s story out of sympathy or fear). She had already dialed 911, and the police were dispatched to the scene to investigate. Massachusetts has a mandatory arrest law for domestic violence, which means that the police are required to make an arrest when they respond to a domestic violence report. Because of the injury to her face, Geraldo was arrested for domestic assault and battery. He told me that the arraignment was the most humiliating event of his life. He knew the judge personally, knew the court stenographer and even knew the police officers who had arrested him. Geraldo’s anger, far from eliminating shame, merely compounded it. Feelings of humiliation had caused the original argument, and his anger was an attempt to rectify that. But his arrest led to an even more intense shame.

The treatment experience was a very difficult one for Geraldo, requiring him to deal with even more shame. It took nearly a month for him to come to a first individual meeting. I scheduled him for three anger management groups before he was able to attend a first group session, which meant a delay of over a year. We had to do significant work with the shame-issue before we could even begin formal treatment. Geraldo imagined that he
would know others in the group, and that they would be shocked that a member of his family had suffered the indignity of arrest. He imagined that they would spread unflattering stories about him, and that soon his entire community would know about what he was disclosing in the group. I assured Geraldo that he was very unlikely to know anyone in the group, but that even if he did, we spend a great deal of time emphasizing the importance of confidentiality. I suggested that many of the others in the group might have similar worries about humiliation, so he would find himself in good company. Geraldo finally came to a group, and it became a surprisingly positive experience for him. Once over the “shame-hump,” he experienced profound relief that other men experienced similar feelings of anger and shame. His feelings of shame had resulted in an emotional distance from others, male and female. During the group, the sharing of feelings caused him to develop trusting relationships with other males that, for him, were completely new.

In my work with men, the shame-triggered vicious circle is the most common one. As men, we are trained to hide our weaknesses from others, and we hesitate to express our normal feelings of inferiority and vulnerability. This leads to deep isolation from others. Men often build their lives with one central purpose—avoiding shame. A man may try to achieve high job status, buy a house in the best neighborhood, and marry an attractive, loyal wife in an effort to have a good public face and therefore avoid shame. He may buy a powerful, late-model car he can’t afford, or other toys that represent his power publicly, in an effort to avoid humiliation. A man may react in anger to someone saying something about his family, not because of any perceived physical danger to his relatives, but because these verbal attacks endanger their social reputation, and by extension, his own social standing.

Road-rage is primarily a province of males—with men accounting for over 90% of reported aggressive-driving incidents.
The primary trigger for road-rage is not physical fear. It is shame. Frequently for men, there is a monologue during driving which has the theme of achieving respect and avoiding shame. We cannot communicate verbally with other drivers while on the road, but we often interpret the subtle cues in terms of a shame-script. A driver pulls up behind me and follows me down the road, and I read this behavior as saying “Look, if you’re such a wimp you’re afraid of going more than 5 miles an hour over the speed limit, pull over and let a real man show you how to drive.” When another driver pulls by me on the turnpike, I may translate this as “You are nothing—your car is slow and powerless, you don’t have the balls to be a real driver.” When a driver pulls into my lane, I interpret this as “You are nobody, not worth noticing.” I regard these driving behaviors as challenges to my masculinity, part of the competition to be an Alpha male in the herd.

Simon. Earlier, when talking about the Mad About You vicious circle, I mentioned that the thought of sexual betrayal is a frequent trigger for anger. However, the anger around sexual betrayal is not always due to the experience of abandonment or jealousy. Sometimes the chief pain caused by infidelity is not the loss of my partner’s love, but rather the public embarrassment that happens when others discover the infidelity. I once worked with Simon, who knew for seven years that his wife Jane was having an affair. They had an agreement that he would not divorce her or insist that she stop the affair, so long as it remained unknown in their social circle. To honor Simon’s request, Jane took great pains to be discreet, and my client never showed anger. However, after the seventh year, his wife’s lover made a momentous decision. Tired of hiding, tired of the sham of his own loveless marriage, the lover left his wife and stopped hiding his feelings for Jane. He made this decision against Jane’s wishes—she was dismayed that the delicate arrangement with her husband was shattered. Simon experienced profound humiliation, and with it,
anger. The launching pad for the anger was not abandonment—his wife had long since deserted their intimate relationship. His anger was triggered by embarrassment and shame—the talk of the town. For Simon, the nightmare was not abandonment, but the loss of social status, the fear that others would see him as sexually impotent, gullible and weak.

