

THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Part 1: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science

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Events of recent months inspired me to put fingers to the keyboard. So many mass shootings. So much suffering. So much rage. So much pain.

And the public conversations around it all has been so varied, ranging from extreme to extreme — from those who demand an eye for an eye and to others who consider forgiveness to be the only means of reconciliation and healing.

In this little e-book, I'll offer that forgiveness is, indeed, the ultimate and only path to absolution and healing — healing on all levels. Forgiveness is a powerful medicine for healing physical disease. However, I'll also offer that it doesn't necessarily come easily.

Rather, it may need to be a process — a process of honoring our experiences of suffering, of pain, of anger. And then, after cultivating

compassion for ourselves, for our emotional pain, can we do the same for those who have caused suffering. And forgive them.

Here in Part 1, I'll describe how both ancient wisdom and modern science teach us that holding onto anger can cause disease, and that by releasing it, we can heal.

In Part 2, I'll offer the how-to's of forgiving: first, how to access and release held anger; then, how to find compassion for ourselves and others; and finally, how to effortlessly experience the end result of these: forgiveness.



Here's the gist of it all:

- Holding onto anger causes *dis-ease*. Emotional *dis-ease*. And it can cause physical illness.
- Getting in touch with and releasing our anger can heal disease.
- We first need to allow and honor the anger, in order to release it.
- Forgiving comes more easily this way.
- Forgiving can heal us.

The resultant healing may be the healing of physical disease. Of emotional *dis*-ease. Or, it may be a healing of another form — of circumstances, of relationships or something else. It may be all of these.

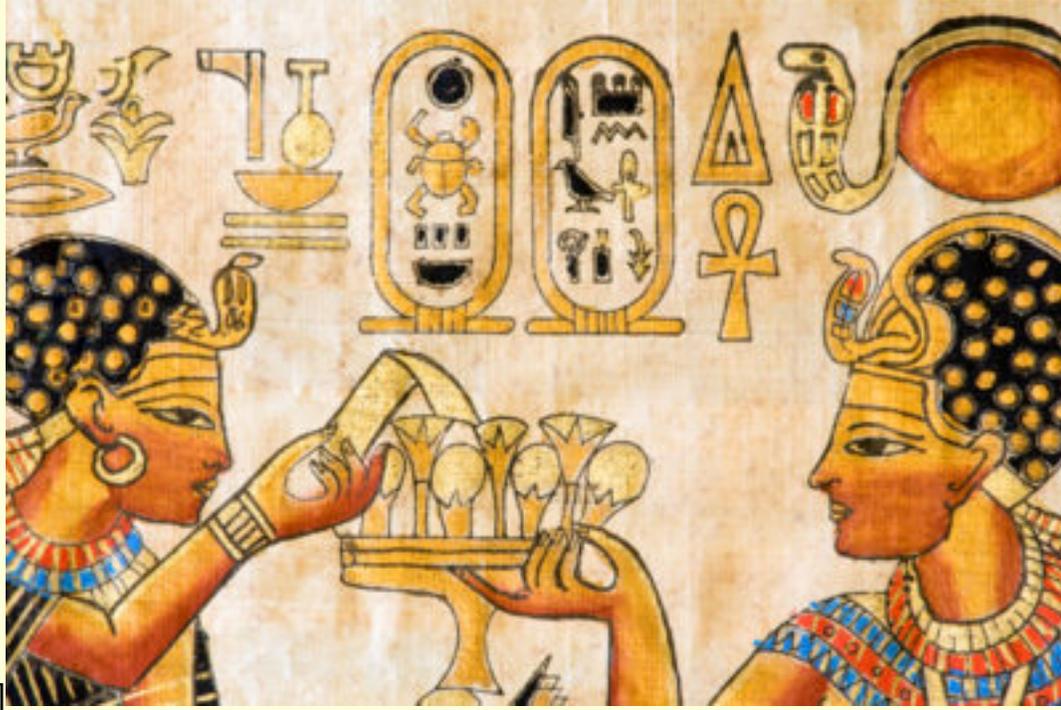
When you
forgive,
you HEAL.

When you
let go,
you GROW

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Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science: The Power of Anger and the Power of Forgiveness



Ancient wisdom abounds on the link between anger and disease. And now, modern science offers us abundant proof, supporting the veracity of this link.

