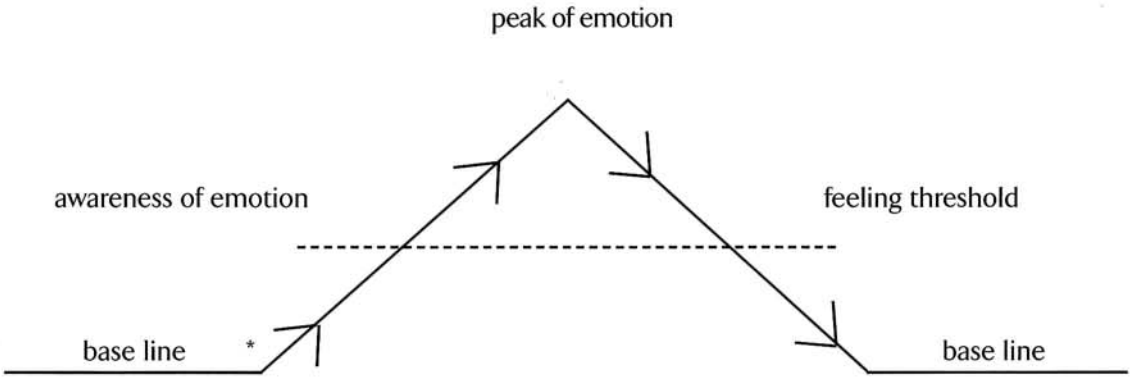
The Emotional Mind: Handle With Care

"Emotions are contagious". [5] Like a virus they can be transmitted instantaneously without conscious thought or language. This is how emotion has insured our survival as a species. Our earliest ancestors knew when danger was near by one look at the one who spotted it. Fear jumped at lightening speed throughout the clan which mobilized immediately to fight the danger, protect the young, to hide or flee to safety.

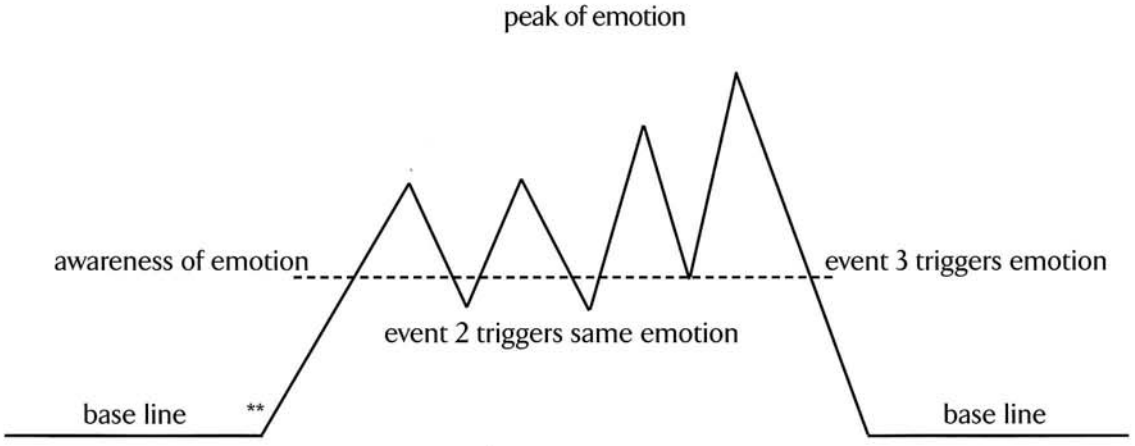
Our brains are bombarded with trillions of bits of information daily. It is emotion that tells us what to pay attention to, what to focus on and what is important. Without emotion nothing stands out. Emotion is meant to be a an attention grabber. Ideally it serves that function and passes. We have little or no control over what we feel or when we feel it. We can determine how long it will last. Humans, unlike other mammals who have a limbic system, can think about their emotions. This is both good news and bad news. Animals don't have "moods" like humans. We can prolong and exaggerate an emotion by what we think about it. People who are chronically aggressive and angry will interpret every incident in the worst possible light. If someone bumps into them it is never an accident or an innocent mistake. It will be considered an intentional act of a worthless person who has the evil intent to harm them because basically people are out to get you. Angry people are extra sensitive to any perceived slight, rejection or public embarrassment.