4. Vicious Circle: Breaking Out

Freedom is a distinctly American virtue, embedded deeply within our mythology. From our founding fathers to legendary frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, freedom was at the center of the American experience. The cowboy riding the open range from job to job is the archetypal American hero. When Americans fight wars, the politicians often justify the war as a defense of our liberty, no matter how far-flung the conflict or how remote from immediate national concerns. We pay hundreds of dollars to see rock-stars embody freedom as they challenge our cultural taboos onstage. We quietly admire those co-workers who have the guts to walk into the boss’s office and tell him that he can take this job and shove it. And in the most popular American sport, football, we see the drama of freedom re-enacted weekly: the running back smashes through the restrictive defensive line and breaks free for a touchdown.

However, real freedom troubles us deeply. When I hand my money to a bank teller, I hope deeply that he is restrained and repressed. When I hire a babysitter, I am hoping for someone who is controlled and responsible. And when I encounter a man in a dark alleyway, I pray devoutly that he is not a free man. Those who are really free both fascinate and terrify us. They are the antiheroes—the motorcycle gangs, criminals, renegade cops, deadbeat dads flouting the system, teenagers roaring drunk down the wrong lane, street people sleeping on the ventilation grates. There is something dark and dangerous in freedom, which we feel
the need to suppress. Despite our patriotic speeches, we thrust real liberty out to the fringes of our society—to the late-night barroom brawl, to the prisons, to the mysterious drifter with his thumb out on the road. In the civilization we have built, Thomas Jefferson would have been expelled from college, and Davy Crockett would have been jailed. The Land of the Free can tolerate freedom only in small doses.

In the Breaking Out vicious circle, freedom is the core value. This type of person tends to react most strongly when things get in the way, close him in, when rules seem too restrictive. He uses anger to break out, to challenge authority, to burst through whatever obstacles stand between him and his autonomy. The person feels that life should be an ecstatic dance, but too often it is weighed down with unnecessary responsibilities and silly regulations. He wants to be the absolute master of his destiny, and when people or things stand in his way, he challenges them. His mottoes are “No one tells me what to do,” and “Question authority.” He is concerned that relationships might fence him in or tie him down. The primary trigger to anger is feeling claustrophobic or blocked.

Otto. Otto shook his head the first day I met him. “I want to drive right over the top of them.” Otto was sixty-five, and was experiencing fury over the high school students in his neighborhood. He lived at the end of a dead-end street, and left for work about the same time as the teenagers left for the school bus. They stroll down the middle of the street, and when he beeps his horn for them to move, the students glance over their shoulders, snicker, and slow down. He reported that he had an almost irresistible urge to slam his foot on the gas, “to hell with the consequences.”

As we explored Otto’s life, we began to notice that he had been haunted by many similar instances of anger. Anger frequently
emerged from a feeling of frustration, deprivation, or blockage. Otto reported a childhood of poverty, with parents who did not have much to give emotionally. He had married in his late teens to a woman he says he did not love, and had two children. Otto then began a period of hard work, climbing the ladder socially, economically, and politically. He got a job as a political consultant for several powerful politicians in a large eastern state, and he was admired and envied because of his career success and his thriving family life. However, Otto reports that he felt inexplicably trapped. He suddenly left his wife of twenty-five years and began an affair with a woman twenty years younger—a woman he described as “a hippie, a wild thing.” His wife divorced him, and his children refused to speak with him. The affair ended within a year, but he merely began another. He then quit his job as a political consultant and got a job working as a cowboy in a western state, earning a few dollars a day—once again, in the name of freedom. His motto might have been the cowboy anthem, “Don’t fence me in.” His anger was mainly triggered by impediments—things or circumstances that frustrated his attempts to reach any goal, anything that restricted his freedom or corralled his spirit.

One common launching pad for the anger of a Breaking Out person is the judgment that things are repeating, will never change. “I’ve told her a hundred times to let me sit down for a few minutes before she asks me questions, and she just doesn’t get it.” “I must have told him every day this school year to do his homework before he turns on the TV, and things haven’t changed a bit.” This gives the person the sense of being a hamster on the wheel, not making any progress. The man may have a sense of déjà vu, that he has been in exactly this place before. This sense of repetition of a situation without progress was a frequent experience that haunted Otto.
**Philip.** Breaking Out is a frequent Vicious Circle for young people. I worked with Philip, a 17-year old male who was frequently frustrated by what he saw as senseless rules and impediments put in front of him by the adult world. He imagined that there was a daily committee meeting composed of all the significant adults in his life—his parents, principal, teachers, and hall monitors. The agenda of this imagined meeting was to clutter his life with stupid rules. Philip frequently got into confrontations with the rule-givers, and the purpose of the anger was to gain freedom. He dreamed of the day he would be out of school, living away from his parents, so he could do whatever he wanted. In the meantime, he was stuck at home with his parents, and one of the principal ways he gained freedom was to drive around with friends after school, smoking marijuana.