Regarding this ancient wisdom: the cosmologies of all non-Western cultures hold that emotions, when persistent, held and unresolved, can affect all aspects of our lives, including, and most significantly, our health. Anger is considered to be a primary cause of disease when not dealt with and released.

Here's some of this ancient wisdom:

- *Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves.* ~ Chinese proverb
- *Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.* ~ Buddha

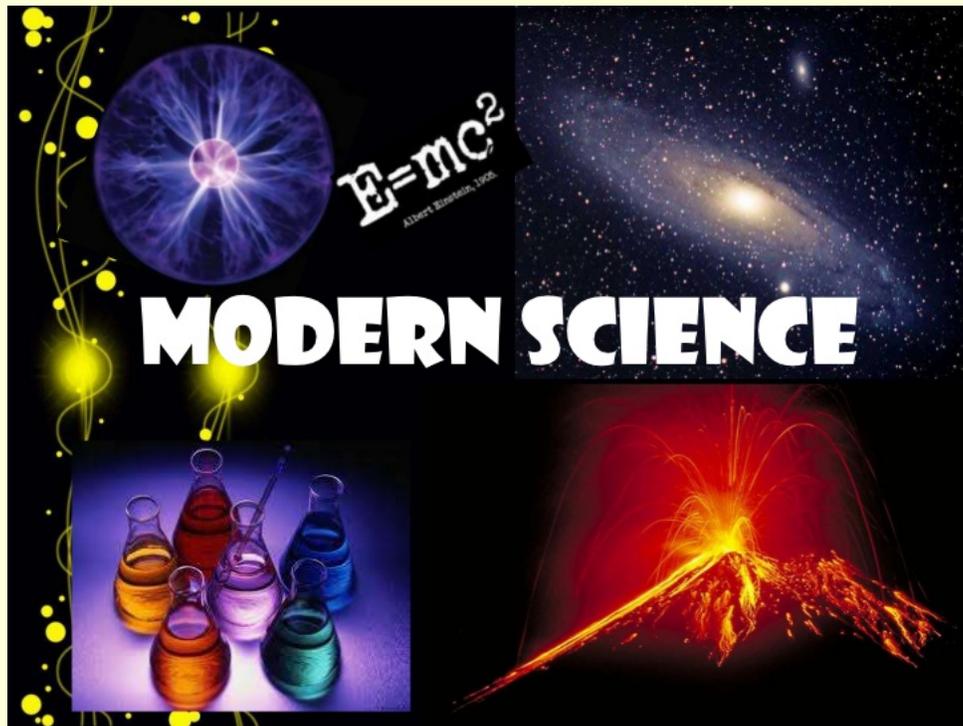
- *If you kick a stone in anger, you'll hurt your own foot.* ~ Korean proverb
- *Anger is a poison that contaminates the blood.* ~ Sufi Master Shaykh Khwaja Shamsuddin Azeemi
- *There are seven emotions: joy, anger, melancholy, anxiety, grief, fright, and terror. When any one is in extreme, without appease, disease results. Anger is a primary cause of disease, with effects on the liver, heart, brain and stomach. Eventually, on the whole being. Cancers and tumors often arise when anger is held.* ~ tenet of Traditional Chinese Medicine
- *Ama, or toxicity, is the cause of all disease. Ama can be mental, emotional, physical, spiritual or "karmic." Withheld emotions create ama. Anger imbalances can result in stomach issues, particularly ulcers, inflammation of any kind, and eventually, destruction of health.* ~ tenet of Ayurveda

In fact, the founders of Western medicine — Hippocrates, Maimonides and others — all espoused this ancient wisdom. They spoke of the links between emotions and *dis*-ease, of the links between anger and illness. It's also a common sense wisdom that our relatives of generations past were likely to dispense.

However, in spite of the abundance of this ancient wisdom, we physicians haven't been taught any of it. With pharmacology's stronghold position in the Western medicine toolkit that occurred in the past century, coupled with the move towards specialization — focusing on parts and systems of the body, and the resultant specialists who attend to these — my profession has lost touch with it all.

Modern Science's Contribution

Yet despite Western medicine's limitations, there's a vast and growing body of scientific research that concurs with the ancient wisdom — that anger, either suppressed or expressed in extreme, is a risk factor for disease, and can cause disease and impede healing.



