

Anger Management Course Workbook

5. Challenging Angry Thoughts and Beliefs

Stop-Think-Act

In earlier classes, we have introduced the concept of stopping and thinking before acting when we feel angry. In order to 'stop', we need to help ourselves calm our Emotional Brain. For example, monitoring our anger thermometer, bodily sensations and putting into place quick control strategies such as breathing, relaxation and self-talk.

This week's class is about how to best make use of our Thinking Brain. First we need to know why thoughts and beliefs play a role in us feeling angry. When we are angry, we can very easily fall into unhelpful, repetitive thinking patterns. However, there are strategies that can help us to challenge this thinking which can then free us up to act in ways that help us achieve what we want.

How our thoughts affect our anger

To help understand why we get angry, we need to pay attention to our thoughts. The reason for this is explained in the following sentence:

How we think directly affects how we feel

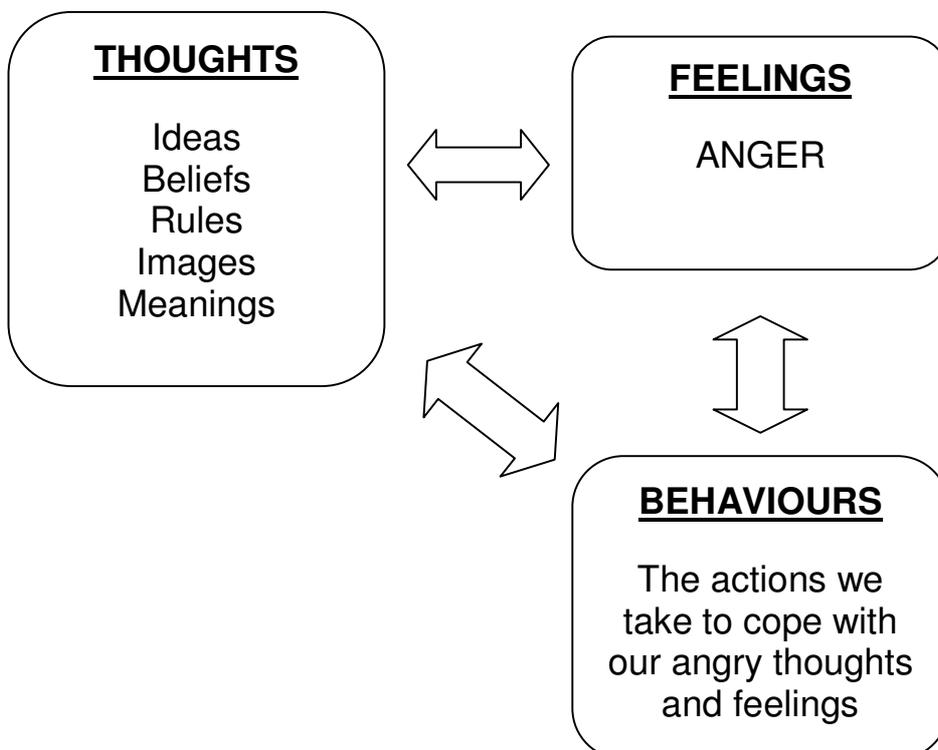
Exercise 1: Do you agree with this statement? Why?

So, as anger is a feeling, our thoughts will affect our anger. This is for the following three reasons:

- (1) Thoughts and feelings are linked: the way in which we *choose* to think about things, is vital to our mood and feelings.
- (2) If we change one, then the other will also change.
- (3) If we learn how to pay attention to our thoughts and beliefs, then we can change how angry we feel and also how we respond to these feelings.

The important point here is that we have more of a choice about how we think and feel than we sometimes realise. The rest of this booklet will explain why this is, and how we can learn to spot automatic ways of thinking and behaving and help us choose alternative ways, in order to help us better manage our feelings of anger.

To explain this link between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, please look at the diagram below:



So, as an example, if I *think* that someone has offended me, then I will *feel* angry and I will *behave* in a way that responds to my feelings.

Now complete this example of your own.

Exercise 2: Bring to mind the last time you remember feeling angry:

In that situation I was ***thinking:***

I ***felt:***

I then (describe your ***behaviour*** and what you did):

How we think about events determines how we experience them and whether or not we become angry. Our perceptions and beliefs about things that happen are important. Of course, our thoughts will be influenced by many things including our past experiences, the current situation we're in, the actions of other people around us and the environment in which we live.

Learning our ABCs

However, anger is not caused by an event itself, but by how we *think* about those events. The same situation can have a different meaning for different people at different times. One way of making this clearer is to consider our ABCs:



Writing down your problem in ABC form can help you to work out the difference between your thoughts, feelings and behaviours and also make clearer what triggered off your anger.