One day, Philip was caught smoking cigarettes on school property, and the school made a call home to his parents reporting the incident. On the same day he had an argument with the hall monitor because he didn’t have a pass to go to class after the bell rang. He came home frustrated, and told his father that he wanted to go out with his friends in the car. His father had received a call from the school, and told Philip that he wouldn’t be going anywhere because of the smoking incident. Philip got angry at one more impediment, yelled profanities at his father, then grabbed the keys, ran out to the car, and laid rubber as he screeched out of the driveway. He was gone for about three hours, achieved the feeling of freedom which he wanted, and returned home. His father, however, was lying in wait. When Philip walked in the door, his father announced that he would not be driving the car again—ever. He told Philip that he had called the police and reported the car stolen, and intended to push the charge as far as possible. In the meantime, Philip had a zero curfew—meaning that he was required to come home immediately after school every day, go to his room immediately, and stay there until he left for school the
following morning. Meals would be delivered to his room, just like solitary confinement in jail. Philip tolerated this sentence for two weeks before he bolted and went to live in a friend’s house. By then, he was on probation for the auto incident, was apprehended by the police and returned to his parents. He left again, and when he was caught the second time, was placed in a foster home. He ran away from the foster home, too, but again was caught. This time he was placed in juvenile detention. What had begun as a simple attempt to gain freedom had turned into literal incarceration, where Philip was experiencing far less freedom than when he began.

**Carl.** To a Breaking Out man, family relationships are often experienced as obstructions. Carl called home from his office on a hot afternoon and suggested to his wife Janet that they go to the beach for the afternoon. She jumped at the idea, and agreed to get their three young children ready for the impromptu trip. When Carl got home, his three-year-old daughter was fussy, and didn’t want to leave the house. His five-year-old son was not dressed, and was still watching cartoons. Janet was still getting food prepared, and said they needed to stop at the grocery store to buy diapers and things to drink. Carl remembered thinking, “Why isn’t everything ready? What has she been doing?” He kept these thoughts to himself, but he was already seething. His two oldest children began arguing over who would have to sit in the middle of the back seat. When they got the children in the car, his three-year-old refused to wear the seatbelt, reaching over and clicking the release button whenever Carl buckled it on. Carl exploded, yelled at his family, and told everyone that he had had enough, that they weren’t going anywhere. They returned to the house, and Carl secluded himself in the garage, furious, for the rest of the evening.

When Carl had called his wife, he was remembering simpler times, when he was nineteen and they had just met. In those days,
the two were able to decide to go to the beach, grab their swimsuits and some towels, and be on the road in ten minutes. The journey to joy and freedom was a simple, straight line. Now, with children, life was considerably more complex. With diapers, special diets, sibling rivalry, and the unpredictable moods of his children, a trip to the beach was a huge logistical undertaking. It seemed to him as complicated as a military invasion. His family represented senseless obstruction to him, preventing him from achieving the simple cool water and relaxation he was trying to achieve. Carl’s anger was attempting to break through the obstacles so that he could get what he wanted. However, when his explosion finally came, joy and freedom became impossible, and plans for the trip were thrown out altogether.

**Stan.** “She is a prison guard,” Stan told me, with all sincerity. He had been married for twenty years, but the marriage was in trouble. He often went biking with a female co-worker, and assured me that she was merely a friend, and that there was no sexual or emotional interest. His wife, however, subjected him to a lengthy interrogation after every bicycle ride. These often led to major arguments, because Stan found his freedom threatened. Stan finally declared his independence. He arranged to continue their marriage only as a formality, and then moved into a separate section of their house. After six months of this arrangement, he left the marriage altogether.

Intimate relationships for the Breaking Out man can seem like incarceration. He may be willing to enter a relationship in order to achieve sexual freedom. However, as soon as demands are placed on him—demands for truthfulness, for commitment, for compromise—he often looks for an exit. He is frequently commitment-phobic, reluctant to tie himself down to anyone or anything. When he is in a relationship, even one that he values, his attention is often on what he is giving up—the promise of possibility. His longing often takes the form of sexual fantasy—
pornography, strip clubs, chat rooms. For some this is as far as it goes. For others, the longing takes the form of action—online relationships, multiple affairs, prostitutes, divorce. In order to maintain this double life, secrecy is a high priority, and he may spend considerable energy constructing a life that allows him this freedom. He learns to lie, even paying the price of breaking his promises and betraying a loved one, in order to maintain the freedom that he has achieved. Even though there may be other values that are important to him—honesty, reliability, love—the value of freedom is paramount and trumps the rest.