Simple experience of emotion



*event triggers emotion, neural excitation begins, physiological changes occur

Emotion prolonged - "mood"



**event 1 triggers emotion, neural excitation begins, physiological changes occur

In a simple experience of emotion, it has a beginning, a peak and then returns to base line. However, since humans can think about our feelings, we can keep them going. When this happens one incident builds on another and leads to greater intensity and duration of the emotion, without a return to the base line. If you are under stress at work already and get into a traffic snarl on your way home, it will much easier for you to be provoked to rage then if you had been calm and relaxed at the start of your drive.

Emotion and Selective Memory

It is important to understand that having an emotion is not a sign that what you feel is right or true. The stronger you feel something, the less likely it is to be accurate. If the emotional mind is dominant, the rational mind is ineffective. The stronger the emotion, the less rational your thinking will be.

Another thing that makes the emotional mind less trustworthy for basing judgments on is that emotional memory is selective. When you are experiencing an emotion, what will be triggered is every memory that is similar in some way to what you are now feeling. So if you are feeling angry every angry memory you have that is similar will be recalled. Only angry memories will be recalled. This sets up a distorted view of reality which is actually more complex, layered and varied.

This is why when you are angry at someone you love, you think only of the things they have done wrong, how they have disappointed you and how they are flawed. You do not, at that time, have access to the other parts of your reality with them. Those happier, more loving memories of their goodness, beauty, kindness and generosity are not available. This is also why when people are angry they can bring up incidents from the past with renewed vigor and intensity. The memory and emotion attached to those past incidents is also being triggered by the present state of anger.

The emotional mind is quick but inaccurate. When emotion is in control, memory is limited. To access other memories, you would need to be in another, different emotional state. You cannot be in two emotional states at the same time, especially when emotion is strong.

This points out again how necessary it is for us to become aware of our emotions and learn how to understand and regulate them. When we do this we can enjoy the richness, depth and meaning that emotion brings to our lives without being controlled and mislead.

Anger and Fear

As was mentioned before, emotions are contagious. Emotion is transmitted instantaneously and without words. We respond to the negative emotional states of anger and fear even more quickly. To see how this is true, think of how a family member or a co-worker in a "bad mood" affects everyone in the environment, even if they don't say a word.

Anger and fear trigger the powerful "fight or flight" response which has been essential to our survival as a species. Anger and fear cause chemicals to be released in our bodies that initiate physiological changes to prepare us to deal with threats to our safety. These changes begin to happen before the neocortex has begun to identify the possible danger and plan a response. The speed of this sequence can save our lives. The downside is that the speed of the response, which does not involve information from the thinking brain, is much less informed and accurate. It may cause us to act on a solely instinctual level without any thought of values or possible consequences (like a reptile or a bear). While this may be appropriate in a truly life threatening situation, it can cause problems for us when not warranted by the reality of the situation.

Unlike our ancestors, our physical safety or survival is rarely threatened. (There are, of course, exceptions like people living in dangerous neighborhoods or doing dangerous jobs.) But anger, which was meant to protect us from physical threat is **now** triggered when we perceive a threat to our self esteem or dignity. It is triggered in response to emotional pain and used to cover up hurt. Anger is most often triggered in our interactions with the people we love and need.

It has disastrous consequences in our lives and relationships when it is uncontrolled and used to fuel abusive or violent behavior.

As human beings, we must develop the ability to regulate our painful and negative emotions. This will allow us to choose our responses and behavior instead of being controlled by uninformed emotion and reactivity.

The Effects of Anger

Anger causes us many problems. Even though it is a normal, human, natural response to situations, it is generally more hurtful than helpful. This is true for a number of reasons.

Most anger is not about our safety and survival but about our emotional hurt and covering it up. However, our brain doesn't know the difference so it releases powerful chemicals (cortisol, nor-epinephrine, epinephrine) into our blood stream. Released in excess these chemicals can lead to health problems and disease. Diseases correlated with anger and fear (anxiety) are: high blood pressure, asthma, arthritis, headaches, ulcers, heart disease and coronary artery disease. [6] High levels of these chemicals "cause immune system depression which can lead to increased susceptibility to allergies, infections and cancer". [7] Anger is a health hazzard.

Anger makes even smart people stupid. We don't think well when we are angry because we are using our emotional brain which diminishes the power of our rational brain. We get tunnel vision. We see only extremes. We get locked into our position and see no options or alternatives. We see our opponent as the enemy who must be defeated. Anger fuels the desire to intimidate, destroy, punish, retaliate and exact revenge. These motives drive behavior that is damaging to ourselves and our relationships. This destructive drama is acted out daily at every level of human interaction from children at play to nations at war.

