

**ABOUT ANGER**

**AND HOW  
IT OCCURS**

**Book 1**

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## **ABOUT ANGER AND HOW IT OCCURS:**

Feeling angry is a normal feature of everyday life for most people. You should not aim never to feel angry again since it is an emotion that can be used productively. It was anger that motivated many of the great social activists to act, such as Ghandi, and Martin Luther King. However, just as with other emotions such as anxiety and depression, problems with anger can arise either if anger is felt too frequently or intensely, or if it is expressed in such a way that is destructive or unhelpful to you or others, e.g. violence.

Below are listed some of the **HELPFUL AND UNHELPFUL ASPECTS OF ANGER** .

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### **HELPFUL ASPECTS:**

- It gets you ready for action
- It gives you energy
- It tells you something is actually wrong
- It could be a useful sign to others

### **UNHELPFUL ASPECTS**

- When it leads to aggression
  - When it leads to trouble with the law
  - It disrupts your ability to be rational and to think clearly
  - It can damage your health
  - It can damage your relationships
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The aim of this handout is to introduce you to ways in which you can manage your anger. This may mean learning to feel angry less often or less intensely. However, it also means looking at and changing how you behave when you do feel angry, particularly in order to avoid violence.

### **How Do Anger and Violence Occur ?**

Episodes of anger and violence do not occur on their own without reason. In everybody there are other factors which set the scene for anger and violence. Becoming aware of what these other factors are is important since then we have

an opportunity of stopping this process in the earlier stages and so avoiding the anger and violence that would otherwise result.

How episodes of anger and violence occur is set out below:

**SETTING → TRIGGER → THOUGHTS → ANGER →  
VIOLENCE**

Learning to manage your anger involves firstly looking at and understanding this chain of factors and seeing how they apply to situations in your own life in which anger or violence have been problems for you. Then methods of breaking the chain can be learnt and practised. The chain can be broken early on so as to reduce the likelihood of feeling angry, or near the end so that any feelings of anger which do occur are less likely to result in violent behaviour.

Each of the five stages of the chain are explained below together with examples of each which commonly arise:

#### **1. SETTING:**

These are situations which may put you into a certain frame of mind that make anger and violence more likely in response to something that provokes you. You may be aware of this yourself – sometimes you might become angry “at the slightest thing” and yet at other times you are able to keep calm even when something which could be very irritating or frustrating occurs. Think about the times at which you are more likely to get angry when things go wrong. Some of the settings are listed below:

- Being tired
- If your home is untidy
- Being angry about something else
- After a bad day at work
- If your partner is complaining
- Feeling generally down and fed up
- Talking about money
- If the children are being demanding
- If you're worrying about something else.

#### **2. TRIGGERS:**

Triggers are events that occur which make you angry. Some of the more common types of trigger are described below:

i. **Threatening Triggers:**

These types of trigger make you angry because you feel threatened in some way. Very often the triggers are words or actions of someone else which are seen by you as threats to yourself in various ways. For example:

- Threats to your personal safety [such as when someone accidentally knocks into you]
- Threats to your views [such as when someone challenges what you say in a discussion]
- Threats to your status [such as a put down remark or a humiliating experience]
- Threats to your usual ways and habits ["It's always been done like this, why change it now?"]

ii. **Frustrating Triggers:**

These are events in which your attempts to do something are stopped or slowed. The cause of this can be another person [such as someone refusing to lend you a vital piece of equipment], or simply to the situation itself [such as missing the bus, or sitting in traffic jams]

iii. **Environmental Triggers:**

Occasionally the environment can make you angry. Often this is unpleasant noise, however, it might also be unpleasant smells or sights. Alternatively, the trigger can have an internal cause such as pain.

It is a combination of **Setting** and **Trigger** which lead to anger. For example, a put down remark from your neighbour might be a trigger for anger in some settings [whilst jealously admiring his new car], but not in others [having just beaten him at poker].

**3. THOUGHTS:**

It has just been described above how a certain event might be a trigger for anger in some settings but not in others. This is because the setting affects to some extent the thoughts that you have in response to the trigger. It is these thoughts that determine whether you get angry or not. To make this clearer look at the example above of the new car and the poker game.

In the first situation you are admiring his new Porsche whilst thinking jealous thoughts about wishing it was yours and how old your car looks when they are parked side by side. Your neighbour says:

“I suppose money must be a little tight for you at the moment”.

To this remark you think:

“Who does he think he is, showing off his money with a fancy car and then saying I can’t afford one”.

It is these **THOUGHTS** that then make you angry.

In the second situation you are collecting your winnings from your neighbour whom you have thrashed at poker. Your neighbour says:

“It’s just as well, I suppose money must be a little tight for you at the moment”.

