

RAGE

A

Step-by-Step
Guide to
Overcoming
Explosive
Anger

RONALD T. POTTER-EFRON,
MSW, PH.D.,
author of *Angry All the Time*

This volume provides essential information for people who experience rage and the mental health professionals who work with them. Potter-Efron's comprehensive and detailed descriptions of the nature and determinants of four different kinds of rage will also be of great interest to the general reader. The interpersonal and behavioral factors that trigger these overwhelming experiences of the extreme expression of anger are clarified, with excellent examples of the manifestation of rage. These recommendations for dealing with intense emotional experiences will help the reader to both understand and cope more effectively with rage-related problems.

—Charles D. Spielberger, Ph.D., ABPP,
distinguished research professor and
director, of the Center for Research in
Behavioral Medicine and Health
Psychology at the University of South
Florida in Tampa, FL

Finally a book that specifically deals with the many facets and complexities experienced in rage! Readers will be able to assess their own specific type of rage easily while also learning useful techniques for intervening and stopping such uncontrollable eruptions. This book is an excellent tool for individuals who are trying to gain more control over their emotions and counter the feelings of helplessness that often accompany experiences of rage. I highly recommend this book to anyone wanting to make significant changes in his or her life.

—Kimberly Flemke, Ph.D., assistant
professor in the Graduate Programs of
Couples and Family Therapy at Drexel
University in Philadelphia, PA

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New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Patricia Potter-Efron, in deepest appreciation for her continuing support, help, and encouragement.

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1. What Is Rage?

Are You a Rager?

Something strange and scary happens to some people. On occasion, they lose control over their bodies, their brains, and their behavior. They say and do things that they later deeply regret. To illustrate, let me introduce you to four people who rage.

Lyle: A Victim of Child Abuse Still Fighting for His Life

Lyle almost died when he was only eight years old. His dad just about killed him. All he'd done was to forget to stack firewood for the woodstove. Dad came home, saw it wasn't done, and beat Lyle unconscious. His ma took him to the hospital. She lied, of course, about what happened. Told the doctors Lyle had fallen and smacked his head. Maybe they believed her. Maybe not. They patched him up. After that, Lyle never was the same. He got mean. He hated his dad. Finally, at age sixteen, Lyle was big enough to turn the tables. One night he went crazy. He doesn't remember what happened. His kid sister told him he started screaming at their father and then charged right at him. He knocked his dad down and kicked him. He beat the crap out of his father.

Here's the problem. Lyle's a thirty-year-old man now. But he can't control his emotions. He gets angry a lot. Really angry. And then he blacks out, just like that first time at age sixteen. Lyle's afraid he'll kill somebody one day. And he might—unless he gets some help soon.

Brenda: The Woman Whom Everybody Ignores

Brenda has always been the kind of person who blends into the background. Not very noticeable. Nice, but nothing special about her. Quiet. There she is now, smiling at her boss as he jokingly ignores all her good ideas. And, at the party, Brenda seems not to mind that her husband openly flirts with other women. Ah, but if people could only read her mind, they'd

discover that Brenda's fuming inside. Maybe then they wouldn't be so surprised when she snaps, something she does about once a month. Man, you wouldn't believe the words that come out of that woman's mouth! It's like she isn't herself. Afterwards, Brenda always says she's sorry. She feels horrible about what she's said. But Brenda also says she can't control herself. It's like those words just roll off her tongue without her having any say in the matter. It's almost as if someone else, not Brenda, were speaking.

Ricardo: A Proud Man Too Easily Humiliated

Ricardo is a hard worker and a good provider. Unfortunately, though, he has very fragile self-esteem. He wants to believe he's a winner, but he's secretly afraid he's really a loser in life. That makes him very sensitive to criticism. So, the other day, when his boss told him that he had to redo some paperwork, Ricardo blew a fuse. "Who are you to tell me what to do, you fat old pig?" he yelled at his boss. He got so angry that two security men had to escort him out of the office. He lost his job that day, just as he'd lost several previous jobs. "I just can't take it when they put me down," he sobbed to his wife later that day. "I tell myself to stay calm, but I just can't. Something happens to me, and I go crazy."