5. Vicious Circle: Avoiding Anger

Scott. Scott came to me at the suggestion of his wife, Joanne, because he had lost his temper with her and was verbally cruel. He was 28, and had been married ten years, with two children. According to Joanne, on one occasion Scott had threatened her life. She insisted that this behavior was out of character for him. He was generally an easy-going husband and family man, very willing to help with the stressful job of caretaking their son. He didn’t act this way often, but when he did, it caused severe problems in the marriage, to the point that she was considering a marital separation. Because of her description, I was immediately worried about her physical safety, and we spent some time on the phone discussing options, including a restraining order and the use of a shelter if this happened again. I was also worried about bipolar disorder, a serious mental illness characterized by extreme mood changes. After evaluating Scott’s situation, I referred him to a psychiatrist for an evaluation. After one meeting the psychiatrist called me and said she doubted that bipolar disorder was the cause of the angry outbursts.

As we met more, it became clear that Scott had a generally passive stance in his marriage. The sexual relationship in the marriage had dwindled to nothing in the past year, and Scott said
that his wife told him that his anger was the main reason. Scott described his wife as a very energetic, charismatic person with a wide circle of friends. She was an evangelical Christian, and was frequently called on by others to counsel them in a lay capacity when they were having trouble. “Right now,” Scott said, “she is very involved in counseling an eighteen-year-old guy from the church.” Scott said that she spent up to twenty hours a week on the counseling, and recently had stayed out all night during a particularly intense session. I asked delicately whether he ever suspected she was getting emotionally involved with the young man, and Scott gently but adamantly rejected the suggestion. “She denies it, and I believe her.” I chose not to question him further about his thoughts about the counseling. Since the stated purpose for our work together was anger, I suggested that he keep track of his anger in an anger record (discussed below, “The Emotional Gym”), showed him how to use it, and set up another appointment.

I next saw Scott about a month later. He had cancelled his follow-up appointment, and it had been difficult for us to find a time to reschedule. I asked about the anger record, and he reported no episodes of anger, irritation, or aggravation in the previous month. I expressed surprise at this, reminding him that the average person reports between four and five episodes of anger or aggravation per day, which would mean more than 120 episodes in a month. He did not dispute the research, but—in an affable, somewhat bewildered manner—continued to deny that he had experienced any anger in the month since I had last seen him. I decided to just get a general picture of the events since our last meeting, and asked him how things had been going in general. “Fine,” he said. His relationship with his wife was about the same, without any sexual contact. She continued to tell him that she couldn’t come close to him because of his anger. He reported that his wife had taken off for a week by herself because she “needed time alone.” He didn’t know where she had gone, and she hadn’t
told him when he had asked. He insisted that he continued to trust her, even though she was spending at least an hour a day counseling the young man on the phone or in person.

I claim absolutely no crystal ball in these matters. I had spoken with Scott’s wife once on the phone, but had not met her, and had no particular opinion about whether she was having an affair at that time. (As it turned out, she was having an affair, and eventually she and Scott were divorced. But as far as I was concerned, her relationship with the young man could have been entirely innocent and platonic). My main concern at that point was Scott’s apparent blindness to his own natural emotional responses to her spending extensive and intensive time with the young man. Scott tended to dismiss, deny, and plow under his reactions for long periods. Then eventually, all these feelings would surface, which caused significant disruption in his marriage. He was caught in the Avoiding Anger Vicious Circle.

In the Avoiding Anger Vicious Circle, an individual has learned from direct experience of anger—his own anger, another’s anger, or both—that this is hazardous material, to be sidestepped at all costs. He frequently experiences intense guilt around his anger outbursts, so he commits himself to staying cool and calm. Feelings of all kinds are avoided, in fact, because they lead inevitably to upset. The attempt to escape from feelings, however, is futile. When a person tries to avoid anger, anger finds him anyway, and often emerges explosively. The person lives a life that is generally emotionally cool, punctuated by periods of explosive heat. The person has two notes on the scale: cool, passive boredom and rage. The rage, even if rare, is disturbingly beyond control. One often has the sense that the other party has pressed the issue and not allowed him to withdraw, as he would have preferred: “When I try to get away, she follows me.”
In this Vicious Circle, when small things happen with another person, the individual generally says little. Guilt causes him to bury anger and deny his needs. He does not wish to cause a major stink, tells himself “it’s no big deal.” He then makes a small deposit into the anger bank, where it draws interest and grows. Before long, there is a sizable deposit of unspent anger. Finally, something small happens in the relationship that tips the balance, and the anger explodes with a vengeance.