A little side mention of why this good science hasn't reached physicians in clinical practice — we're just not caught up with these research findings. Medical education and practice always lag many years behind current scientific endeavors.

Here are some of these research findings: links between anger and heart disease, ulcers, cancer, acute and chronic pain, infections, obesity and diabetes, just to name a few, have been demonstrated. Also, gastrointestinal issues such as gastritis, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, headaches and musculoskeletal pain. All of these can be caused and/or aggravated by unresolved anger.

The how's of these research findings lie in the basic research exploring the connections between emotions and health.



Here's some of the science of it all. Thoughts and feelings can:

- Affect the autonomic nervous system, which controls our fight/flight/freeze and our relaxation responses. The stress or fight/flight/freeze response is turned on.
- Affect gene expression — what the genes actually do — for example, genes that control immune function, the body's response to stress, inflammation.
- Affect physiologic parameters in the blood, neurochemicals in the brain, hormone function — causing inflammation and decreasing immune function.
- Affect neuroplasticity in the brain — literally, changes in the brain's grey and white matter — with effects on thoughts, emotions, memory, and increasing states of anxiety and depression.
- And much more, beyond my scope here.

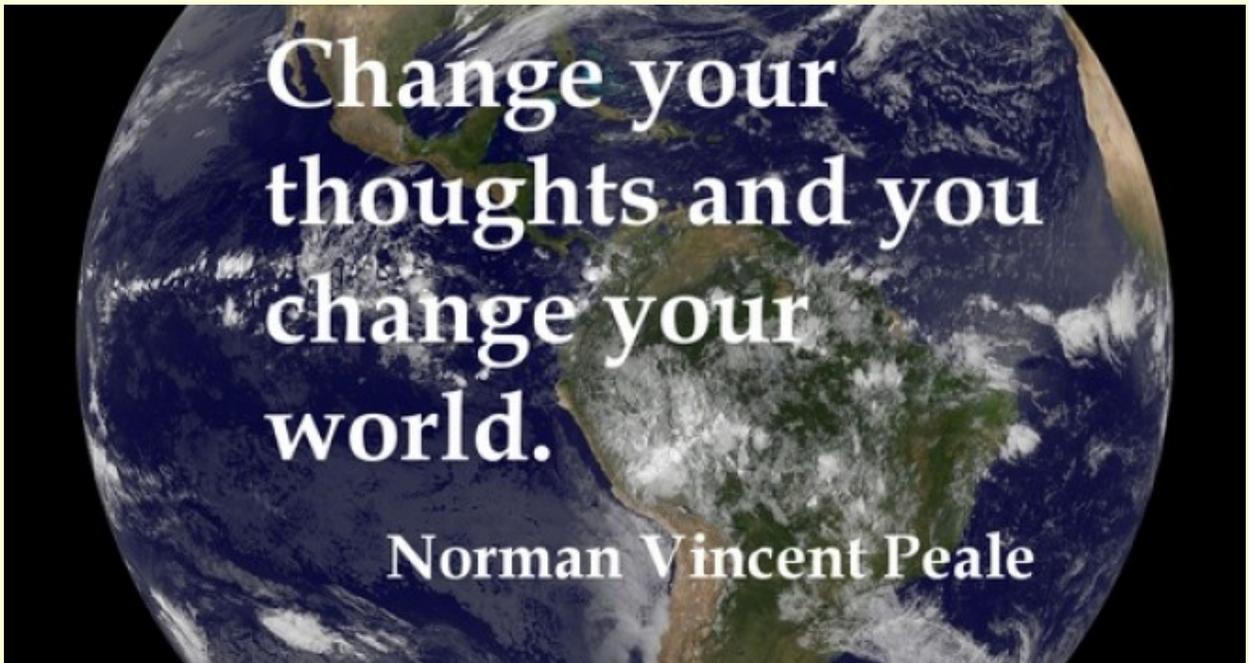
Ancient wisdom and modern science concur, as well, on the healing power of releasing and resolving anger, and on the power of forgiveness.



In the traditions of Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda, for example, addressing the root cause of disease, the emotional cause of disease, can heal that disease. Ulcers can heal, infections can heal, tumors can remit, metabolic disease can resolve. And more.