Sharelle: A Woman Who Cannot Handle Abandonment

Here's Sharelle's story: "My boyfriend said he needed a little more space. He said we were getting too close. I went nuts. I threw a vase at his head." Sharelle gets so preoccupied with the men she falls in love with that she loses herself. She becomes really jealous, too. She better not catch her man so much as peeking at another woman, or all hell will break loose. But mostly, Sharelle is terrified of being abandoned. That probably goes back to when her mother died when Sharelle was only five years old. Her father disappeared from her life a couple years later. So when her boyfriend backs off even a little bit, Sharelle has an immediate meltdown. She cries uncontrollably. She shakes. Once she got so angry that she aimed a shotgun right at her boyfriend's heart. At least she thinks she did that. Her memory of events like this is pretty vague.

Lyle, Brenda, Ricardo, and Sharelle—and perhaps you, the reader, as well—all suffer from *rage*. This mysterious event can be defined as an experience of excessive anger accompanied by partial or complete loss of conscious awareness, a normal sense of self, and/or behavioral control. Each of these people becomes, for a little while, someone different from themselves. As one of my clients told me of how he'd jumped out of a car to pummel a man who had just insulted him, "Someone else got out of that car. It wasn't really me."

How Common Is Raging?

If you are a rager, you may believe you are the only person on this planet with that particular problem. Actually, you have plenty of company. In fact, author and psychiatrist John Ratey (Ratey and Johnson 1998), in reviewing the literature on rage, writes that "one in five normal, everyday people experiences violent attacks of rage that he or she cannot control" (149). Now this doesn't mean that 20 percent of the population gets homicidally mad on a regular basis. But, what it does mean is that many people do become so irate, from time to time, that they say and do things they later regret. Furthermore, these individuals often say that they don't like losing control that way but that, when it happens, they truly cannot stop themselves.

I am a clinical psychotherapist in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Eau Claire is a rather sleepy city of only 60,000 people. It is family oriented, religious, and quiet. There are no real gangs in Eau Claire, Wisconsin—just a few wannabes. In other words, you would probably expect there to be precious few ragers in my humble burg. You would be wrong. My caseload is full of people who display both sudden and seething rages—short-fused screamers and long-term resenters. Abandonment rages are routine, since Eau Claire suffers from the same problem with failing relationships that is so common everywhere in the United States. Job layoffs have added to many workers' sense of impotent rage. Too many of the people in my town feel tremendous shame and sometimes react with great anger to the slightest insult. And, sadly, Eau Claire has its full share of men and women who have survived severe trauma, only to be left with a terrified, defensive stance toward life.

I believe Ratey's statistics. I agree that 20 percent of the population rages at least occasionally. That makes rage a significant problem in American society (and probably in many other countries as well).

A Closer Look at Rage

Let's break down the definition of rage into its component pieces:

An Experience of Excessive Anger

Too much anger! That's a big part of the rage experience. But what does that mean? When is too much too much? Here's one explanation. Imagine that every person alive carries around an emotional container. The job of that container is to be a place we can fill with our strong emotions, in this case anger. The container is more like a balloon, though, than a box. When you're not angry, the balloon contracts. When you get mad, it fills up. It expands enough so that you can be angry, sometimes very angry, but still be yourself. Furthermore, some fortunate people seem to have balloons that can expand easily. They can get angry without any difficulty. It's as if their emotional balloon can just keep on expanding forever. But most people can't do that. They can only get so angry, and then the balloon starts to get stretched awfully thin.

Besides, no balloon can expand forever. At some point, you reach your limit. Your emotional balloon is full. But what if you still have more anger? How much more emotion can you force into the balloon? At some point, sooner or later, that balloon is going to burst.

Here's another analogy. Imagine that it's been raining for days and days. Water is pouring into streams and rivers, threatening to flood the land. Only a single dam lies in the way. But can that dam hold back the flood? The answer, if all that water represents anger, is usually yes. You might have to open the spillways for a while (maybe by taking a time-out or by being appropriately assertive or by using other anger management tools), but the dam has been built to withstand a lot of pressure. It would take a once-in-a-century flood to burst through the dam.

The point at which your emotional balloon pops, or when the dam bursts, is what I mean by the phrase *excessive anger*. It's a state of emotional overload that triggers all kinds of changes, none of them good. The three most significant of these problematic changes are covered below.

Partial or Complete Loss of Conscious Awareness

Lyle says he doesn't remember what he says and does when he rages. That's a fairly common experience, although many ragers

remember part of what they said or did, usually up to a certain point (when their emotional balloon pops) and perhaps a little of what happens after that. These memories will usually be more emotional than intellectual, more vague than detailed.

Lyle is having a *rage blackout*. That balloon has popped, and the first thing affected is the more evolved parts of his brain, including the part responsible for active conscious memory.

