

How do I stop being angry at my ex, years later? It is a verdict nobody ever let you deliver.

If you are not alone right now, this page will be in your browser history. You can read it in a private window, or clear it when you are done.

Anger that is still present years after an abusive relationship is usually an unfinished judgment rather than a leftover feeling. Something was done to you, it was wrong, nobody with any authority ever said so, and the anger is what a mind does with a verdict it was never allowed to deliver. Duration is not evidence of anything about your character.

Anger of this kind can also be a trauma symptom, and the two run together often enough that separating them is clinical work rather than something an article can do. Both explanations describe a mechanism, and neither is a failure of healing. Whether anything else is going on requires assessment, and no website can do that.

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Why is the anger still here when he isn't?

Anger persists after the danger ends because anger was never only about danger. Fear is what a threat produces. Anger is what an *appraisal* produces — a judgment that something wrong was done, by someone who could have chosen otherwise, to someone who did not deserve it. Removing the man removes the person the judgment is about. It does not settle the judgment.

Richard Lazarus, whose appraisal theory of emotion is the standard model in the field, gave every emotion a **core relational theme** — the specific meaning that produces it. For anger, the theme is *a demeaning offense against me and mine* (Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation*, 1991). That is not a description of arousal. It is a description of a claim. A claim stays live until something happens to it: acknowledgment, repair, restitution, or a settled account of who did what. If none of those arrived, nothing has closed, and the anger is doing what anger does with an open file.

Arrival and persistence are two different puzzles. Why the anger showed up at all is about a body standing down from years of threat. Persistence has its own explanation: the appraisal is still true and still unanswered.

Everyone else has moved on from your marriage, including people who were never in it. That is not a sign that they have processed something you have not. It is a sign that they were never handed the file.

Is this a symptom, or is it a judgment?

Anger years after abuse is usually both, and the useful move is working out which part is which, because they do not respond to the same thing. The symptom part is arousal — the short fuse, the surge, the disproportion

between a small trigger and the size of the reaction. The judgment part is the content: what he did, that it was deliberate, that nobody who mattered ever named it.

The symptom part is treatable and the treatment is only partly effective, which nobody tells you. In a systematic review of 16 trauma-focused psychotherapy studies including 1,846 participants — a literature drawn largely from veteran and military samples — 11 showed significant reductions in anger after treatment; pooling the eight randomized trials among them, covering 417 participants, produced an effect on anger of Hedges's $g = 0.33$, which the authors describe as small-to-medium (Wells et al., 2025). Trauma therapy helps the anger. It does not resolve it, and the authors say so, recommending research into whether anger needs its own intervention alongside.

If you have done trauma work — including good trauma work — and come out sleeping better and still furious, you have run into a limit the literature already documents rather than failing anything. Whether the symptom side of this is emotional abuse causing PTSD is a separate question, and answering it does not make the judgment go away.

The women who are stuck longest are the ones who were told the anger was the problem. They arrive having spent years trying to dismantle it, and it has not moved, because a judgment cannot be relaxed away. What moves it is being taken seriously first — and almost nobody has done that, which is why it is still shouting.

Why does moral injury fit this better than most trauma words?

Moral injury describes damage done by a violation of what you believed about how people are supposed to behave — often a closer fit than fear-based trauma language for a woman years out of an abusive marriage. The wound is not only that something frightening happened. It is that someone who promised otherwise chose to do it, repeatedly, and the world mostly did not treat it as a wrong.

The concept came out of work with combat veterans, and it should be represented accurately. The psychiatrist **Jonathan Shay**, whose *Achilles in Vietnam* introduced the idea, later distilled it as "a betrayal of what's right, by a person who holds legitimate authority in a high stakes situation" (Shay, 2014); **Bret Litz and colleagues** proposed the definition now most used — "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009). Litz's team called their model preliminary, and it was built for war. Extending it to relational harm is active research, not settled ground, and **moral injury is not a diagnosis in any manual.**

The evidence for the extension is early and thin, and knowing that is more use than being impressed by it. In a cross-sectional study of 152 college students, moral injury significantly mediated the relationship between experiencing intimate partner violence and psychological distress (Kanter & Hassija, 2026). One study, in students, measured at a single point in time. It shows the construct behaves sensibly in this territory. It does not show that it describes you.

Moral injury is worth putting in front of you anyway, because it names something the fear vocabulary cannot. Living inside what coercive control actually is does not only frighten a person. It requires her to watch a moral expectation broken on a schedule and keep functioning as though it had not been. Anger is the correct response to that.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

National Domestic Violence Hotline — 1-800-799-7233, 24 hours · text **START** to **88788** · thehotline.org

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988

Deaf, DeafBlind and hard-of-hearing callers: National Deaf Domestic Violence Hotline videophone **855-812-1001**, 24 hours (a partnership between the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services).

Calling leaves the number in your call log and texting leaves the thread in your messages. Both can be deleted afterwards. If that is not something you can do safely, a friend's phone or a payphone is the safer route.

Why does being told to forgive make it worse?

Being told to forgive lands badly because it arrives as a second verdict against you. The first was his. The second is that the anger is now the problem, and that the price of being considered well is agreeing to stop pressing a claim nobody ever heard. That is not a healing instruction. It is a request that you drop the case.