The scientific rationale for such healing lies in the work of modern biomedicine. Studies have demonstrated effects on heart health, cancer, immune function, pain, depression and anxiety, just to name a few. The effects that I described above are lessened and can be eliminated by healing the anger and forgiving.

Bottom line: if you can change your thoughts, if you can change your emotions, you can change your health, you can change your life.



Stay tuned for the how to's in Part 2....

THE HEALING POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Part 2: The How-To's of Forgiving



In Part 1, I described how both ancient wisdom and modern science teach us that holding anger can cause disease and that freeing ourselves from anger's grip can heal us.

Here in Part 2, are the how-to's: how to access and feel the feelings; how to shift the feelings; how to experience forgiveness.

Reflecting again on the events that inspired this piece, much talk in the media centered on forgiveness. Op-ed pieces and media interviews were plentiful, and quite a few discussed the need for forgiveness.

However, as I wrote in part 1, forgiveness doesn't necessarily come easily. Rather, it's a process. First, we need to honor and allow our anger, without judgment, before we can begin to forgive.

Allowing the feelings is the first step to healing.



Here are the 2 steps of this process:

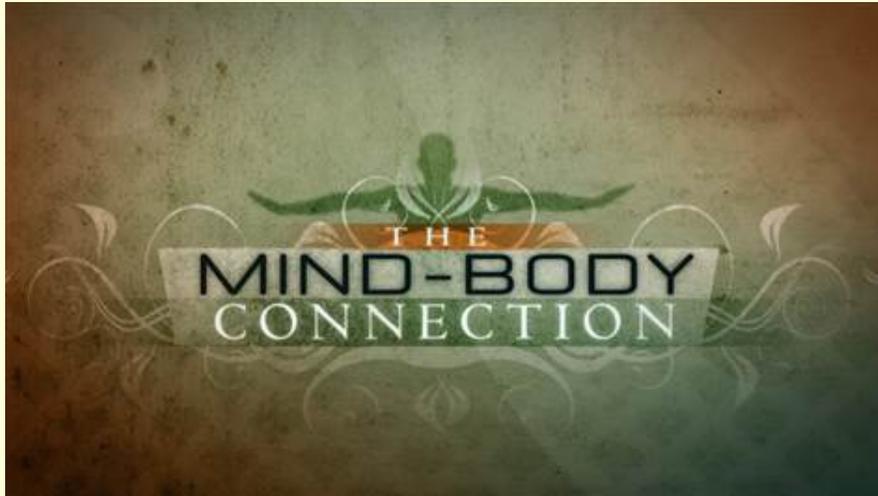
1. Allowing the feelings
2. Compassion and understanding for ourselves and others

Being able to forgive is the natural and effortless result of this 2 step process.



A little background

Knowing a bit about the mindbody connection is helpful. Thoughts and feelings are not separate from the physical body — they result in instantaneous effects and changes in the physical body. We cannot heal the physical body without healing our thinking, without healing our emotions.



Step One: Allowing the Feelings

The following how-to's are mindbody medicine techniques that use this mindbody connection to help us to shift our mental and emotional states.

By getting in touch with what we're thinking and feeling, and then connecting with our physical body, where thoughts and feelings are imprinted and held, we can shift them.

Anger can be a strong and protective overcoat, yet it can be this very protection that keeps us from going deeper, allowing for healing. Often, underneath the anger may be fear, grief, shame or other feelings. Anger is also an emotion that we may have trouble allowing and honoring, because of what culture and society may have taught us about this emotion.

Keep in mind that all feelings are normal and natural, and allowing them, with compassion and understanding for ourselves, is the first step to healing.

Journaling is a powerful tool that can help us to get in touch with what we're feeling.



Writing Exercise: Journaling to Get in Touch with Anger

1. Get 3 sheets of paper.
2. On the 1st sheet, make a numbered list of everyone and everything you feel or have ever felt angry towards. Don't judge yourself. Be exhaustive. Don't limit anything.

Go back to your childhood, to any memories of feeling angry toward your parents, siblings or friends. Consider other close relationships, past and present. Your spouse, children. Other family members, close friends, colleagues.

Beyond individuals, consider institutions, political, social issues — anything and everything that might elicit feelings of anger.

