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## Anger: Breaking the Vicious Cycle

You have a right to get angry. Anger is an internal reaction. It is something we feel – and we have a right to our feelings. In fact, you may not have a choice - anger happens. Sometimes whether you intended it or not.

### Aristotle's Challenge

*Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - this is not easy.*

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

The good news is that anger can be a positive thing. It might be a *warning sign* - say, for example that your rights are being violated, that your needs and wants are being unmet. Or perhaps our beliefs, desires, or ambitions are being compromised too much. Maybe you are feeling ignored, misunderstood or disrespected. Some times anger is a form of *protection* – anger can get the body prepared to ward off an attack, or allow us to continue fighting in the face of pain. In the same way, your anger can be a *motivation* device – energizing our behavior, or a *communication* delivery vehicle – helping us to get our needs met.

The problem is, that anger can become a problem - one that can lead to self-destructive behavior. Worse, this behavior can take on a self-fulfilling pattern. I think of it as the *vicious cycle*. It begins with an event. Let's say someone does something to you that you view as a threat. The first response to that event is a chemical reaction in your body that produces stimulants, getting you ready for an angry outburst. Then emotions kick in. Your heart starts pounding, your pulse quickens, you begin quick shallow breathing, your skin flushes, your muscles tense up, your temperature rises, or you start to sweat. You recognize these symptoms as anger.



Now, it's decision time, and you're hardly in the right frame of mind to make a good decision. Sound familiar? Here's where the real problem arises. The decision you make will determine your fate. Because your decision will lead to an action – the action that you will take toward the person who initiated the event. And, as we learned in school, every action produces a reaction. In this case your perceived antagonist will react by creating another event, and thus the cycle of anger rolls on, perhaps taking on cyclonic proportions. You might have been trying to react to the hurt by dealing hurt back, but the fact of the matter is that you get hurt. And hurt, and hurt, and hurt again.

To avoid the hurt, professionals recommend a combination of

- Anger Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Assertiveness
- Forgiveness

**Anger Management** – The idea here is to make your anger work for you, not against you. The first step is to get a deep understanding of your anger. You can do this through 1) an analysis of heritage patterns – understanding how you learned about anger in terms of how it was expressed and managed in your family of origin; and 2) self-monitoring – measuring the frequency of your anger and the specifics of your behavior. Often, people find that they need a third party to help in this assessment.



The second step is to build your own personal anger management plan – only you can be responsible for your anger. In this step you need to understand the cues of your anger, the physical, emotional and distorted thoughts that can be early-warning signals. We all have different cues. Clenching of the fists might be a physical cue. A feeling of powerlessness or jealousy might be emotional cues. And distorted thoughts are just that – the worst one being the belief that you know what someone else is thinking.

Then you can identify your anger triggers – what are the things that set you off? Trigger behaviors precede and cause a violent response, usually because they bring up the feeling of being abandoned or rejected. An angry response takes the place of the original feelings, which are too painful to feel. There are verbal triggers, like hearing yourself say: "it's all your fault," or, "you never help with anything," or "if you don't start giving me what I want, I'm out of here!" Then there are the non-verbal triggers, like rolling your eyes, or making a face, or the gestures, like shaking a fist or pointing a finger at the other person's chest

The third step is to build and practice your own anger action plan. This plan might incorporate the principles of taking a time out, making a time out contract with the other person, or learning a memorized response to events, that enables your mind to cool off.

**Conflict Management** – This is essentially practice of learning how to attack problems rather than attacking people. At the core of conflict management is learning how to express a complaint. For example, discussing only one complaint at a time, complaining in a specific manner about a behavior or situation, avoid blaming statements (you), avoiding absolutes (you always) and, when possible expressing appreciation before stating a complaint. It is also necessary to learn how to receive a complaint. This includes avoiding an emotional reaction, briefly summarizing the other person's points, trying to understand the other person's viewpoint before you present your defense, and offering win-win solutions. Critical to this work, and often the most challenging, is learning how to apologize when you are wrong.

**Assertiveness** – Often people with anger issues are encouraged to learn to be more assertive, which is a seeming paradox because unassertive people are usually thought of as passive or acquiescent, certainly not the hallmarks of angry people. The notion here is the positive use of assertiveness, which does not mean practicing aggression. Positive assertiveness is about listening before asserting. The process is 1) gaining awareness & respect for where our own values, rights and personal boundaries, end - and the rights, boundaries of others begin; 2) comprehending other person's emotions, needs, hopes, desires - through their camera lens, prior to 3) disclosure of what we feel, need, hope and want.

**Forgiveness** – The bonus of learning to deal with anger, is the indescribably beneficial feeling of being able to forgive. Forgiveness is an art form that begins with learning how to forgive yourself. So you have been an angry person? It's OK, because now are beginning the process of taking control of your anger.

Bottom line, we can't eliminate anger, and it would be unhealthy to try to do so. But we can change how we let anger affect us – because at the end the day, the pain caused by anger is self-inflicted pain. And who wants to live that kind of life? Control angry responses can help you live a happier life.