The explosion is often bewildering to the recipient, and difficult to digest. First, the anger frequently emerges over a relatively small thing, causing the other to wonder over the lack of proportion: “Why is he making such a big deal over the toothpaste cap?” Second, the angry person often brings out old things that have been festering in the anger bank for a while, causing the person on the receiving end to wonder, “Wow, why didn’t he mention that he didn’t like my sister when she was visiting last year?” Third, when the explosion does come, there are often so many things brought up at once, it is difficult to respond or make changes: “Well, there’s no use. Everything I do is wrong.” Because the anger is so big, disproportionate, and irrelevant, it rarely leads the recipient to change behavior. The angry person now may feel guilt and shame over having let the beast out of the cage. He re-learns the lesson that it does no good to let the anger surface, and the “stuffing” process begins anew.

There is a sub-species of this Vicious Circle, where the anger does not emerge in a “hot” way, but instead emerges in a cold, remote way. The furious party says nothing, but simply withdraws further. If asked by the other party if there is something wrong, he responds that “Everything is just fine,” but the non-verbal signals contradict this. The person on the receiving end has difficulty understanding what might be causing the icy fury, and again cannot digest the partner’s anger. It is not uncommon for the angry person to bury himself in some distancing activity—
sometimes an addiction—to alcohol, work, television, or the Internet. The relationship descends into an ice age. When I begin working with a couple who have been caught in this situation, it sometimes is very difficult to identify the anger that started this process.

**Frank.** The launching pad in this Vicious Circle is often a sense of guilt. Sometimes a person caught in this vicious circle is guilty about prior anger explosions. Perhaps he has done damage to others in the past, and has vowed to keep his anger buried. In some cases, the man caught in this Vicious Circle does not have a history of flagrant anger explosions. But he has guilt nevertheless—over what he might do if he ever let his anger out, over the fantasies he has of hurting people. Frank, a thirty-year-old accountant, came to me complaining of anxiety and panic. He lived alone, and had a close relationship with his mother and younger sister. He reported that his panic was often debilitating, causing him to miss work. He described his most recent panic attack as follows: His sister had recently gotten a job promotion, and his mother wanted to have a party to celebrate this. She wanted Frank to help put the party together, which involved taking a day off to help decorate and arrange the refreshments. Frank told me that he had a panic attack on the day he was scheduled to help, so severe that he was not able to leave his apartment. I explained to him that feelings often come mixed, and asked if there were other feelings aside from anxiety. He had difficulty at first naming these, but eventually admitted that he felt some anger towards his mother for assuming he could afford a day off of work. He then told me that when he had passed a qualifying exam for certification, it was a big deal to him, but his family had never celebrated his achievement. I asked if his mother knew he was upset about this, and he told me he had never discussed it with her. He said he was worried that if he told her how upset he was, his relationship with his mother would be over. He imagined that he
would have a major tantrum, and cause her severe emotional
damage. I coached Frank in how to make a clear assertive
statement to his mother about his feelings, and after several weeks
he managed to do this over the telephone. It was a successful
experience. Far from destroying his relationship with his mother,
his honesty and clarity helped them get closer in a new way. He
began to apply this discovery to other areas of his life—his
relationships with co-workers, his girl friend, and his sister. As he
started to experience success at this, his anxiety and panic
diminished significantly.

The presence of this Vicious Circle may appear confusing. Isn’t
the point of anger management to avoid potentially explosive
situations? Why would this be a problem? There is often some
confusion between anger avoidance and anger management. Anger
management is no more aimed at avoiding anger than money
management is aimed at avoiding money. Avoiding anger only
closets it, stores it for a later decision. It is like avoiding opening
up bills. Eventually the table is stacked with windowed envelopes,
and the collection agencies are calling and banging on the door.
Anger management, in contrast, is similar to using a budget to pay
bills on time. Anger management opens up the “envelopes” of
difficult situations and decides how to handle them responsibly.
Disagreements are discussed as they arise, while they are still
small and manageable. The way out of this Vicious Circle is
learning assertiveness, learning how to bring up issues in a
digestible way—not frightening, insulting, or threatening.

