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# *The Dance of* **ANGER**

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

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*"The Dance of Anger is a careful and  
compassionate exploration of women's anger. It will be  
extremely useful to almost every reader."*

—Susie Orbach

*Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.*

With a New Preface by the Author

# THE DANCE OF *Anger*

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*A Woman's Guide to  
Changing the Patterns of  
Intimate Relationships*

**Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.**



For my first family:

My mother, *Rose Rubin Goldhor*

My father, *Archie Goldhor*

My sister, *Susan Henne Goldhor*

And in memory  
of my grandparents:

*Henne Salkind Rubin and Morris Rubin*

*Teibel Goldhor and Benny Hazel Goldhor*

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# PREFACE

I recently read *The Dance of Anger* again with an eye toward updating its contents for this new edition. Although the book was first published more than a decade ago, I found that I still agreed with everything I said back then.

This was both good news and bad news. The good news is that I had nothing more to do.

The bad news is that anger is still with us, and for obvious reasons. Intimate relationships are still a source of suffering, disappointment, and just plain hard times. Families continue to be dysfunctional (I like Mary Karr's definition of a dysfunctional family as "any family with more than one person in it"). And the world of work is neither fair nor hospitable to women. Anyone who claims to have nothing to be angry about these days is sleepwalking.

Anger is one of the most painful emotions we experience, and the most difficult to use wisely and well. Yet our anger is an important signal that always deserves our attention and respect. The difficulty is that feeling angry doesn't tell us what is wrong, or what specifically we can do that will make things better rather than worse. That's why I wrote *The Dance of Anger*—to help readers not only to identify the true sources of their anger, but also to learn how to change the patterns from which anger springs.

The challenge of anger is at the heart of our struggle to achieve intimacy, self-esteem, and joy. Learning how to deal with it is worth the journey, even though there are no six-easy-steps to personal fulfillment and relational bliss. *The Dance of Anger* teaches readers to understand how relationships operate and how to change our part in them. It encourages readers to go the hard route.

My own attitude toward the self-help world has changed since *The Dance of Anger* was first published in 1985. During the early stages of my writing, colleagues often asked, “Do you really think a *book* (as opposed to *therapy*, they meant) can help people?” It was a fair question. Real change occurs slowly, sometimes at glacial speed even with professional help. My honest response was, “I don’t know.” But I hoped that it could make a difference in people’s lives.

I also worried that I would never find out. For a very long time, it appeared as if *The Dance of Anger* would never see the light of day. My first publisher hired, fired, rehired, and then fired me again. This was the beginning of an endless series of rejections from just about every publisher on the planet over a period of years. I often quip that I could wallpaper the largest room of my home with rejection slips—hardly an exaggeration. No one wanted to publish a book on the subject of women’s anger. When *The Dance of Anger* finally did hit the stores, I was convinced that no one other than my mother and my five best friends would buy it.

Today, with twenty-five foreign editions and sales of over two million copies in English, I have only my readers to thank. Word of mouth keeps *The Dance of Anger* circulating, and I am continually moved by the “you changed my life” stories that come my way. Once, after a lecture, a seventy-three-year-old woman came up and introduced me to her ninety-five-year-old mother. They were holding hands. The daughter told me that they hadn’t spoken to each other for over two decades until they read my book. This story, along with many others, stays with me, reminding me during the inevitable down periods of authorhood that it is all worthwhile.

Finally, I want to mention the availability of a booklet called *A Reader’s Guide to the Work of Harriet Lerner*, which your local bookstore can order for you free of charge. You can also call toll-free 1-800-242-7737 and order by ISBN (0-06-099359-6) or visit

the HarperCollins home page (<http://www.harpercollins.com>). All around the country, women have gathered together in book groups to discuss ideas that interest them. Some of these groups are salon-style arrangements where participants share ideas only, while other groups encourage self-examination and more personal sharing. The reader's guide includes information about me as an author, tips for forming a book (or "Dance") group, and questions for your own group to discuss. Reading groups like these are wonderful and anyone can start one—on my books or on those of other favorite authors.

What my readers have taught me is that, yes, a book really can change lives. Or, as the saying goes, "When the student is ready the teacher arrives"—and sometimes in the form of the written word. I'm continually amazed that so many women and men have been able to grab a bit of wisdom and advice from *The Dance of Anger* and run with it. Appreciative letters from my readers now far outnumber my old rejections slips. I am very grateful, indeed.

Harriet Lerner, January 1997

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## THE CHALLENGE OF ANGER

Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to. Our anger may be a message that we are being hurt, that our rights are being violated, that our needs or wants are not being adequately met, or simply that something is not right. Our anger may tell us that we are not addressing an important emotional issue in our lives, or that too much of our self—our beliefs, values, desires, or ambitions—is being compromised in a relationship. Our anger may be a signal that we are doing more and giving more than we can comfortably do or give. Or our anger may warn us that others are doing too much for us, at the expense of our own competence and growth. Just as physical pain tells us to take our hand off the hot stove, the pain of our anger preserves the very integrity of our self. Our anger can motivate us to say “no” to the ways in which we are defined by others and “yes” to the dictates of our inner self.

Women, however, have long been discouraged from the awareness and forthright expression of anger. Sugar and spice are the ingredients from which we are made. We are the nurturers, the soothers, the peacemakers, and the steadyers of rocked boats. It is our job to please, protect, and placate the world. We may hold relationships in place as if our lives depended on it.

Women who openly express anger at men are especially suspect. Even when society is sympathetic to our goals of equality, we all know that “those angry women” turn everybody off. Unlike our male heroes, who fight and even die for what they believe in, women may be condemned for waging a bloodless and humane revolution for their own rights. The direct expression of anger, especially at men, makes us unladylike, unfeminine, unmaternal, sexually unattractive, or, more recently, “strident.” Even our language condemns such women as “shrews,” “witches,” “bitches,” “hags,” “nags,” “man-haters,” and “castrators.” They are unloving and unlovable. They are devoid of femininity. Certainly, you do not wish to become one of *them*. It is an interesting sidelight that our language—created and codified by men—does not have *one* unflattering term to describe men who vent their anger at women. Even such epithets as “bastard” and “son of a bitch” do not condemn the man but place the blame on a woman—his mother!

The taboos against our feeling and expressing anger are so powerful that even *knowing* when we are angry is not a simple matter. When a woman shows her anger, she is likely to be dismissed as irrational or worse. At a professional conference I attended recently, a young doctor presented a paper about battered women. She shared many new and exciting ideas and conveyed a deep and personal involvement in her subject. In the middle of her presentation, a well-known psychiatrist who was seated behind me got up to leave. As he stood, he turned to the man next to him and made his diagnostic pronouncement: “Now, *that* is a *very* angry woman.” That was that! The fact that he detected—or thought he detected—an angry tone to her voice disqualified not only what she had to say but also who she was. Because the very possibility that we are angry often meets with rejection and disapproval from others, it is no wonder that it is hard for us to know, let alone admit, that we are angry.