Anger Hurts

Most anger management approaches assert that anger is not a problem but what we do with anger can be. That analysis does not go deep enough. It says that as long as you don't do anything bad with your anger (like yell at people or break things or hit someone), anger is not a problem. Anger hurts everyone even if they always express it "appropriately". It hurts the person who feels it, even if they never say a word about it to anyone. It hurts people who never have a problem with angry behavior, never get out of control or rageful. It hurts people who experience anger only in its mildest forms such as irritation, crabbiness, frustration, annoyance, and resentment.

Anger hurts and is a problem for everyone. This is not only because of behavior, though bad behavior makes it worse. Anger hurts because at its source is deep pain. This pain is caused by our deep and unconscious doubts about our worth as a human being. We can use anger and other painful emotions as a way to help us understand and heal the real source of our hurt, instead of using them to cover it up. Changing these beliefs about ourselves is an "inside job". It is one we have to do internally, for ourselves and by ourselves.

Anger Exceptions

What about anger that is justified and useful such as the kind of righteous anger against evil and wrongdoing (racism, sexism, poverty) that leads to change? Or the anger that helps a battered woman finally leave her relationship? These would appear to be exceptions because they use anger to bring about a good result. Sometimes anger does work to get us where we want to go. However, if only anger is fueling the effort, it will lead to problems.

Anger is contagious and even if we are doing something good we can be involved with a lot of angry people who will end up fighting with each other about how to achieve the goal. What fuels movements for change in a positive and lasting way is passion and commitment, not anger. Anger can fuel personal change. If it is the only fuel, it will lead to bitterness and resentment. This keeps the problem that we "solved" alive and active in the present. Holding on to the anger keeps us prisoner.

Responding to Emotion

The Self Mastery model teaches a very different way of responding to events and emotion than most of uswere taught. The following diagram shows the differences between a Self Mastery approach and an "assertiveness model".

Event occurs
(a friend is late again for a lunch date)

Emotion is triggered
(anger as irritation or annoyance)

Self Mastery Response	Assertive Response
1. Notice and identify the feeling. "I feel irritated."	1. Notice and identify the feeling. "I feel irritated."
2. Look for the cause of the feeling. "I am hurt"	2. Look for the cause of problem. "She is late again."
3. Look inside. Explore emotional world. Practice emotional regulation Do STOP!	3. Start preparing my case to justify my anger. "Being late is so disrespectful. She is rude."
4. Irritation dissipates.	4. Anger grows.
5. Begin problem solving. What do I want to do about it?	5. Begin problem solving. What do I want to do about it?
6. Friend arrives, full of apologies.	6. Friend arrive, full of apologies.
7. I accept her apology and ask that she call me on my cell phone if she is late.	7. I tell her she has upset me & I will not wait for her again.
8. We have a nice lunch and part friends.	8. We have a strained lunch and part unsure of the friendship.

Some people will look at the above and think that the Self Mastery approach is wimpy and the assertiveness model better. That, of course, depends on your point of view. In the Self Mastery approach, I take responsibility for my feelings and identify my hurt as coming from inside myself. I act to heal it. In the assertiveness approach, I believe that the other person is responsible for my feelings and that they caused them. They need to change their behavior so I am not upset again.

In the Self Mastery approach I practice emotional regulation. This helps me calm and soothe myself. I know that her behavior doesn't mean anything about my value or importance so I am no longer angry. Because I am not angry I have a number of options in dealing with the situation. I decide I do not want to make a big deal about it. I really like her and it is just the way she is. I decide to ask her to give me a call if she is going to be late, so I know nothing is wrong. When she arrives I can greet her with openness, genuinely glad to see her and accept her apology.

In the assertiveness approach, I am holding on to my anger and waiting to confront her about her bad behavior. I am sure that I am in the right and that she has to be made aware of how she made me feel, how wrong she is and what she has to do to correct it. Even though I am calm on the surface, my underlying irritation is clear. It is communicated instantly, nonverbally, as I greet my friend. Since emotion is contagious, my friend feels my anger which triggers anger and defensiveness in her. The confrontation that follows is difficult for both of us. We make it through the rest of lunch but leave uncomfortable, wondering about the future of our friendship. I still believe I did the right thing. My friend feels shamed and guilty.

Which Approach?

Deciding which approach is better for you depends on what outcome you want. Do you want to be right or do you want to be close? Do you want to be responsible for your emotions or do you want to make others responsible for them? Is the problem primarily internal or external? Though the answers to these questions are not simple or clear cut, the Self Mastery approach will always promote greater individual responsibility for the internal world of emotion and its external expression.