

Managing Anger: A Cognitive-Behavioral Perspective

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Biography: Author retired after 21.5 years from the US Air Force in 1996. He's currently a College Counselor at Delaware State University holding a Master's degree (MSW) and License in Clinical Social Work. He is also a current member of the Delaware Board of Clinical Social Work Examiners (governmental appointment); and former charter member of the National Institute of Mental Health Extramural Interventions Committee (June 2003 – June 2005). Specialty includes the practice of advance mental health as it relates to college students.

“The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I can't enjoy my work any more because he even controls my thoughts. My resentments produce too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after only a few hours' work. The work I formerly enjoyed is now drudgery. Even vacations cease to give me pleasure ... the man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind. When the waiter serves me porterhouse steak with French fries, asparagus, crisp salad, and strawberry shortcake smothered with ice cream, it might as well be stale bread and water. My teeth chew the food and I swallow it, but the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it ... the man I hate may be many miles from my bedroom, but more cruel than any slave-driver, he whips my thoughts into such a frenzy that my innerspring mattress becomes rack of torture.”

S.I. McMillan, *None of These Diseases*

Most humans are able to manage their anger without much introspective thought. It can be described as an internal self-preservation switch that goes on when one is in danger of being highly emotional, or “out-of-control” as it relates to anger. There are some however, whose self-preservation switch is either

defective or non-existent and the result can be devastating. The anger and bitterness they harbor can be addictive and self-destructive.

Why is it so difficult for some people to manage their anger? Well, according to Barris (1999 & 2002), there are many reasons. For some, anger appears to work. They make the connection that if I get angry with whomever, they will comply with what I want. However, this thinking is in error and neglects to consider that people have freedom of choice.

For some, anger is an “over-learned” reaction. They have been reacting angrily for so long that it seems to occur automatically, without thinking. However, behaviors and emotions are a result of thought. One cannot behave, or emote without thinking. A problem arises when one does not take the time necessary to think rationally, which may result in “semi-automatic,” irrational self-talk, emotions and behavior. The key is to teach one to slow down the thought process long enough to allow for meditation and rational thinking - - this takes practice and will be highlighted more later in this discussion.

For some, anger helps them hold onto the past - - even an unpleasant past. For example, my childhood friend became pregnant and had a son while she was in the 10th grade. She was very much in love with her son’s father, but the father was not in love with her and wanted nothing to do with her or the child after he found out about the pregnancy. My friend, to this day, 30-years later, is still angry with the father and whenever I see her she still talks about him (“that no good bum”) in a very negative way. For over 30-years she has held on to this anger, and in so doing, keeps alive the memory of their relationship.

Anger is experienced more often than other emotions. Think about it. During the events of the day which emotion do you experience the most: shame, guilt, disgust, joy, sadness, fear or anger? Anger is very intense and results in high arousal of the nervous system. This is an “adrenaline rush” and for some people it’s like being “high” on their anger. This is how anger can have an addictive affect for some people. Anger will cause people to confront or approach, rather than retreat or avoid the person or situation that the anger is directed towards. This is because it includes an experience of increased power and potency.

Well, there you have it. The reason managing anger is so difficult for some, and makes slaves out of others, is that it means giving up a frequent, intense, long-lasting emotion. It means giving up feelings of

power and potency. It means giving up an addictive “high” that feels “sooo goood.” It means giving up holding on to the past; and it means giving up the belief that anger is a more acceptable response.

So, with all these seeming advantages, why do people want to give up their anger? Because there are very painful costs associated. Barris (1999) gives an example of an anger management group member who stated: “You know, I’ve been addicted to everything. Alcohol, cocaine, you name it. I never realized that what I was really addicted to is my anger. When I get angry I feel good and, the thing is, I don’t have to pay anything for it. It’s free! And I can give myself a fix whenever I want it. The only problem is that I’m 47 years-old now, have three kids, and my anger has caused all kinds of relationship problems. I’m sick and tired of feeling this way.”

At this point we need to define what is meant by Anger and compare that with the less harmful emotion called Irritation. According to Barris (1999 & 2002), Anger is the emotion humans experience when they do not get what they think they should or must get. The emotion humans experience when they cannot accept that they cannot control others. The emotion that activates increasing heart rate, muscle tension, etc. The emotion that has a tendency towards displaying aggressive behavior (verbal or physical) and seriously diminishes problem solving, parenting skills and interpersonal relationships.

Irritation, on the other hand, is a much healthier emotion and is defined as the emotion humans experience when they do not get what they prefer, desire, hope, want, or wish for. The emotion humans experience when they accept they cannot control others. The emotion that results in little, if any, physiological affects such as increase heart rate, muscle tension, rapid breathing, headaches, etc. The emotion that results in the likelihood of assertive behavior, improved problem solving, improved parenting skills and improved interpersonal relationships. Based on these definitions, one’s task in managing anger is to learn how to move from anger to irritation.