You may not be aware of these feelings now. But if the feelings come to mind when thinking about people or circumstances,

remembering means the emotion still exists vibrationally in your bodymind and that it's being held in your physical body.

Most importantly, suspend any judgments. Don't feel any "shoulds" about the process. Know that feelings are normal and natural aspects of our humanness.

3. On page 2, for each number listed on first page, write the reason "why," or explain the circumstances. Be as detailed as possible.
4. On page 3, for each number listed on the first page, answer the question: "How did it make me feel." This may seem self-evident. However, don't write merely "angry." Rather, go within and find a deeper feeling. Perhaps it could be feeling misunderstood, or hurt, or fearful, or worried. Or something else.
5. Take some time to reflect on what came up for you when you did the third part of this exercise. What was beneath the anger?



Being angry isn't "unspiritual."
Anger shows us where we're
clinging and what needs healing.



The Second Exercise is a Mindbody Exercise: accessing anger in the physical body.

To prepare, find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted, where you'll feel comfortable and at ease. Either sitting or lying down. If you're wearing a watch, remove it. Make sure your clothes are loose around your waist, so you can breathe easily.

7 Steps to Accessing Anger in the Body

1. Close your eyes and start focusing on your breath. Follow your breath in and out through your nostrils. Allow your belly to expand on the inhalation, and to gently return on the exhalation. Do this abdominal breathing for several minutes.
2. Think about the list you made in the journaling exercise. Bring to mind the source of anger that is the strongest for you. It might be a person or people. It might be circumstances or incidents. It might be the state of politics today. Or something else. Just choose the one's that's the strongest, and then imagine filling your forehead with all of the thoughts and feelings that come up for you. Don't worry, this won't make it worse...it's part of the process of allowing the feelings and then shifting them.
3. Now, return to your breath awareness. Check in with your physical body and notice where you feel these thoughts and feelings in your body. You may feel them as an awareness, as a sensation, as a discomfort. You may feel them in one place or more. Many people feel the anger emotion in their neck or jaw. You may feel it elsewhere. Or you may not localize the feelings at all, but rather have a general all over bodily sensation. Whatever you experience is normal for you.
4. When you've noticed where the feelings are, breathe into that place or places. Or into your whole body, if it's a generalized sensation.
5. Continue breathing into your body. Don't try to make the bodily awareness or sensation go away or change it in any way. Just be with it. Continue this for several minutes.

6. When you feel ready, return to breath awareness. Follow the gentle rising of your belly when you inhale and the gentle return when you exhale. Continue for a while.
7. Return to the activities of your day, slowly and gently. Or consider a rest, or even sleep, after this exercise. It can elicit deep shifts, and allowing time to rest can support these.

Step Two: Compassion for Ourselves and Others

In order for us to truly forgive, we need to have compassion for ourselves. Also, we need to have compassion for those we've felt hurt or offended by.

But, as above, we need to honor and allow our feelings first. It's hard to have compassion when we're still feeling angry.

Then, compassion and understanding for others come more easily....



Cultivating compassion

Drawing from contemporary contemplative traditions and mindbody medicine, here are several simple exercises to help us to cultivate feel compassion for those we've been hurt by:

First, using the rational, thinking mind, reflect on the following:

1. Consider that the source of your anger suffers deeply, too. Even if they are unaware.
2. Consider that many lack enlightened wisdom, and often their actions are based on ignorance — a lack of understanding of themselves and others, and a lack of understanding about the nature of relationships and life processes.

Next, experiment with a mindfulness technique, a heart-centered meditation. Prepare as before. Be in a quiet place, allowing for your physical comfort and ease.



