

INTRODUCTION

The teen years can be tumultuous—a time of flux and personal discovery. Classes get tougher, demands and expectations get higher, relationships with friends and family are changing—even bodies are changing. But some teens also deal with losing contact with family members, being bullied, growing up with abuse or neglect, or having to live with strangers who don't care for them. Some teens are in situations where they are not able to express their feelings, or they learn to express their feelings in destructive ways.

As a result, teens may have a hard time knowing what they feel. As many of the teen writers in this book explain, anger becomes the only emotion they have left. And though expressing their rage can feel empowering in the moment, uncontrollable anger usually leaves teens feeling powerless. It can lead to serious consequences and threaten their goals for the future.

In these essays, teens write about their struggles with anger and describe how their abusive pasts have affected their emotions. They are frank about the negative ways they've let out their feelings, but also write about learning to express themselves in more positive ways.

Many of the writers talk about an anger that feels out of control, but which they desperately want to contain.

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In “The Monster Inside,” Griffin K. writes about his struggle to stop himself from releasing his rage on the people around him: “When I look back, I see that I was always waiting for someone to intervene, someone to stop me—the teachers, my counselor, security, or the police. When I was hurting someone, I was looking around like a child, hoping someone would take control of the monster inside me.”

The writers are honest about the fact that controlling their anger is often an ongoing struggle. But they also show that it’s possible to get help, both from other people and on their own.

The teens in this book have learned many strategies for keeping calm, including deep breathing, counting, knitting, drawing, cleaning, listening to music, dancing, playing sports, spending time with friends, reading self-help books, walking away from arguments, and trying to avoid upsetting situations. Most importantly, the teens find that learning to express their emotions, and not bottling up their pain, helps them control their anger.

Good therapists help several writers open up about their feelings. When Fred W. talks in an anger management group, he feels relieved. “Letting out some of my emotions was the best thing I’ve done,” he writes. “It helped me find out who I was. It felt great to break my family’s taboo against talking about our feelings or discussing what happened inside our house.”

A sympathetic new foster parent helps Julie Stewart start to express herself. “By opening up her heart and home to me, she gave me a feeling of belonging,” Julie says about her new foster mom. “She talked with me about the emotions I had from all the abuse, and that in itself made me feel a little less angry.”

And Otis Hampton finds that writing is a way to let out his emotions: “I’d like to keep my anger on the page and out of my life as much as I can.”

Regardless of the strategies they use, learning how to deal with painful emotions in a safe way lets teens regain a sense of safety and control.

The stories in this book offer a window into many teens’ lives. You are sure to find within its pages people and experiences you can identify with and relate to. You might find that you can get more out of the book by applying what the writers have learned to your own life. The teens who wrote these stories did so because they hope that telling their stories will help readers who are facing similar challenges. They want you to know that you are not alone, and that taking specific steps can help you manage or overcome very difficult situations. They’ve done their best to be clear about the actions that worked for them so you can see if they’ll work for you. For further help, this book also features interviews with therapists and psychologists about the causes of anger,

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how it affects people, how to identify what triggers it, and how to handle anger in healthy ways.

Another way to use the book is to develop your writing skills. Each teen in this book wrote 5 to 10 drafts of his or her story before it was published. If you read the stories closely you'll see that the teens work to include a beginning, a middle, and an end, along with good scenes, description, dialogue, and anecdotes (little stories). To improve your writing, take a look at how these writers construct their stories. Try some of their techniques in your own writing.

If you'd like more information about the writing program at Youth Communication or want to read more teen essays, visit www.youthcomm.org.