The forgiveness literature deserves to be reported honestly rather than dismissed, because it is real. A meta-analysis of interventions designed to promote forgiveness — 53 post-treatment effect sizes across 2,323 participants — found recipients reported more forgiveness than untreated controls, with a pooled effect of $\Delta^+ = 0.56$ (95% CI 0.43 to 0.68) ([Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell & Worthington, 2014](#)). **That is a finding about people who chose to enter one, in mostly non-abuse contexts, and it is not a recommendation about you.**

One further finding belongs here. In a four-year longitudinal study of newlywed couples, spouses more inclined to express forgiveness saw their partner's psychological and physical aggression stay steady, while those less inclined saw it decline — the author's explanation being that expressed forgiveness removes the ordinary costs that discourage repetition ([McNulty, 2011](#)). That was a general marital sample, not an abuse sample, and it does not say forgiveness causes harm. It says forgiveness is not automatically protective, which is the opposite of how it is sold.

The philosophical objection is older and sharper. **Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy's** *Before Forgiving* (Oxford, 2002) argues there is no universal prescription and that hasty forgiveness can be a failure of self-

respect rather than a triumph over it — and Lamb asks why we have so much trouble with the woman who will not forgive. **Nothing on this page will ask you to forgive anyone.** Not now, not eventually, not as a stage.

What keeps it running, day to day?

What keeps the anger running is usually not the memory. It is the rehearsing — the imagined conversation in the shower, the reply you compose to a message he has not sent, the fifteen minutes in the car redoing something from 2019 with better lines. That process has a name and a mapped mechanism, and it is the most changeable thing on this page.

Thomas Denson's multiple systems model of angry rumination describes how dwelling on a provocation keeps anger alive across cognitive, affective, neurobiological, executive and behavioral levels at once — and that angry rumination temporarily reduces self-control, which is why a ruminative afternoon so reliably produces a bad evening (Denson, 2013). Rumination is not a symptom of how angry you are. It is one of the things making you that angry, and it runs on its own once started.

Two things feed it here. If he still generates input into your week through the schedule, the children or the money, the provocation is not historical — that is why he still seems to be running your week. And every time you are told it was a long time ago, the claim gets pushed back down unheard, which is exactly the material rumination is made of.

Women can almost always say what they were doing when the rehearsing started, and almost never why. The drive, the shower, folding laundry — undemanding tasks with an idle mind. That is not weakness of character. It is what an unoccupied attentional system does with an open file, and it is why what works is structural rather than moral.

What actually helps — and what am I allowed to keep?

What helps is separating two things that get confused: the anger, and the account. **The account is your record of what happened and who did it, and you never have to give that up.** Letting go of it would mean agreeing that you have misremembered your own life — which is precisely what was done to you the first time. The work is on the anger's grip, not on its contents.

Change the distance, not the subject. In an experimental study manipulating how people revisit an anger memory, participants who analyzed it from a *self-distanced* perspective — watching as an observer and asking why — showed less emotional reactivity than those who relived it from inside, without avoiding the memory; whether the situation was still unresolved made no difference (Kross, Ayduk & Mischel, 2005). So the useful question is not *how could he* but *what was he doing, and what did it cost me* — asked from three feet back. It is the one thing here you can do tonight, without anyone.

Say it to the empty chair rather than to the shower. Chairwork is the structured, spoken version of the argument you have run internally for years, and unlike rumination it is designed to finish. Its target construct,

from **Leslie Greenberg's** emotion-focused tradition, is **unfinished business** — an interrupted emotional response to someone not available to receive it. A systematic review of 22 randomized controlled trials of experiential therapies including chairwork reported effects on individual trials ranging from small to large, across depression, childhood trauma, unfinished business, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety and eating disorders ([Ottingerová, Halamová & Szitás, 2026](#)).

Interrupt the idle time, not the thought. Rumination starts in low-demand attention, so the leverage is at the entrance — a podcast for the drive, something to count while folding, a call booked into the hour you always lose. Arguing yourself out of a rehearsal already underway mostly fails.

Be careful where you take this. A general anger management class is built to reduce entitlement and increase accountability — a class built for people who hurt other people. Neither is your problem.

What this page can tell you, and what it cannot

This page can tell you why anger outlasts the threat, how an unanswered judgment differs from a symptom, what moral injury is and how far the evidence extends, what the forgiveness research shows, and what interrupts rumination. This page cannot tell you what is happening in your particular case. That is an assessment, and no article can do it — including this one.

One thing worth saying plainly, because you have probably been told the opposite. **The length of time is not evidence against you.** Anger that lasts is not proof that you enjoy it, cling to it, or have made it your identity. It is what happens to a true claim that was never received.

A next step does not have to be therapy. It can be one week of noticing where the rehearsing starts. If you want to talk to somebody now, the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** is **1-800-799-7233**, 24 hours, or text **START** to **88788**.

Anger is the piece most often handed to somebody who does not work with abuse, and abuse is the piece most often handed to somebody who does not work with anger — and it is worth checking, in one question, which one you have found.

With the anger, the work is not learning to keep a lid on it. It is getting it back to being yours — so that it comes when something is actually wrong, and settles when it is done.

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