Heart-centered meditation

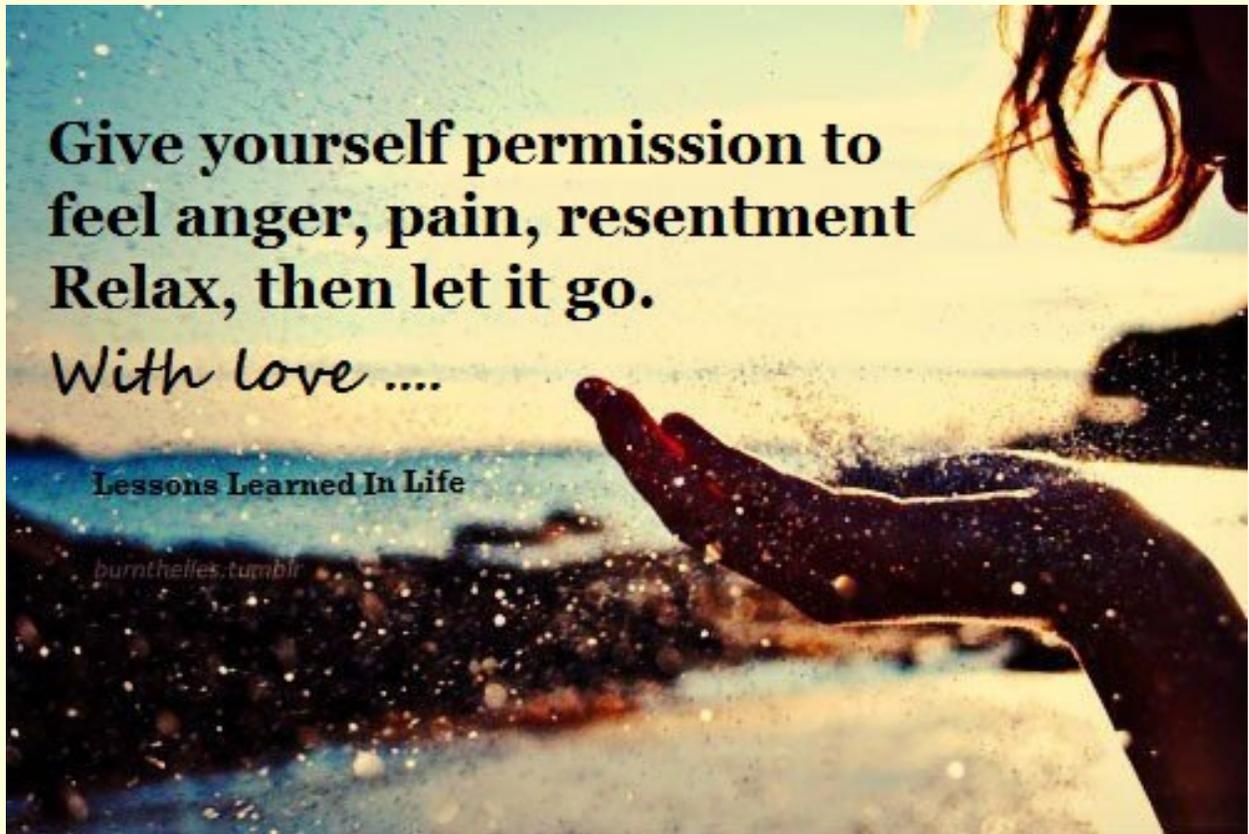
1. Close your eyes and start focusing on the breath. Follow your breath as it goes in and out through your nostrils. Allow your belly to gently expand on the inhalation and gently return on the exhalation. Do this abdominal breathing for several minutes.
2. Focus your intention on your heart center. Breathe into your heart center. Exhale out through your heart center. Put an image of yourself there. Breathe into your heart center. Exhale out through your heart center. Continue for several minutes.
3. Now bring to mind the source of your anger. Breathe into your heart center. Exhale out through your heart center. Put an image of this person in your heart center. Breathe into your heart center. Exhale out through your heart center. Continue for several minutes.
4. Return slowly and gently to breath awareness. Continue for several minutes.
5. Return slowly and gently to the activities of your day.

Some final thoughts and suggestions for continuing with the forgiveness process on your own....

Feelings are always coming up for us. Be mindful that anger is an important feeling to honor, that it may be a sign that we are needing something that we are not getting, and also, that underneath the anger may be deeper feelings that need attention.

Check in with yourself and with what you're feeling by slowing down, getting still, and experimenting with some or all of the above.

It can be helpful to work with these tools whenever you're feeling that anger is present and not easily transiting. Also, and often, we can be holding onto anger but unaware of it. Thus, it can be helpful to work with these exercises even if we're not actively feeling the feelings — we can bring them up to the surface this way, allowing them to shift and leave us.



In Closing....

I hope you've found this little e-book interesting and helpful.

As always, I welcome your feedback.

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