

Breaking the Chain of Anger



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Note. This module is intended to increase awareness about responding to anger-related events in life. Additional books and programs in the community may help to develop knowledge and skills to cope with anger. This module may be implemented in small groups The small superscripts in the text refer to references that were used to develop this module.

Understanding the Chain of Anger



We all have felt anger. Children, old people, teenagers, men and women all experience anger. People in all cultures experience it. Anger, however, is NOT simple annoyance, irritation or disappointment².

Anger is a complex emotion. People have different styles of expressing anger⁹. It may be expressed as rage, verbal abuse, or striking out at others and things. It can be quick, like a viper's bite or it can be like a boom of a cannon, or it can be slow and seething. It can zoom from "0" to "85" in a split second, and spin out of control! Other people shove it down and let it smolder like hot coals. Some people feel resentment and shame. Some people feel anger day in and day out.

Anger can pierce deep into the heart. Anger may lead to problems when it happens too often, lasts a long time, gets out-of-control and is destructive. It hurts you and other people. The aftermath of fury or isolation can be a painful time.



Understanding anger and reducing it when it happens will help with recovery from alcohol and drug use. Research studies have shown that feelings, such as anger, anxiety, depression, frustration and boredom, are associated with highest rates of relapse to re-using alcohol and drugs⁴

Anger can put a "hand-cuff" on life.



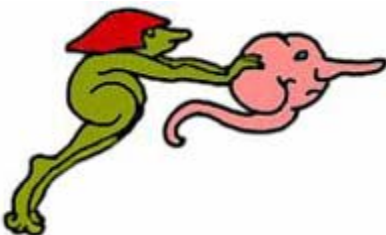
Anger involves a chain of events when one thing leads to another. Understanding the chain of events can help to stop or diffuse anger. So, it's important to understand the links that make- up the chain that leads to anger.

Anger is experienced as a combination of hostile thoughts, a surge of bodily sensations, and an attack or desire to cause harm – *verbal, physical, emotional or mental*. It is a complex response to situations^{2,3,4}.



Understanding the Links that Make-up the Chain of Anger

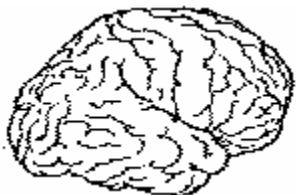
The 1st link in the chain of anger are EVENTS in daily life. Things happen in life! These situations may be “mere drops in a bucket” on some days. Depending on other things that are happening in the day, however, these events could ignite anger. Triggers are those situations that “push” our buttons².



Some times “trigger” events can be things like a traffic jam, or the garbage truck beeping its warning horn while making a pick –up early in the morning. It can also be things, such as

- ❖ The words people say - *“Don’t bother – forget it.”*
- ❖ The sounds that people make- *Sighing or groaning*
- ❖ Voice tone, quality and volume - *Whining or speaking coldly*
- ❖ Arm and hand gesture - *Pointing a finger at you*
- ❖ Facial expressions - *A facial twitch*
- ❖ Body movements - *Turning away or hands on the hips*

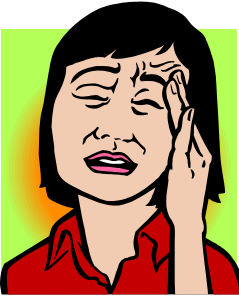
Example: A driver cuts closely in front of you.



The 2nd link in the chain of anger is how we PERCEIVE, INTERPRET or GIVE MEANING to situations. The situation could be perceived as **threat, misdeed or failed expectation**. We evaluate the situation with our selves in mind. We assign cause or blame. We think that the other person was bad and wrong to have harmed us, and should have acted differently. We may THINK or tell ourselves that someone is purposely making life miserable for us⁷. Resentment precedes most anger problems. It is triggered by an event that is perceived as unfair: we think we give more than we get, nothing matters, or hardly anything works the way it should. These interpretations can happen in a split second. Sometimes we “stew” about them as they play in our heads over and over again.

