Laura Houser remembers the day with embarrassment. “My mother was visiting from Illinois,” she says. “We’d gone out to lunch and done some shopping. On our way home, we stopped at an intersection. When the light changed, the guy ahead of us was looking at a map or something and didn’t move right away. I leaned on my horn and automatically yelled—well, what I generally yell at people who make me wait. I didn’t even think about what I was doing. One moment I was talking and laughing with my mother, and the next I was shouting curses at a stranger. Mom’s jaw just dropped. She said, ‘Well, I guess you’ve been living in the city too long.’ That’s when I realized that my anger was out of control.”

Laura has plenty of company. Here are a few examples plucked from the headlines of recent newspapers:

- Amtrak’s Washington–New York train: When a woman begins to use her cell phone in a designated “quiet car,” her seatmate grabs the phone and smashes it against the wall.
- Reading, Mass.: Arguing over rough play at their ten-year-old sons’ hockey practice, two fathers begin throwing punches. One of the dads beats the other to death.
- Westport, Conn.: Two supermarket shoppers get into a fistfight over who should be first in a just-opened checkout line.

Reading these stories and countless others like them which happen daily, it’s hard to escape the conclusion that we are one angry society. An entire vocabulary has grown up to describe situations of out-of-control fury: road rage, sideline rage, computer rage, biker rage, air rage. Bookstore shelves are filled with authors’ advice on how to deal with our anger. Court-ordered anger management classes have become commonplace, and anger-management workshops are advertised in local newspapers.

Human beings have always experienced anger, of course. But in earlier, more civil decades, public displays of anger were unusual to the point of being aberrant. Today, however, whether in petty or deadly forms, episodes of unrepressed rage have become part of our daily landscape.

What has happened to us? Are we that much angrier than we used to be? Have we lost all inhibitions about expressing our anger? Are we, as a society, literally losing our ability to control our tempers?
Why Are We So Angry?

According to Sybil Evans, a conflict-resolution expert in New York City, there are three components to blame for our societal bad behavior: time, technology and tension.

What’s eating up our time? To begin with, Americans work longer hours and are rewarded with less vacation time than people in any other industrial society. Over an average year, for example, most British employees work 250 hours less than most Americans; most Germans work a full 500 hours less. And most Europeans are given four to six weeks vacation every year, compared to the average American’s two weeks. To make matters worse, many Americans face long stressful commutes at the beginning and end of each long workday.

Once we Americans finally get home from work, our busy day is rarely done. We are involved in community activities; our children participate in sports, school programs, and extracurricular activities; and our houses, yards and cars cry out for maintenance. To make matters worse, we are reluctant to use the little bit of leisure time we do have to catch up on our sleep. Compared with Americans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of us are chronically sleep deprived. While our ancestors typically slept nine-and-a-half hours a night, many of us feel lucky to get seven. We’re critical of “lazy” people who sleep longer, and we associate naps with toddlerhood. (In doing so, we ignore the example of successful people including Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, and Napoleon, all of whom were devoted to their afternoon naps.)

The bottom line: we are time-challenged and just plain tired—and tired people are cranky people. We’re ready to blow—to snap at the slow-moving cashier, to tap the bumper of the slowpoke ahead of us, or to do something far worse.

Technology is also to blame for the bad behavior so widespread in culture. Amazing gadgets were supposed to make our lives easier—but have they? Sure, technology has its positive aspects. It is a blessing, for instance, to have a cell phone on hand when your car breaks down far from home or to be able to “instant message” a friend on the other side of the globe. But the downsides are many. Cell phones, pagers, fax machines, handheld computers and the like have robbed many of us of what was once valuable downtime. Now we’re always available to take that urgent call or act on that last-minute demand. Then there is the endless pressure of feeling we need to keep up with our gadgets’ latest technological developments. For example, it’s not sufficient to use your cell phone for phone calls. Now you must learn to use the phone for text-messaging and downloading games. It’s not enough to take still photos with your digital camera. You should know how to shoot ultra high-speed fast-action clips. It’s not enough to have an enviable CD collection. You should be downloading new songs in MP3 format. The computers in your house should be connected by a wireless router, and online via high-speed DSL service.
In other words, if it’s been more than ten minutes since you’ve updated your technology, you’re probably behind.

In fact, you’re not only behind; you’re a stupid loser. At least, that’s how most of us end up feeling as we’re confronted with more and more unexpected technologies: the do-it-yourself checkout at the supermarket, the telephone “help center” that offers a recorded series of messages, but no human help. And feeling like losers makes us frustrated and, you guessed it, angry. “It’s not any one thing but lots of little things that make people feel like they don’t have control of their lives,” says Jane Middleton-Moz, an author and therapist. “A sense of helplessness is what triggers rage. It’s why people end up kicking ATM machines.”

Her example is not far-fetched. According to a survey of computer users in Great Britain, a quarter of those under age 25 admitted to having kicked or punched their computers on at least one occasion. Others confessed to yanking out cables in a rage, forcing the computer to crash. On this side of the Atlantic, a Wisconsin man, after repeated attempts to get his daughter’s malfunctioning computer repaired, took it to the store where he had bought it, placed it in the foyer, and attacked it with a sledgehammer. Arrested and awaiting a court appearance, he told local reporters, “It feels good, in a way.” He had put into action a fantasy many of us have had—that of taking out our feelings of rage on the machines that so frustrate us.