A is the Anger Trigger. These are the facts in the situation or event in which you became angry. This could be a real event that has occurred in the outside world (such as someone crashing into your car), or an event that is inside your mind such as an image, sensation or memory (remembering about a time when someone made fun of you).

B is your Beliefs. Your beliefs include your thoughts, your personal rules for living your life, and the meanings that you attach to the external and internal events (the triggers). It is really important to note here that B comes in-between A and C (the consequences come after the beliefs).

C is the Consequences. Consequences can include your feelings (anger), physical sensations that accompany the angry feelings and your behaviours (the actions you take to cope with the feelings). Anger may be only one of many feelings that you feel.

We cannot stop thoughts coming into our head. However, by developing a really clear ABC of your problem can make it much easier for you to realise how your thoughts at 'B' lead to your emotional and behavioural responses at 'C'.

Now use the form on the next page to work out the ABC of a recent situation in which you became angry. Use the example given to guide you. (Tip: it can sometimes be easier to remember the consequences first and then work backwards to what you were thinking and what triggered this).

ABC Form - EXAMPLE

A nger Trigger	B elief	C onsequence
<p>Write down what triggered your feelings (it could be an outside event or something inside your mind)</p> <p><i>Someone jumping in front of me in the supermarket queue</i></p> <p><i>Son not tidying room when I asked twice</i></p> <p><i>Boss giving me extra work to do</i></p>	<p>Write down the thoughts and beliefs that went through your mind</p> <p><i>That's not fair</i></p> <p><i>He never listens to me</i></p> <p><i>This isn't part of my job and I can't cope with this just now.</i></p>	<p>Write down (a) your feelings and (b) what you did as a result (your actions and behaviours)</p> <p><i>Anger (feeling)</i> <i>Irritation (feeling)</i> <i>Gave them an angry look (action)</i></p> <p><i>Anger (feeling)</i> <i>Frustration (feeling)</i> <i>Shouted at him (action)</i></p> <p><i>Anger (feeling)</i> <i>Stressed (feeling)</i> <i>Became quiet and withdrawn at work (action)</i></p>

Exercise 3: ABC Form – My own example

A nger Trigger	B elief	C onsequence
Write down what triggered your feelings (it could be an outside event or something inside your mind)	Write down the thoughts and beliefs that went through your mind	Write down (a) your feelings and (b) what you did as a result (your actions and behaviours)

What have you learned from filling in this ABC form? Write down in the space provided any patterns that you notice, be that ways of behaving, kinds of feelings, or the types of thoughts you might have:

What I have noticed from completing the ABC Form:

It may be that you noticed that there are some triggers that make you more angry than others, or that you often experience a range of emotions that go along with anger such frustration, annoyance, irritation and sometimes guilt, depression or anxiety.

Common Themes in Angry Thoughts

Whilst many different angry thoughts can go through our minds, it is recognised that there are common themes when it comes to anger that you may be able to recognise in yourself.

For example, if anger is often felt in situations where we believe that:

- We are under **threat**
- There has been an **injustice**
- Something or someone has **prevented us from doing something we want to do**
- Someone has **attacked or criticised us** at a personal level
- Someone has **violated or broken a rule** which is important to us

Wind-Up Thoughts

In such situations, common thoughts that can make us angry, or 'wind us up' include:

Feeling **under threat**

- *I could get hurt here*
- *This is dangerous*

Feeling there has been an **injustice**

- *This isn't fair*
- *You're completely wrong*

Feeling something/someone has **prevented us from doing something**

- *You can't stop me*
- *Get out of my way*

Feeling someone has **attacked or criticised us**

- *You've really upset me*
- *Don't treat me like that*

Feeling someone has **violated or broken a rule** which is important to us

- *That's not right*
- *You can't do that*

Exercise 4: Have you thought any of the above statements before when you have been angry? If so, which ones?

All of the above suggests that we get angry when something happens, or could happen that we think “should not”. It also appears that anger can increase if the event is judged as:

- Unwarranted or unjustified (and so is unfair or undeserved)
- Intentional (someone purposely inflicted the event)
- Preventable (it need not have happened)
- Blame-worthy (someone is responsible for this).

Getting stuck in our ways

In all of these situations, anger can be a very natural human response. However, when problems with anger arise this is when we generalise our responses so that we take each of these situations to the extreme. For example, our beliefs and rules can become too rigid or over-inclusive, and we don't make any exceptions. Or, our wishes and desires become absolute commandments that others must abide by.

In summary, we start becoming very stuck in our ways, and unable to be flexible, even when being more flexible and adaptive could help the situation, and help us get to where we want to be.