Example: In response to the driver cutting closely in front of you, you say to yourself: “Jerk! Who do you think you are?”

The 3rd link in the chain of anger are FEELINGS OR BODILY SENSATIONS.



Painful feelings: anxiety, fear, depression, hurt, guilt or shame, and badness. We may feel manipulated or unappreciated.

Frustrated desire: something is blocked, forced, or not expected or should be

Threat: feeling attacked, overwhelmed, robbed or abandoned.

*We feel pain*⁹. In addition, beneath the surface of the angry face and body, there are physiological and biological changes. The heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, coronary arteries (arteries that lead to the heart) narrow. Blood becomes thick and sticky. Muscles tense, the body is agitated. The mouth is dry. We breathe faster. The face gets red. Energy from our feelings and body build up.

Remember it's the energy that builds up in the body, NOT the anger!

Example: In response to the driver cutting closely in front of you, you say to yourself: "Jerk! Who do you think you are?" Your heart beats faster. You feel "dis-respected".

The 4th link in the chain of anger is behavior and action. The energy in the body is released with some kind of outward behavior. Physical reaction is the most familiar expression of anger. It may appear that our actions happen before thinking and feeling. Our brains and nerves, however, are much quicker than our mouths and hands. The natural, instinctive way to show anger is to respond aggressively. Examples of responses are:



- ❖ verbal assault or shouting and yelling,
- ❖ gesture of the hands, clinched jaw, hitting or standing ready to defend or over power, and many more destructive ways. Some people plan and act on revenge.

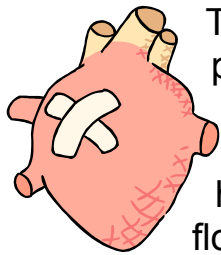
Other people keep the energy in and 'stew' with anger. They withdraw, pout and stop talking or relating to people. Some people release the energy by crying.

Energy is released from the body or it stays in!

Example: In response to driver cutting in front of you, you say: “Jerk! Who do you think you are?” You feel dis-respected, your heart beats faster. You speed to catch up to the driver to teach him a lesson (Where’s the release in energy?)

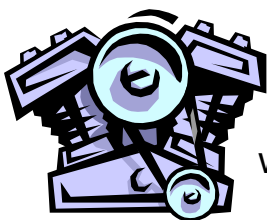
The 5th link in the chain is the result of anger. Anger may help to defend ourselves to survive. It can also hurt us, the people we love, and other people. Anger may involve verbal and physical injury, property destruction, job loss and trouble with the legal and justice system.

During anger our bodies produce adrenaline, a hormone that make the nervous system move blood from the skin, liver, stomach and intestines to the heart, lungs and skeletal muscles. This happens to get our bodies ready to fight or flee. When blood is moved away from the liver, the liver does not work as well in clearing the blood of cholesterol. Cholesterol is a kind of fat that circulates in the blood.



The movement of blood to “vital organs” during anger is made possible by blood vessels getting smaller. When blood vessels get smaller, the blood pressure goes up. Think about a garden hose: the smaller the size or diameter of the hose, the greater the water pressure – the harder the water flows. High blood pressure or hypertension forces the heart to work harder, because the heart has to pump harder to push blood through smaller blood vessels. The high blood pressure causes little tears on the artery wall. Adrenaline makes the artery wall sticky. Fatty deposits or plaque get caught on the artery wall and covers up the tears. Plaque can build-up and block the artery.

Plaque build-up is also caused by *HOMOCYSTEINE* (ho-mo-sis-tene), a chemical, produced during anger. Homocysteine makes cells of the coronary (heart) arteries grow thicker which traps collagen. Collagen is a protein which can be found in connective tissue, such as tendons. Collagen is also found in the plaque that clogs arteries. Clogged arteries can lead to a heart attack!

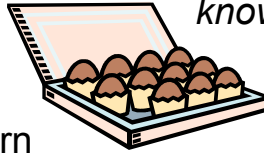


A constantly “revved-up” cardiovascular system from bottled-up chronic hostility or frequent volatile anger are risk factors for heart disease⁷. Some people feel alive when they are “revved-up” by chronic anger. Unfortunately,

that may be a sign of emotional addiction to anger!