Tension, the third major culprit behind our epidemic of anger, is intimately connected with our lack of time and the pressures of technology. Merely our chronic exhaustion and our frustration in the face of a bewildering array of technologies would be enough to cause our stress levels to skyrocket, but we are dealing with much more. Our tension is often fueled by a reserve of anger that might be the result of a critical boss, marital discord, or (something that many of today’s men and women experience, if few will admit it) a general sense of being stupid and inadequate in the face of the demands of modern life. And along with the challenges of everyday life, we now live with a widespread fear of such horrors as terrorist acts, global warming, and antibiotic-resistant diseases. Our sense of dread may be out of proportion to actual threats because of technology’s ability to so constantly bombard us with worrisome information. Twenty-four hours a day news stations bring a stream of horror into our living rooms. As we work on our computers, headlines and graphic images are never more than a mouseclick away.

**The Result of Our Anger**

Add it all together—our feeling of never having enough time; the chronic aggravation caused by technology; and our endless, diffuse sense of stress—and we become time bombs waiting to explode. Our angry outbursts may be briefly satisfying, but afterwards we are left feeling—well, like jerks. Worse, flying off the handle is a self-perpetuating behavior. Brad Bushman, a psychology professor at Iowa State University, says, “Catharsis is worse than useless.” Bushman’s research has shown
that when people vent their anger, they actually become more, not less, aggressive. “Many people think of anger as the psychological equivalent of the steam in a pressure cooker. It has to be released, or it will explode. That’s not true. The people who react by hitting, kicking, screaming, and swearing just feel more angry.”

Furthermore, the unharnessed venting of anger may actually do us physical harm. The vigorous expression of anger pumps adrenaline into our system and raises our blood pressure, setting the stage for heart attack and strokes. Frequently angry people have even been shown to have higher cholesterol levels than even-tempered individuals.

**How to Deal with Our Anger**

Unfortunately, the culprits behind much of our anger—lack of time, frustrating technology, and mega-levels of stress—are not likely to resolve themselves anytime soon. So what are we to do with the anger that arises as a result?

According to Carol Tavris, author of *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, the keys to dealing with anger are common sense and patience. She points out that almost no situation is improved by an angry outburst. A traffic jam, a frozen computer, or a misplaced set of car keys are annoying. To act upon the angry feelings those situations provoke, however, is an exercise in futility. Shouting, fuming, or leaning on the car horn won’t make traffic begin to flow, the screen unlock, or keys materialize.

Patience, on the other hand, is a highly practical virtue. People who take the time to cool down before responding to an anger-producing situation are far less likely to say or do something they will regret later. “It is as true of the body as of arrows,” Tavris says, “that what goes up must come down. Any emotional arousal will simmer down if you just wait long enough.” When you are stuck in traffic, in other words, turn on some soothing music, breathe deeply, and count to ten—or thirty or forty, if need be.

Anger-management therapist Doris Wild Helmering agrees. “Like any feeling, anger lasts only about three seconds,” she says. “What keeps it going is your own negative thinking.” As long as you focus on the idiot who cut you off on the expressway, you’ll stay angry. But if you let the incident go, your anger will go with it. “Once you come to understand that you’re driving your own anger with your thoughts,” adds Helmering, “you can stop it.”

Experts who have studied anger also encourage people to cultivate activities that effectively vent their anger. For some people, it’s reading the newspaper or watching TV, while others need more active outlets, such as using a treadmill, taking a walk, hitting golf balls, or working out with a punching bag. People who succeed in calming their anger can also enjoy the satisfaction of having dealt positively with their frustrations.

For Laura Houser, the episode in the car with her mother was a wake-up call. “I saw myself through her eyes,” she said, “and I realized I had become a chronically
angry, impatient jerk. My response to stressful situations had become habitual—I automatically flew off the handle. Once I saw what I was doing, it really wasn’t that hard to develop different habits. I simply decided I was going to treat other people the way I would want to be treated.” The changes in Laura’s life haven’t benefited only her former victims. “I’m a calmer, happier person now,” she reports. “I don’t lie in bed at night fuming over stupid things other people have done and my own enraged responses.” Laura has discovered the satisfaction of having a sense of control over her own behavior—which ultimately is all any of us can control.

About Unity
1. Which of the following statements best represents the implied thesis of “Taming the Anger Monster”?
   a. People today have lost their ability to control their anger and to behave in a civil fashion.
   b. Anger would last only a few seconds if we didn’t keep it going with negative thinking.
   c. While technology has its positive aspects, it has made us constantly available to others and frustrates us with the need to master its endless new developments.
   d. Our out-of-control anger has understandable causes, but common sense and patience are more satisfying than outbursts of rage.

2. Write a topic sentence that covers what is discussed in paragraphs 3 and 4.
   The problem of anger is becoming worse in our society.

3. What sentence in paragraph 17 serves as the topic sentence for paragraphs 16 through 18? (Write the first words.)
   “According to Carol Tavris, author of Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion, the keys . . .”

About Support
4. The essay is about one main effect and three possible causes. What is the one main effect? What are the three causes?
   Effect: An epidemic of anger
   Three causes: Lack of time, technology, tension

5. Trace the line of causation in paragraph 11. What is the ultimate cause, the proximate cause, and the effect?
   Ultimate cause: Technology can be frustrating.