Anger takes many forms. Many people do not regard themselves as angry individuals because they don’t understand the many disguises anger takes. What follows are 16 variations of anger.

- Bitterness: To exhort strong, deep-seated hostility.
- Malice: Desire to harm others; ill will.
- Clamor: Loud out cry or noise (e.g., yelling).
- Envy: Dissatisfied desire for someone else’s possessions or advantages.

- Resentment: To object to.
- Intolerance: Opposing view; bigoted.
- Criticism: To judge adversely.
- Revenge: To impose or inflict injury.
- Wrath: Violent anger; fury.
- Hatred: Deep-seated antagonism (hostility), or enmity; violent ill will.
- Seditions: Rebellion against authority.
- Jealousy: resentful or bitter in rivalry (trying to be equal).
- Attack: To set upon with violent physical or verbal force.
- Gossip: Spreading rumor or talk of a personal or sensational nature.
- Sarcasm: Taunting or scornful remarks that are opposite of what is meant.
- Un-forgiveness: To continue being angry about or resentful against.

Barris (1999 & 2002), indicates that there are some hard truths about anger that we need to highlight. It can kill us slowly or quickly. Slowly, over a period of time, anger places people at greater risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, headaches, strokes and stomach-related problems, etc. Conversely, angry people can quickly kill or be killed by becoming aggressive (violent) towards others.

Important relationships are destroyed by fits of anger. No one enjoys being around angry people. Anger pushes others away like no other emotion and they are often fearful of being exposed to angry people. Even the angry people themselves tend to isolate from the world. Opportunities pass them by and doors remain closed.

Our society is set up to punish angry people who behave aggressively. If we cannot control our own behavior, eventually someone will come along and control it for us - - in a way we probably will not like.

This next statement is somewhat philosophical, but life will find ways to punish us for being angry. Mysteriously, spiritually, karma, fate, or whatever you want to call it, life finds a way of evening the score.

Joe Bagadonuts is a student at DSU. He announced to some friends that he had “told off” one of his professors who apparently had refused to allow Joe to make up a missed exam. “God, I was so mad!

And it felt so good to tell the SOB off! The problem is he won't let me back into the class and, I need this class to graduate."

There are many things we tell ourselves to justify our anger. These are called anger producing beliefs.

"If I don't get angry, and behave aggressively, people will think I'm a wimp and walk all over me." If someone is determined to view you as weak, all the anger and aggression you can generate will not necessarily change their view of you. In fact, others will point to your anger as proof that you are weak and out of control. Being able to choose your emotional response, including ones other than anger, are signs of strength, not weakness.

"I just get angry. Emotions are things over which I have no control." Most people have been taught that emotions are things that happen to us and are beyond our control. In fact, emotions are products of how people think about specific situations. If we control our thinking, we can control our emotions. We do not have to be a prisoner, or slave to unhelpful emotions like anger.

"Only by expressing my anger am I going to feel better. I should never keep my anger bottled up!"

There are countless examples of persons you might not want to express your anger towards under different circumstances. (i.e. police officers, employers, judges, a drunk with a gun.) Rather than struggling to keep anger "in," or surrendering to it by letting it "out", we need to manage it. Managing our anger will help us to avoid the physical problems associated with "holding it in" (repression). Managing our anger will help us to avoid the personal and interpersonal problems associated with "letting it out" (expression).

"Anger can be healthy." Most people do not use their anger to produce healthy behavior. Anger is a negative emotion. However, when one does refer to "anger" as a positive motivating force, it's not anger, it's healthy irritation. "Healthy Irritation" allows one to overcome life's problems. "Unhealthy Anger" always causes one more problems.

A counselor conducted a workshop for 30 students. Working under a deadline, he realized that all of the changes he had made to the presentation were not saved on his computer. He called his wife and began yelling at her about the situation (displaced anger), and experienced the most intense desire to throw the phone through the computer monitor. After twenty minutes of ranting and raving, he recomposed himself

and began addressing the problem of recovering the lost work. Where is the “healthy anger” in this situation? As in all cases of anger, it is nowhere to be found.

“Hitting something, like a pillow, will help me deal better with my anger.” This is the “catharsis theory” of dealing with anger. It emphasizes “letting off steam” as the best way to deal with anger. Regretfully, there’s no evidence to support the value of this approach. There is more evidence to support that this approach is the wrong way to learn anger control. They are simply rehearsing future aggressive behaviors. Today a pillow, tomorrow a wall, next week a person.