Example: Feeling angry with the driver and speeding to catch up with him, you skid on the road and land in a ditch.

A fact of life is that we encounter all kinds of situations every day, day in and day out. Forrest Gump's mother said, "*Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get*". We cannot predict what will happen nor control all situations in our lives. We never know what will happen. The only thing we can do is to learn to respond to situations in the most effective way. Anticipating situations that may provoke anger or knowing how to reduce conflict will help keep expressions of anger at a manageable and nondestructive level². We can learn to break the links!



Thinking about the Links that Make-up My Chain of Anger

THINK of a situation in which you were caught-up in the chain of anger.

The event was:

I thought that:

I felt that:

I acted by:

The consequences of my anger were:

What alternative actions could I have taken to prevent my anger?



Breaking the chain of anger



What events ‘push’ my button? Clanging garbage can lids at 4 AM that awaken me up from a deep sleep. A clerk puts my change on the counter and not in my hand. The music from the boom-box that is coming from the next apartment.



What ways do I appraise or interpret events?

What do I tell myself? The following table lists typical thoughts that are sometimes related to anger. Role play these examples to experience the interpretations of events. Which interpretations do you have most often?

Interpretations of Events	Examples
A negative thing colors the entire experience.	People kept on talking. I didn't learn a thing.
Things are black or white, good or bad.	You did it once, and you'll do it again.
A general conclusion is based on one incident.	I am not going to that store because the manager refused my application once before.
I automatically know people's thoughts, feelings and actions.	I know he'll yell at me for being late for my prenatal appointment, so I won't go.
Disaster and bad things are expected.	I used (alcohol or drugs). I may as well not go home.
An occasional event is viewed as an ongoing problem.	He was late the a few times, so I can expect he'll be late again.
I am either a victim of external circumstances or I am responsible for the pain and suffering of all other people.	I make my whole family miserable.
I feel resentment because people won't agree with what I think is fair.	It's not fair that you can leave work now, and I have to stay for two more hours
Ironclad rules that are broken make me feel guilty or angry with those who broke them.	How come you get to do it, and I can't?
What is felt must be true.	I feel stupid, so I must be stupid.
My well-being and health are dependent on changes in other people.	If you talked more, our marriage would be better.
Complete negative judgment is made from only 1-3 qualities.	I could tell that he was a loser, just by the way he walked.
I am never wrong, only right all the time.	Don't tell me what to do, I know that I'm right.
I feel bitter when sacrifice and self-denial does not pay off.	I stayed up all night washing your clothes, and this is how you treat me?

Adapted from McKay, Davis & Fleming (1981)



How do I change the way I interpret situations? There are many ways to change your interpretation or meanings or events. Most of all, think outside the box. Make your brain stretch! Get **REAL SPINS** on situations.

How can I take **R**esponsibility for my behavior and what is going on?
How can I express **E**mpathy for the other person?
What **A**lternative choices and exceptions can I think of?
How might I **L**isten better and hear what people are saying?

What are **S**mall changes in thought and behavior that I can make?
What is actually **P**ositive or enjoyable and rewarding?
What **I**nformation can help me interpret better what is going on?
How can I **N**egotiate to find a solution?
How can I **S**ee that it's not all bad and make the most out of it?

Take **REAL SPINS** on interpreting and making meaning of events in your life! What are my **real spins** on events?



How can I diffuse my feelings of anger?

Anger can work fast. As soon as you feel the surge of anger, it's important to recognize it and stay calm. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly: *In through your nose, and out through your mouth.*

- Count slowly to 10, count to 20 or 100 if you need more time.
- Find a way to distance yourself from the situation.
- Excuse yourself, pull on the side of the road, go to another room, sit down, put your head down or take a walk.
- Think of something funny.
- Tell yourself to "cool it!!"
- Talk yourself down – "It's not worth it to get angry."
- Tell yourself "I am not going to let him or her get to me."
- Pray
- Call a friend and tell her what happened
- Think that the glass is half filled, rather than half empty!