However, because you are thinking how much better you are at poker than he is you think:

“I know he’s trying to show off how much more money he has than me, but he’s only trying to get back at me because he knows he’s a useless poker player”.

These **THOUGHTS** do not make you angry.

It can be seen that although the remark by the neighbour was similar on both occasions it acted as a trigger for anger in the first setting but not in the second. This is because in the first situation the remark triggered thoughts which led to anger, however, in the second situation the remark triggers thoughts which did not lead to anger.

It is important then to realise that an event, or trigger does not directly lead to anger. It is what you **THINK** in response to the trigger that determines whether you become angry or not.

Learning to control and modify to some extent the thoughts that you have in response to a trigger can give you some degree of control over whether anger results [as will be described later].

#### **4. ANGER:**

What is being described in this booklet is the chain of events that lead to anger and aggression. The fourth link in the chain following **Setting – Trigger – Thoughts** is the emotion of anger itself. This will occur in response to certain thoughts that you have, which themselves occur in response to a trigger in a certain situation.

When someone becomes angry or anxious certain physical changes occur which get their body aroused and ready for action. Have a look back at the examples

of settings on Page 4 that make anger more likely in response to a trigger. It has often been found that if someone is already anxious and tense about one matter then they are more likely to get angry about something else. This is because if their body is already aroused by anxiety then this arousal can more easily be switched to that of anger than if they were calm.

There is, therefore, a link between arousal [whether it be due to anxiety, previous anger or even stimulants such as coffee] and the increased likelihood of anger in response to a present trigger. Being aware of this link can be very valuable in attempting to manage your anger and this is described in Book 2,

Most people are able to recognise their bodily response of anger and how it is different to that of anxiety or sadness. Below are given some of the descriptions given by people of what anger is, that is how they feel when they get angry:

- I feel like I'm going to explode
- I feel hot and sweaty
- My heart beats faster
- I can't speak clearly
- I start shaking
- I feel tense – tight muscles

Later in Book 2 is described how you can learn to exert some control over these feelings of anger. This can be done by attempting to control the **THOUGHTS** that lead to the **FEELINGS** of anger, or by attempting to control the **FEELINGS** of anger themselves by counteracting them with relaxation. Regular relaxation can also be used to reduce general levels of arousal and make anger less likely.

## 5. BEHAVIOUR:

The final link in the chain is that between the feelings of anger and behaviour that results. This may be the most crucial link since it is often through a need to curb their violence that people begin to work on managing their anger.

To illustrate this some of the goals given by people who have themselves attended an anger management group are given below.

- To be more assertive without hitting somebody
- To understand why I find it difficult not to hit Policemen
- To try not to lash out at my kids
- To avoid trouble with the law
- To avoid hurting someone
- Not to take it out on my wife

It is very important to realise that what you **do** when you get angry directly influences whether you stay angry, get more angry, or become less angry. For example, if when you are angry you swear at your partner, they may get angry with you, causing you to become even more angry, so that a major confrontation results. On the other hand, if you had said clearly what the problem was, without swearing, you might have been able to have a reasonable discussion about it and sort it out without a fight.

## **WHY DO PEOPLE GET VIOLENT ?**

People do not usually become violent the moment they first become angry. As stated above the initial feelings of anger can be increased or decreased by how you behave when you first become angry. If you behave in such a way as to increase your feelings of anger then it is easy for your feelings of anger to escalate to such an extent that violence results.



What type of behaviour acts to increase initial feelings of anger ?

The type of behaviour that escalates anger are small acts of aggression. Such acts include abusive and threatening remarks, abusive or threatening facial expressions or threatening acts. Unfortunately this is the very type of behaviour that occurs most naturally in response to feelings of anger and so these small acts of aggression tend to occur spontaneously. In your own experience you might have found that you have acted aggressively e.,g. by swearing or making an aggressive gesture without thinking and then have regretted it later. Eventually these smaller acts of aggression escalate your anger to such an extent that violence results.

Another characteristic of acts of aggression is that they often act as triggers for anger in others, as in the example given above. If they then also act aggressively as a result of this anger then violence is particularly likely to happen eventually.

## **HOW TO PREVENT VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR:**

To prevent violent behaviour in response to feelings of anger there are two important points to appreciate:

1. That, as described above, small acts of aggression will act to increase feelings of anger and so greatly increase the likelihood of violence.
2. That, when feelings of anger start you do at that point **HAVE A CHOICE** as to how you behave. If you choose to act aggressively then your anger may well escalate to a point where you have less control and resort to violence to relieve these feelings. However, you can **CHOOSE** not to act in this way and to do something else when you start to feel angry. Other things that you can do that do not increase your anger and so are less likely to lead to violence are discussed in Book 2.