Partial or Complete Loss of a Normal Sense of Self

Brenda felt almost like someone else had taken over her body. That's also a common raging experience. Even if you stay conscious, you don't feel at all normal. You have a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde experience in which a mean and furious person seems to take over your body. Sometimes the takeover is partial and short lasting. Sometimes it is complete and long lasting.

Partial or Complete Loss of Behavioral Control

The scariest part of a rage episode, at least for bystanders, is that ragers may appear to lose control over their actions. At worst, ragers can and do kill people while raging. They also destroy precious objects, both their own and others'. They say awful things as well, oftentimes things they would never say at other times. Again, and fortunately, this loss of control may be only partial and temporary. Some ragers tell me they sense an internal battle during these moments between a destructive, violent, furious self and their more sane and peaceful self.

Rage Is a Transformative Experience

Here's what all this means. Rages occur when you become angry enough at the world (or yourself) that you can no longer contain your anger through your usual channels. Discussion doesn't help. Arguing is useless. Exercise

fails. It's too late to take a time-out. Your emotional balloon, the one you use to contain your anger, bursts. The dam breaks. You then become someone noticeably different, if only for a few seconds and perhaps only to yourself. You are transformed.

Technically, this experience is called a *dissociative event*. But I want mostly to avoid that term because it has become too closely associated with people who have permanent splits in their experience of self, so-called-multiple personalities. I'm not saying these people don't exist, however. It's just that the rager's experience is a more temporary one. It is an emergency measure the brain uses when it is simply overwhelmed with anger. True, the balloon pops. But once the emergency ends, almost always within minutes or a few hours, your normal personality returns. "It's over, I'm not angry anymore. I can come back now" is the theme song of the rager.

I do use the term *dissociation* when someone has what is often called a *blind rage*. A blind rage occurs when you have an exceptionally long-lasting loss of awareness during which you say or do excessively violent things. You may appear to be perfectly alert (perhaps pacing around, yelling, making threatening remarks) during a blind rage. But you really aren't yourself at all. Later, you'll report that you don't remember most or all of what happened. It is as if you had a circuit breaker in your brain that breaks the connection between your actions and what you are aware of doing. Nobody knows exactly why this happens. The best current guess is that during times of extreme stress and perceived threat, the brain goes into survival mode. Its only job right then is to keep you alive, if necessary, by destroying everything in your path. The brain essentially decides, "This is no time to think. Just act. Fight. Kill if necessary."

Blind rages are the most potent kind of transformative experience that ragers may have. They are true dissociative experiences, similar to but not the same as epileptic seizures. Blind rages are related to the way highly traumatized individuals repress extremely threatening events in their lives, such as near-death experiences or sexual assaults.

Here is one other distinction. A blind rage is different from an alcoholic or a drug-induced blackout. Alcoholic blackouts aren't emotional events. They aren't caused by emotional overload. However, use of alcohol or other mood-altering chemicals does make some people more likely to have rage blackouts. That's why you should avoid these substances if you have a

problem with rage.

Other Important Characteristics of Rage

Rages always involve an experience of excessive anger and a transformative experience marked by loss of normal awareness, a changed sense of self, and loss of behavioral control. But people also often talk about the following aspects of rage:

- Total rages are far more intense than very strong anger.
- Rages may develop quickly and without warning.
- Rages may develop more slowly and less spontaneously.
- Four kinds of threatening situations can trigger rage.
- A distorted sense of danger leads to exaggerated actions.

The next part of the chapter will cover these different aspects.

Total Rage

A total rage is an extreme event, more powerful than even the strongest types of normal anger. When you have a total rage, the word “anger” completely understates your experience. To say that ragers get angry is like saying a tornado is a bad storm. No, you aren’t angry. You are absolutely furious about whatever is troubling you. Total rage is the cyclone of wrath, the level five hurricane of vengeance. Rages like this are a total body-and-mind event that transforms a person into a potentially lethal instrument of destruction. Your entire body can become consumed in a rage. Your heart starts pounding. Your hands turn into fists that pound on tables until they are bloodied. Your voice may rise an octave. Your legs shake. Some people literally see red because the rush of blood being pumped far too quickly and powerfully expands the capillaries in their eyes.

You may instinctively understand this idea. You know you can talk with an angry person, even someone who is irate. You can calm them down. You can reason at least a little with them. But you also know or sense that there is no talking with someone having a total rage.