Practice the following deep breathing exercise, so it's an automatic response when you need it¹. Ride out the emotion with deep breathing. Surf the anger surge – all waves big or small go to the shore.

- Put one hand on your abdomen (stomach area)
- Put the other hand on your chest.
- Inhale and exhale slowly through your nose, so that only your abdomen moves up and down.
- When you feel relaxed, think of something that makes you smile.
- Then, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.



What steps can I take to respond better to situations?

After you have reduced the negative energy, think about the type of anger you have. For each kind of anger, take the next step to cope better with your anger.

Type of Anger	A Step to Take
Avoidance – fear of angry feelings.	Acknowledge feeling angry. Being aware of your anger is a step!
Undercover– resentment of being advised, guided, or gently directed.	Try to be open to different ideas and activities.
Suspicious – feeling envy, jealousy or that every one and every thing is against you.	Get more information before you act.
Sudden anger - fed by frustration and impatience.	Take time out and relax. Take a deep breath.
Shame – perception of inadequacy as a person.	Affirm the goodness in you. Acknowledge that you are human!
Over emphasized & deliberate– show power and image, keep people away or control them	Say goodbye to manipulation.
Energy surge – anger is stimulating and exhilarating; it is a real pump up.	Exercise or do some physical activity to release energy.
Habitual with no purpose – angry day in and day out.	Identify automatic thoughts and behavior; get counseling or therapy.
Threatened values – moral correctness.	Listen to the views of others; find what you have in common with others; empathize; develop flexibility.
Resentment and grudges – vengeance, feeling helpless, hate, nothing can change the hurt.	Forgive and ask for forgiveness.

Potter-Efron, R., & Potter-Efron, P. (1995).



Who can I turn to for help with my thoughts and feelings?

Talk to some one ---it's a way to release energy

- ❖ A friend or relative
- ❖ Your nurse, social worker, counselor, or doctor
- ❖ Go to Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or Cocaine Anonymous meetings or a support group
- ❖ A counselor or minister
- ❖ God or spiritual higher being
- ❖ The Crisis Clinic in the city – look in the community service section of the city telephone book
- ❖ Write in your journal



How do I learn from what I do? How did I diffuse my anger?

What worked well?

How did I contribute to the success?

What small change will I do when this situation occurs again?

What will be my plan of action the next time around?

How can I do it better?

Do I believe that I can handle my anger better?

Anger is a human experience. It serves a purpose. Anger gets in the way of living life when it's too much, too often and severe in expression. It can be made a smaller part of life and used appropriately, so that living is filled with freedom, laughter and love!





Developing a Self-Prescription to Break the Chain of Anger

I think that this situation may push my button:

The things that I usually think about in this situation are:

This is how I will take REAL SPINS on what is happening:

This is how I will take a step to respond to the situation without anger:

The person or place I can go to talk is:

This is how I will learn from my SUCCESSES:

Breaking the Chain of Anger
What did I Learn?

1. Anger is experienced as a combination of
 - a. Hostile Thoughts
 - b. Surge of bodily sensations
 - c. An attack or desire to cause harm
 - d. All of the above

2. A trigger events in the chain of anger are:
 - a. Those things that help to deflect anger.
 - b. Those things that “push your button” and provoke anger.
 - c. Those things that help you to think about different choices.
 - d. Thos things that help to calm down.

3. During anger the blood is moved from the digestive tract, skin and liver to the _____, _____, and _____.

4. Fatty deposits in the blood covers up tears in the _____ True or False
arteries from high blood pressure related to chronic anger.

5. Complete the words to help to remember how to interpret appropriately trigger events.

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¹⁰<http://onhealth.webmd.com>. Anger triggers harmful chemical (April 2000)

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Breaking the Chain of Anger Answers to Questions

1. D
2. B
3. Brain,heart and muscles
4. True
5. Responsibility
Evidence
Alternative choices
Listen

Small Changes
Positive
Information
Negotiate
See