“I can’t help it if other people, or situations, make me angry!” This is the greatest lie of all. As long as you believe that other people make you angry, *they are in control of your emotions!* As long as you believe that other people make you angry, *“you are powerless over your anger!”* To be in control of your emotional life, to regain your personal power, it is essential that you abandon the notion that others make you angry.

You can replace this notion with, the belief that only *you* are powerful enough to create your own anger!

“Turning up the anger meter makes people comply.” The problem with this theory is that we cannot control people or their choices. Most often turning up the anger makes people less compliant. They want us to know that we cannot control them and they will resist even if resisting makes no sense.

According to Albert Ellis (1987) and Jerry Wilde (1996), anger is not caused by the things that happen to us, or don’t happen to us, but is the result of the universal, very human habit of elevating in our minds, the things we would like to have, wish to have, hope to have and prefer having, Into: Things we BELIEVE we MUST have, SHOULD have, OUGHT TO have, are ENTITLED TO have, and DEMAND to have. The key words to remember here are “believe,” “must,” “should,” “ought,” “entitled,” and “demand.”

Sure your life would be easier, better and more pleasant if you got everything you thought you should. But is that the real world in which we live? No! In the real world you may demand that your roommate help keep clean the common areas of your room, but must she? No! Would you be happier if she did? Certainly. The important thing to remember is that making commanding, or demanding statements about

what we think people should do can set us up for being very angry and disappointed because human beings have freedom of choice and are not obligated to do what we think they should.

What follows is an example of what one can do to manage their anger using the principles of Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT):

- Joe Bagadonuts: “My girlfriend was hanging around with Sheila though I have told her not to.”
- Joe’s Consequences: There are three.
 - Emotional: “I got really angry; about an 8 on a scale of 0-10.”
 - Behavioral: “I screamed at Sheila to leave, and then I pushed my girlfriend and started yelling at her.”
 - Physical: “I got to feeling hot, my heart started pounding fast, and my muscles were all tense.”
- Joe’s Commanding/Demanding Beliefs are:
 - “Sheila should go away!”
 - “I don’t go against my girlfriend’s wishes, so she must not go against mine!”
 - “My woman ought to just do what I tell her to do!”
- Joe Disputes his Beliefs Using Rational Self-Talk:
 - “Where is it written that my girlfriend must do what I say?”
 - “Because I don’t go against her wishes doesn’t mean that she must not go against mine.”
 - “Holding on to these beliefs hurt me and it hurts our relationship.”

(See addendum for more rational self-talk).

- Joe’s More Effective Beliefs: “I would prefer that my girlfriend not hang around Sheila, but I now realize that I have no control over her.”
 - These are Joe’s new beliefs about his girlfriend and the situation.
 - They are preferential (i.e., desire, wish for, want, hope for, prefer).
 - They help him and his relationship.
 - They recognize he has no control over his girlfriend.

- Joe's New Feelings/Behaviors:

- New level of irritation: "I would still be irritated with her, but only about 3-4 on the anger scale."
- New behaviors: "I would assertively discuss the situation with her."
- New physical feelings: Heart rate slows down, less muscle tension and normal breathing.

You see, it is our commanding/demanding beliefs that generate anger. It's not the person, or situation that makes one angry - - it's what one thinks about the person, or situation that produces anger. Hence, anger is a choice and can be managed by examining, and if necessary, changing one's thinking. We have control over our thinking and our emotions - - we don't have control over other people or situations. Through the use of rational self-talk one can change anger producing thoughts and beliefs and thereby change the negative consequences they produce. Yes it's not easy and yes it takes practice, but it is a worthwhile endeavor, which can be very helpful for those who want freedom from the devastating and relentless negative affects of anger.

More Rational Self-Talk (Addendum)

- I don't need to prove myself in this situation. I can stay calm
- As long as I keep my cool, I'm in control of myself.
- No need to doubt myself, what other people say doesn't matter.
- I'm the only person who can make me mad or keep me calm.
- Time to relax and slow things down, take a time out if you get tight.
- I don't need to feel threatened here. I can relax and stay cool.
- Nothing says I have to be competent and strong all the time.
- It's OK to feel unsure and confused.
- It's impossible to control other people and situations. The only thing I can control is myself and how I express my feelings.
- It's OK to be uncertain or insecure sometimes. I don't need to be in control of everything and everybody.
- If people criticize me, I can survive that. Nothing says I have to be perfect.
- If this person wants to go off the wall, that's their thing.
- I don't need to respond to their anger or feel threatened.

- When I get into an argument, I need to stick to my plan and know what to do. I can take a time out.
- It's OK to walk away from this fight.
- It's nice to have other people's love and approval, but even without it, I can still accept and like MYSELF.
- People put erasers on the end of pencils for a reason. It's OK to make mistakes.
- People are going to act the way they want to, not the way I want.

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