

Understanding and Transforming Resentment

Handout

What Is Resentment?

Resentment is a deeply rooted emotional response that combines suppressed anger, perceived injustice, and unresolved emotional pain. It often develops over time in response to feeling ignored, betrayed, devalued, or treated unfairly. Unlike brief episodes of anger, resentment lingers—and can turn into depression, anxiety, or chronic interpersonal stress (Balcomb, 2021; Ciulla, 2020).

Why Does It Matter?

Left unprocessed, resentment can:

- Disrupt relationships and communication
 - Damage self-esteem and personal growth
 - Fuel symptoms like depression, chronic fatigue, or irritability
 - Interfere with trust in therapy or caregiving relationships
- (Abbott et al., 2021)



Where Does Resentment Come From?

Resentment may be triggered by:

- Violated expectations in close relationships (Orem, 2021)
- Systemic inequality or cultural oppression (Banda & Cassese, 2022)
- Childhood emotional neglect or betrayal trauma (Benjamin, 2020)
- Shame, helplessness, or unmet emotional needs (Ke & Barlas, 2020)



How Resentment Affects the Body and Brain

Neuroscience research shows that resentment activates brain areas linked to social judgment and threat response—such as the anterior insula and prefrontal cortex (Babic & Johnson King, 2025). Chronic resentment can keep your body in a stress response, undermining your health and emotional balance (Na'aman, 2021).



Ways to Recognize Resentment

Ask yourself:

- Do I feel stuck rehashing past wrongs?
- Am I often sarcastic, withdrawn, or passive-aggressive?
- Do I struggle to forgive, even when I want to?



- Do I feel powerless or invisible in key relationships?
If you answered yes, resentment might be shaping your reactions.

How to Transform Resentment



Cognitive Strategies (CBT)

- Challenge all-or-nothing and entitlement beliefs
- Identify the story you tell yourself and test its truth (Ke & Barlas, 2020)



Compassion-Focused Practices (CFT)

- Cultivate kindness toward yourself and others
- Understand how unmet needs shaped your emotions (Gilbert, 2010)



Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT)

- Explore emotions under the resentment—like grief, fear, or shame
- Express needs in safe, supported ways (Abbott et al., 2021)



Mindfulness & Grounding

- Bring awareness to the present moment
- Use breathwork to calm body arousal before reacting (Na'aman, 2021)



Social and Cultural Awareness

Resentment doesn't exist in a vacuum. Many people carry resentment from societal injustice, discrimination, or cultural silencing (Davis & Wilson, 2023; Fernandez, 2023). If this applies to you:

- Your feelings are valid
- Group therapy, narrative therapy, or cultural healing circles may help (Jacobs & Munis, 2023)

When to Get Support

If resentment is harming your well-being or relationships, therapy can help you:

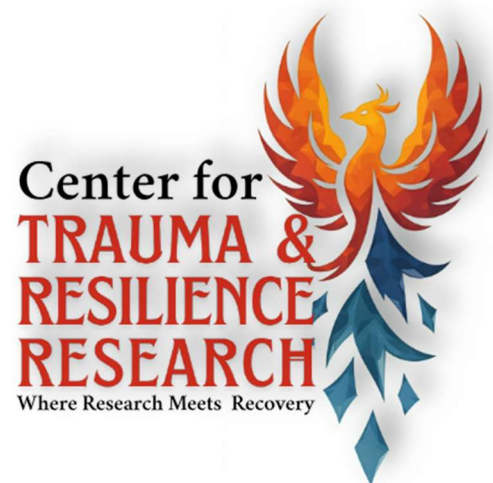
- Clarify what your resentment is protecting
- Practice expressing needs and setting boundaries
- Move from emotional paralysis to empowerment

In Closing

Resentment is not a flaw—it's a signal. When understood, it becomes a tool for growth, insight, and emotional healing.

Resentment, though uncomfortable, can be one of the most informative emotions we experience. It shows us where our values lie, where we've been wounded, and what we need in order to heal. By facing it directly—with honesty, curiosity, and courage—we can transform it from a corrosive force into a tool for clarity, communication, and personal evolution.

Rather than asking, "How do I get rid of resentment?" perhaps a better question is:



“What is my resentment trying to teach me?”

*Resentment isn't the enemy. It's a messenger. Instead of suppressing it, we can ask:
“What is my resentment trying to teach me?”*

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