When you rage, you are in a world of your own. No matter what others

say, you either don't hear it at all or you completely distort the message. When you hear "please calm down," you interpret it as "you're trying to control me again, aren't you?" You hear "I love you" as "I hate you."

But then, several minutes or hours later, or the next day, you might feel terribly guilty and remorseful. "I don't know what came over me," you might say. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to scare you. I didn't mean to hit you. I promise I won't do it again. Please forgive me."

Note that not all rages are total rages. It's possible to experience smaller and less terrifying rages. The topic of partial and near rages is covered later in this chapter. First, I want to talk about six different kinds of rage.

Sudden Rage

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Sudden transformation. Quickly changing from normal to scary. Dangerous. That's a classic rage. If you act this way, you are having a *sudden rage*, defined as a rapidly appearing, unplanned, and unanticipated transformative anger experience during which you lose partial or complete control over your feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Sudden rages are unplanned. That doesn't mean they always come completely out of the blue, however. You may receive warning signs, such as noticing bad feelings building up inside. You may sense that you are getting close to a meltdown. That can be very helpful, because then you can get away from others, take appropriate medications, exercise, relax, or just talk with someone who can help you ward off the potential rage. But frequently, there are no particular signs or warnings. Instead, something happens that may seem minor to observers but feels instantly intolerable to you. That's when you lose control. You begin yelling, threatening, intimidating, attacking. You zoom past normal anger as if it were on a Sunday drive and accelerate instantly to a 100 mile-per-hour fury. You cannot be calmed with soothing words, because you aren't able to listen to anybody. And you don't stop until your surge of energy is exhausted.

Sudden rages are the topic of chapter 3 in this book.

Seething Rage

Rages aren't always a reaction to an immediate situation. Sometimes they build more slowly in response to what you feel is a terribly unfair situation. These rages are like underground fires, smoldering below your full consciousness for years before they finally break through to the surface. The result is a *seething rage*, which can be defined as a long-term buildup of fury toward a specific individual or cluster of individuals that includes a sense of having been victimized, obsessive thoughts about the situation, moral outrage and hatred toward the offenders, personality changes, vengeful fantasies, and (sometimes) deliberately planned assaults upon targeted offenders. People who struggle with seething rages almost always have to deal with a tremendously strong sense that the offenders who have harmed them are morally bad, monstrous, and evil. Seething rages are described in much more detail in chapter 4.

What Triggers Rage

People don't rage just because they feel like raging (although some people may fake a rage to get what they want). Rages are far too uncomfortable, exhausting, and dangerous to play around with. Instead, rages are usually triggered by a negative experience that you interpret as dangerous to some important aspect of your being.

What kinds of dangers are likely to trigger a rage? The most immediate threat, of course, is to your physical existence; therefore, one kind of rage is designed to help you survive physically threatening situations. The best name for this kind of event is *survival rage*. But there are at least three other types of threats that can trigger rages. Perhaps you cannot stand situations in which you feel out of control of your own life, or powerless over important events (whether or not you will be laid off from work in the next round of company cutbacks, for example). *Impotent rage* is the name for rages associated with this sense of helpless fury. This is the rage of a man shaking his fist at the sky, demanding that God explain why his son has just died.

A third kind of threatening situation may occur when you feel embarrassed, criticized, or humiliated. Now, certainly nobody likes this experience. Who would? But you might react incredibly intensely to perceived put-downs, whether or not the other person intends to be insulting you. If so, you could have a *shame-based rage*, in which you flail away

verbally and sometimes physically at the people you think are shaming you.

Finally, a fourth kind of potentially rage-producing threat occurs if you cannot endure feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and insecurity. For instance, you may desperately want your partner back, even though that person just told you he or she is in love with someone else. You call to talk about it, only to hear yourself screaming that he or she is a horrible jerk whom you hate and never want to see again. At that moment, you are having an *abandonment rage*.

Survival rage. Impotent rage. Shame-based rage. Abandonment rage. These four kinds of rages overlap because each in its own way involves your fighting for something that feels absolutely necessary. First comes physical safety. Then the need to feel you can make things happen in critical situations. Then comes the need to be respected within the community as a member in good standing. And the final critical need is to belong with people who love and nurture you. Although these four needs differ, they have a common thread: survival in an often-threatening world.

Six different kinds of rage have now been mentioned. Two kinds of rage depend on how fast they develop: sudden and seething rages. Four types of rages are reactions to specific kinds of threats: survival rage, impotent rage, shame-based rage, and abandonment rage. These six kinds of rages will be described in more detail, along with tips on minimizing their power, in separate chapters later in this book.