6. Vicious Circle: Just Deserts

The person caught in the Just Deserts Vicious Circle sees the
world as one that should be just and fair. If something happens
which he sees as unfair, he experiences anger towards the person
who has gotten better treatment, and also towards those who are
responsible for dispensing justice. When he gets angry, it is in the
interest of restoring the balance to the universe. With this person,
the roots of this anger-trigger are often found in a relationship with a sibling during childhood. He often tells a brooding tale of a brother or sister who got easier treatment or special advantages. There may also be a story told of racial or ethnic injustice, perpetuated by an insensitive or malevolent social and judicial system that has stacked the deck in favor of others.

**Greg.** When I first met Greg, he was furious with his boss, the chief of police. “He has no right to give me a different punishment than he gives her.” Greg, a police officer, was involved in a relationship with a woman officer in his department. There had been several violent incidents between them, made worse by Greg’s frequent alcohol abuse. One of these incidents had happened at the local county fair, and had been witnessed by an unfortunately large group of fairgoers. The chief investigated, found Greg to be the main instigator of the incident, and placed him on disciplinary probation. He insisted that Greg attend Alcoholics Anonymous and go to anger management. His firearm was confiscated, and he was assigned to desk duty for the duration of the disciplinary probation. During our first session, Greg was emphatic that his girlfriend should have been placed on probation, as well. He did not deny some responsibility for the incident, but insisted that the incident was as much her fault as it was his. “She’s getting a break just because she’s a woman.”

When we examined Greg’s anger history, there were many incidents with a similar pattern. With his girlfriend, the angry incidents had occurred when he felt she was demanding special treatment, was getting more freedom or privilege in the relationship than he was. At work, one of his pet peeves was a co-worker getting special treatment. He had railed against the chief in a meeting when he had felt unjustly skipped over for a promotion. As a child, he had a younger brother who, he believes, always received special treatment in the family. His family had given his brother a free ride to college, while Greg had to work for
everything he had ever gotten. In his family, he had had frequent explosions at his parents or brother about issues of unfairness.

When I asked Greg what sorts of feelings of discomfort triggered anger, he answered without hesitation, “Unfairness.” This seemed an apt answer, at least at the start. But unfairness alone doesn’t trigger anger. I have never spoken with anyone who got furious when he got the biggest piece of cake, although that situation would be as unfair objectively as when he gets the smallest piece. The feeling at the core of unfairness is envy. The feeling of injustice is not a simple feeling of envy, which would be accompanied by the thought “I wish I could have a car like his.” The thoughts that accompany the feeling of injustice are these:

1. **Life should be fair.** This is a thought that demands a just universe, where individuals are rewarded according to their relative merit: “I deserve a car like his as much as he does.” “I work as hard as he does. I should have a house as nice as his.”

2. **The powers that be blew the call.** This is the assumption of a power—human or spiritual—which has the job of keeping the universe in harmony according to the law mentioned above. This may be a person (boss, parent, referee, political figure), spiritual power (gods, angels), or a political system that is responsible for maintaining the just universe. “Those jerks in the government have set it up so he gets a Porsche and I don’t.” “So why is it that the boss overlooks every good idea I have, and he can do no wrong?”

3. **I am the avenging angel, restoring justice.** This is a thought that assumes that I have the right to avenge injustice, to return the world to the harmony that has been lost. “The ref didn’t see him giving me a cheap shot, so I’ll get even by myself.” “The little rat stepped on my foot, so I’ll stomp on his.”
One objection that may be raised here is this: “Wait, what if these stories are true? What if a person *has* been mistreated at work? What if an individual *is* a member of an oppressed minority? Isn’t the anger justified, even necessary, as a way of balancing the scales?” In the descriptions of the Vicious Circles, I have not dealt with the issue of whether there is some truth to the belief system. For instance, in the Mad About You Vicious Circle, one might ask, “What if a man’s wife is really having an affair. Isn’t the anger justified then?” In response to this, I suggest that if we turn our longing for justice over to anger, it frequently backfires. In the process of avenging a wrong, the angry person often puts the universe even more out of harmony by doing something even more unjust. The social world reacts again, causing him even more problems because once again he sees himself as misunderstood, getting unfair treatment. To achieve true justice, we need a more sophisticated and thoughtful strategy than simply blowing up. This merely perpetuates the problem.

