Anger Management

We all experience anger at times. Anger exists on a continuum with varying degrees of severity – from mild irritation, impatience or annoyance, to frustration, all the way up to severe fury and rage. Anger is a normal, usually healthy emotion. But when anger is inappropriate, too intense, too frequent or turns destructive, it can cause problems (e.g., workplace conflicts, personal problems) and eventually affect our overall quality of life.

It is important to distinguish the emotional experience of anger from the outward expression of anger. Being angry is appropriate in some circumstances, but anger must be expressed appropriately, or it and can lead to damaging, destructive or abusive situations. For example, if you’re frustrated at work because your team has overly long meetings, your frustration may motivate you to take action (e.g., suggest ways to increase efficiency). But if you act your angry feelings out on your team members (e.g., by putting them down, criticizing everything, making sarcastic comments), your expression of anger negatively impacts others and is therefore inappropriate.

Understanding the Triggers of Anger

Angry feelings can be triggered by both external and internal events. We can be angry at another person (e.g., a worker), frustrated because of an event (e.g., unproductive meeting, broken computer), or we can simply be mad at ourselves (e.g., due to performance failure, personal problems).

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There is a range of strategies that can help us understand and control our angry feelings:

- **Identifying and avoiding trigger factors/situations**: One way to deal with anger is to find out what triggers it and develop strategies for reducing those triggers, especially when anger is too frequent and too intense. For example, if we become angry almost every morning while sitting in bad traffic, we might consider changing our way of commuting (e.g., driving at different hours, taking the bus or going by bike).

- **Working to solve underlying issues**: Anger can be a “secondary emotion”, meaning that the anger is caused by another, underlying emotion (“primary emotion”). Stress, insecurity and certain mental health conditions (e.g., fear/anxiety and depression) can manifest as anger. But becoming angry won’t solve the problem. We should always try to determine the real problem, and then find ways to address and manage it. For further details, see the exercise document **Anger as a Symptom**.
• **Learning more effective/healthy communication styles:** A healthy way to express our anger is to express it in an assertive, rather than aggressive manner. We must learn how to express and clarify our needs while respecting the needs of others (and not hurting them by being verbally aggressive). Unexpressed or suppressed anger can lead to explosive outbursts or pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behavior (e.g., “getting back” at people indirectly, through manipulation, instead of confronting them in person). For more details, see the information document [Monitoring Your Communication Style](#).

• **Learning and implementing relaxation strategies:** Physical reactions to anger can hinder us from thinking clearly and acting appropriately. It is helpful to learn how to calm ourselves down and let go of anger and tension. Finding the best method is a highly individualized process. Some might find relaxation techniques helpful (e.g., special breathing methods or meditation), while others prefer more practical approaches like exercising, listening to relaxing music, talking to a friend, or leaving the anger-causing situation.

• **Changing thoughts/interpretations that lead to angry thoughts:** Anger thoughts can be unrealistic or unfair assumptions about your situation. Here are examples of types of angry thoughts:
  - *filtering* (looking only at the bad side)
  - *labeling* (insulting other people by calling them harsh names)
  - *magnifying* (considering a small disappointment to be a disaster)
  - *perfectionism* (being indignant when you don’t meet your very high standards)
  - *mind reading* (assuming other people’s thoughts and intentions to be always negative)

Such anger thoughts can make us angrier than is necessary or helpful. Once we’re aware of our anger thoughts and know where they come from (e.g., “I’m thinking this way because I had a stressful day at work and I’m frustrated”), we can try to find more calming and helpful ways of thinking.

• **Reducing alcohol or other non-prescription substance use:** Alcohol and medication can make us more irritable and impatient and less able to deal with frustration and anger.

We can’t eliminate anger from our lives. There will always be situations or people that make us angry. We can’t change that, but we can learn to control our reactions. Controlling our angry responses helps prevent us from being dissatisfied in the long run.