Rage and a Distorted Sense of Danger

Every tool in the great toolbox of life has value. That is true even for raging, under certain circumstances. Most immediately, raging could help you survive in life-threatening situations. If an enemy is running toward you with a knife, for example, it's not a really great time to think too much ("Hmmm, let me consider the options here. I could fight. I could run. I could..."). Wouldn't it be a lot better right then to be able to do something, anything, to get out of danger? Just shut down your mind for a few minutes and start fighting for your life?

Hopefully, though, you face few life-threatening situations, even if you rage frequently. But that doesn't seem to make sense. If you are raging, even

though there is no immediate actual threat to your existence—and rages only occur because people feel deeply threatened—what’s going on? The answer, of course, is that you regularly feel deeply threatened, even when there is no real danger. You have a distorted sense of danger. You constantly feel attacked. The world, for you, is by no means safe and secure. Instead, you live in a place full of hostile, dangerous, and threatening adversaries.

How did you become convinced that you are in constant danger? Perhaps, at one time in your life, you really were seriously threatened or attacked. Or possibly, you did not have that kind of experience, but you grew up with parents who promoted the idea that the world is full of bad people. You may have suffered subtle damage to the brain, making it easy for you to misinterpret other people’s intentions.

This sense of immediate danger can take over your mind during a rage episode. It’s useless at those times to suggest that you should “just relax and don’t let it bother you.” You can’t relax. You probably would if you could, but you can’t. Your anger is feeding on itself by then. Anything someone else says just makes you angrier (especially the line “just calm down and get control of yourself”). You could almost say that at this point, you have become your rage and your rage has become you. By this time, your thoughts have become terribly distorted. All you can see around you are enemies ready to strike. You’ve got to defend yourself. Right at the moment of rage, you believe you must fight for your life in a totally hostile world. Your brain has only one job: find the danger, so it can be eliminated.

That brings you to actions. Chances are you don’t live by the motto “all things in moderation” when you are raging. Probably your motto at those times would be more like “all things to excess.” So you take sudden and impulsive actions. You make incredibly nasty verbal attacks. You may even become dangerously violent. And, true to the idea of transformation, you say and do things that you would never do if you weren’t raging. Later, you might totally want to deny you did those things. But you did indeed do them, and now you’ll need to take responsibility for your actions.

Partial Rages and Near Rages

Fortunately, not all rages are total rages. Most often, people only partially lose control of themselves during a rage. For instance, a former client named

Herm reported that he got into a fight with another guy, went into a rage, and beat his opponent to the ground. But then Herm stopped himself, “just before I was gonna kick him in the head.” Many other times, people rage verbally but don’t become physical. They manage to contain themselves even though they “wanted to strangle him until his eyes bulged.” This kind of episode is a *partial rage*, for you maintain some control over what is occurring even while the rage is happening. During a partial rage, you may attack verbally rather than physically, bypass one person to attack another, assault objects rather than people, or stop attacking even after starting. As for transformation, when you are having a partial rage, you may feel torn between your normal self and your raging self. Finally, your normal self regains control, and you settle down, probably angry but no longer raging.

You may remember times when you stopped yourself before you even began a rage episode. At those times, you were having a *near-rage* experience, in which you got close to having a rage and then somehow managed to stop it in its tracks. Allie, a middle-aged homemaker, for example, caught herself rapidly building up to a rage after her boyfriend came home drunk one night: “He had passed out on the floor, and there I was ordering him to get his ass upstairs into bed. He couldn’t even hear me. I wanted so bad to kick him and hit him. I could feel myself losing it. But then I stopped. I don’t know how, but I stopped. I just left him there on the floor and went to bed.”

Partial rages and near rages represent the fuzzy middle ground between strong anger and total rages. They indicate that, at least some of the time, you have some control over your rages. That’s good. It means that you can benefit from such standard anger management tools as taking time-outs and replacing your angry thoughts with calming thoughts. These tools will help you gain better control over your tendency to rage and supply you with better ways to handle difficult situations.

The High Cost of Raging

Here’s one man’s story: “I lost it. I had a total meltdown. First I started screaming at my wife to shut her damn mouth. Then I knocked over the table with all her important stuff on it. Then I slapped her face. That’s when my kid called 911. Now I’ve got a restraining order against me. I can’t even talk with my wife. I hope she’ll take me back, but who knows? Man, why did I do