**Andy.** Andy worked in a factory, and was partnered in his job assignment with Jim. Andy was a self-starter, very conscientious about doing his job well. Jim was street-smart and lazy, would work hard only when the supervisor was observing. As soon as the supervisor left, Jim would slow down, chat with other workers, and look for reasons to take breaks—cigarettes, bathroom, or coffee. When Jim slacked off, Andy would begin to brood. He would think, “We get the same pay, but I work twice as hard. He gets credit for the work I do. If I slow down to his pace, I get yelled at for not working hard enough, but he’s good at coming up with excuses about how it’s not his fault.” Andy tried to talk to Jim about this inequity one day, but Jim only smirked at him. Incensed, Andy blew up and screamed threats at Jim, and the supervisor and other employees overheard these. The human resources office called Andy to the office and warned him that these threats created an adversarial work environment. He was placed on probation and told to get anger management. Andy
objected, “But Jim hasn’t been working as hard as I have.” The personnel manager responded, “Be that as it may, you are on probation, and any further incident will result in your termination.” Andy left the personnel office with an even deeper sense of injustice: not only did he work twice as hard as Jim, but now his job was in jeopardy for the angry outburst, while Jim played the innocent victim. We can see clearly in Andy’s story how this can be a vicious circle. He attempted to gain justice through anger, but his attempt backfired and caused even greater injustice. One danger for Andy is that he might respond to this increased injustice with even greater indignation and anger.

Sean. Even parents may experience envy and injustice regarding their children, and this can become the starting place for anger. Sean came to see me because he was exploding at his two daughters—ages three and five. His wife, Sharon, was bewildered and concerned about his anger, worried about the effect it might have on the children. I explored Sean’s family relationships, and he told me that a frequent issue in his marriage was Sharon’s breastfeeding of their children. Sharon believed strongly in nursing, and had been involved with the La Leche league even before the birth of their children. She was reluctant to stop, even as her sons approached school age. Sean reported that they had a family bed, and his two sons nursed on demand every night. Every few months, he and Sharon got into an argument about the issue. Sharon was very educated and eloquent about the virtues of breastfeeding, and Sean had great difficulty explaining why he had problems with it. He expressed discomfort over what other people might think, but Sharon easily dismissed these arguments, saying that these opinions were part of the bias against breastfeeding that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century.

I asked Sean about his sex life, and he said, somewhat uncomfortably, that it was non-existent since the birth of his second child. He felt deprived sexually, but denied that this
situation contributed to his anger. I gingerly suggested to him, “When your sons have needs, your wife responds immediately. But you’ve put your needs on the shelf. It sounds like your needs have moved down the priority list since you became a parent.” Sean was reluctant at first to acknowledge that he felt envy towards his sons. He felt such feelings were beneath him, and he told me that of course the children’s needs should take precedence over his for the time being, because of their age. Feelings, however, are not always well behaved and reasonable. Suppose I had a dog, and was unable to walk it until late in the day, for very good reasons. No matter how good my reasons, the dog is likely to chew through the screen door to get out. Sean’s envy was as persistent and irrational as that dog. Gradually, he became more comfortable discussing his feelings about his sons’ nursing and how it affected him. He began to make progress in softening his anger towards his sons only after he began to acknowledge his envy towards them about how quickly their needs were met.

The Mix of Vicious Circles

The six Vicious Circles outlined above at times appear in isolation. When this happens, there is a single, clearly defined theme that defines a person’s anger addiction. Often, however, the Vicious Circles mingle or chain together, forming a more complex situation. In nature, the chemical elements are rarely found in isolation. Generally, they appear combined with other elements in molecules. Similarly, the Vicious Circles are frequently discovered combined with other Vicious Circles in the form of compounds. There are as many possibilities of these compound Vicious Circles as there are chemical compounds. I will describe only two examples here to indicate how these can combine.

Dean. Dean, a 45-year-old single journeyman electrician, had been through several long-term relationships with women. Each one was turbulent, and each one had ended in a similar way. He
had great trouble tolerating any demands from his partner, and would easily feel imprisoned in the relationship. If his girlfriend Val simply asked him what he was thinking about, Dean could fly into a rage, with accusations that she was attempting to control him. He would often get so furious at this incursion that he would demand that she leave his house immediately, and would announce that their relationship was over. Often, Dean would stay angry with her for several days, ruminating over her attempts to control him. He would not call Val or attempt any other form of contact during this period. Eventually, Dean would become curious about what Val was doing. He would wonder why he hadn’t heard from her, even though he might have interpreted any call as another attempt to control and confine him. His ruminations would shift to the theme of infidelity. He would convince himself that Val was out meeting other guys during their separation, and was having wild sex parties, perhaps with multiple partners. Sometimes, the thoughts would be so powerful that he would leave work to check on her whereabouts. He would drive by her house, leave accusing voice-mail messages, and then finally insist on seeing her immediately. When they met, he would explode with angry accusations that she had been unfaithful. Val had known him for several years, and was expert at reassuring him and convincing him that she had no desire to be with another man. Dean would begin to calm, and would be sufficiently reassured to resume their relationship.

Dean served two masters. He was first seized by the Breaking Out vicious circle, which revolves around freedom and is launched by feelings of blockage or entrapment. However, as soon as he achieved separation from Val, he was seized by the Mad About You vicious circle, which is triggered by fears of abandonment. One of his core values was freedom, and the other was love and fusion. These two were often working at cross-purposes for Dean—one driving him towards Val, the other away from her.
His dilemma was similar to that created by a toddler who runs away from his mother in defiance, then becomes terrified that she is not there. In Dean’s case, this pendulum swing between the values of love and freedom had destroyed several previous relationships. It had left his former partners bewildered and emotionally battered, and eventually fed up with the dizzying contradictions of this man. Now the pendulum was putting considerable stress on his relationship with Val.

**Felix.** Felix was a sergeant first class in the Army. It was obvious from his general manner that military training had permeated his personality style. He was precise and formal in his communication style, carried himself in a straightforward, direct way. He had progressed quickly through the ranks in the Army, and was highly respected. However, he came to me because he was having difficulty with his family. Felix was married and had three sons under six. Chaos is inevitable in a household with young children. When messiness and mayhem emerged at home, he frequently exploded. He demanded the same discipline and compliance from his sons that he would demand of men in his platoon. His angry explosions had become a major issue in his relationship, and his wife was threatening divorce unless he got himself under control.

Felix hit the ground running in our work together. Determined to keep his family together, he began applying the same discipline he had learned in the military to his work on his temper. He identified his major Vicious Circle as Rage for Order, and began to address this. He began to consciously reduce the expectations that his wife and children would share his need for order and control. His progress was quick and impressive. Soon he reported that it had been several months since his last anger outburst, and his marriage had improved considerably. He believed that he had made enough progress, and stopped treatment.
Three years later, Felix called again. Emotional problems had re-emerged, and he wanted a tune-up. He told me that he had been walking through the garage hand-in-hand with his youngest son, and had tripped over an open can of paint, spilling it on the floor. His wife, he guessed, had not tightened the top. Felix had had a major meltdown, and had squeezed his son’s hand way too hard. He reported that he was still bothered by the same issues of chaos and lack of discipline. He said that he had learned to keep his feelings to himself. When things seemed out of control, he would bite his tongue and leave the house. I asked whether he ever talked about his feelings with his wife, and he responded that he did not. He didn’t want to rock the boat with her, because she had a sick family member who was consuming her attention. Even though Felix was still married, his marriage had very little communication or intimacy.

We eventually decided that Felix had simply traded in one Vicious Circle for another. He had first been caught in the Rage for Order Vicious Circle, with frequent anger explosions triggered by chaos. Now he had changed, and the explosions were much less frequent. But what had seemed to be a solution to his anger had actually been tongue-biting. He had covered over the Rage for Order circle with the Avoiding Anger circle. I encouraged him to express more what was bothering him, to speak up. Felix was incredulous about my suggestion at first, because he mistakenly believed that I was encouraging him to return to his previous outbursts that had been so threatening to his marriage. I then asked Felix to imagine that he was a professional spokesperson for his temper, like a lawyer or agent. For example, he could say to his wife, “I got very upset when I tripped over the can of paint you left open. It’s really important to me that you put the paint away after you use it.” This opened a new direction of work for us—helping Felix to become more assertive. This also proved to be an important new stage in his relationship with his wife, leading to
more understanding and intimacy, and to a restructuring of their life together.

There is a symbol called the **ouroboros** that appears in mythology, religion and alchemy of various cultures. This is the symbol of the snake or dragon eating its tale. The ouroboros is often used to represent the endless cycles of nature: the seasons, the phases of the moon, waking and sleeping, psychological death and rebirth. The Vicious Circles of anger addiction, which we have outlined in this chapter, are simply modern examples of this symbol. In each of them, the causal chain unfolds with a sense of inevitability. The snake is coiled on itself with immense power. In the work I do with clients, I have learned great respect for the power of these addictive loops. Change does not come easily. It certainly does not occur through the mechanical application of cognitive-behavioral techniques. These dragons do not crawl quietly into their caves to sleep. In order to free ourselves from their power, we must fully wake up. The struggle involves every ounce of strength, courage and awareness we can muster. In the following sections, I will outline some of the tools that may prove useful in this struggle.