Indeed, often we get angry not so much at the event itself, but in our individual reaction to it. For example, we may feel completely overwhelmed and unable to cope with our anger. Particularly if we're the kind of person who feels that we 'should not' have to put up with negative experiences then we be tempted to put all blame elsewhere. In such situations, we may even feel that anger and and/or aggression is completely justified.

So, difficulties can come when we start to respond automatically to our angry triggers, which means that our options are limited. If we are able to step back, and are aware of all of our beliefs, feelings and likely actions, then this gives us more opportunity to ***choose our response***.

How to Change our Automatic Responses

There are a number of key skills we can develop in order to help us manage our anger through increased awareness of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

1. Increase our self-awareness – get to know yourself better (use ABC Forms)
2. Recognise your most unhelpful thoughts
3. Challenge these thoughts
4. Discover more helpful strategies

Getting to know you...

As mentioned above, it is not the event that makes us angry, but what we think about the event and what meaning we attach to it. So, it is not the event that makes you angry, it what the event means to you. For example, if something bad happens, and you take it personally, it is likely to cause you anger.

In order to understand our thoughts we need to understand our feelings. It is important to be able to spot when we are angry and what makes us angry. We need to be in tune with our feelings and what triggers our feelings. In order to do this it is helpful to keep a simple diary of anger incidents including (using ABC Form)

- The situation and identifying the anger triggers (A)
- Working out what went through our mind: our thoughts and beliefs (B)
- Recognising the consequences (C) of our thoughts and beliefs in terms of our feelings, and behaviours

Recognise your most Unhelpful Thoughts

Sometimes we get into unhelpful thinking patterns. These patterns affect our judgment of situations. Below, some of the common unhelpful patterns in anger are described:

All or nothing thinking

This is where we split things into black and white categories with no shades of grey in-between. For example, *“It’s all going totally wrong”*.

Jumping to conclusions

This is when we guess what people are thinking, with no facts to support our assumption. For example, *“She hates me, so much for her friendship”*.

‘Should’ statements

“Shoulds”, “oughts” & “musts” are rigid forms of thinking and can lead to feelings of guilt and anger. For example, *“I must never forget things”*

Blaming

When you hold yourself or others responsible for something that happened that was out of your control. For example, *“I got angry because you messed up today”*

Labelling

This is when we are very quick to give ourselves or others a negative label. For example, *“He is stupid”*

Overgeneralization

This is when we see a single event as part of a regular pattern. For example, *“that’s it, I’m always late”*.

Mental filter

This refers to not seeing the good things in a situation & dwelling on the bad things. For example, *“See, she couldn’t even finish the job”*.

Magnification

This is when we exaggerate the importance of problem. For example, *“How awful, how terrible, I’ve got no clothes to wear, this is the end!”*

Emotional reasoning

When we take our emotion as evidence for the truth. For example, *“I feel angry, that proves that you must have treated me badly”*

Exercise 5: Look at the above types of unhelpful thoughts. Which ones do you have when you feel angry?

Challenge your Unhelpful Thoughts

If we can catch our thoughts and spot where they are unhelpful, we can change them into helpful thoughts that work for us. Our angry thoughts are often inaccurate and unrealistic because we mistakenly see the situation being thought of as threatening. Our self-talk can make our anger worse as it “winds us up” and we don’t challenge the thoughts.

D is for Dispute. We need to challenge our unhelpful thinking by questioning and disputing our thoughts. We can do this by asking ourselves certain questions.

When we lose our sense of perspective we often become angry. Learning to see things differently can often help. We each look at the world through our own pair of glasses. It can help prevent anger if we are able to see someone else's point of view. One way of doing this is to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. Alternatively, we can try and keep things in perspective, by seeing the bigger picture. A key strategy for managing anger is to keep a sense of humour. It helps to be able to take a step back and see things in proportion. When you lose your sense of humour it is a sign that you are on edge and may be taking things too seriously.

When trying to challenge our unhelpful thoughts, it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

Key questions we can ask ourselves:

- (1) Is there another way to seeing this?
- (2) What would someone else do?
- (3) What are the chances of that happening?
- (4) What is the worst thing that could happen?
- (5) Am I right to think that?
- (6) Will this matter in 5 years time?
- (7) What is this worth?

In relation to the unhelpful thoughts listed above, there are specific things we can bear in mind. See the suggestions below.

All or nothing thinking

- Be specific, focus on the behaviour only and describe it with precision

Jumping to conclusions

- Pay attention and catch yourself making the assumptions
- Keep an open mind to other possibilities

Should statements

- Describe what you want or would like. Then if it doesn't happen you can be frustrated/disappointed but less likely to feel righteous anger

Blaming

- Forget the other person, they're not going to do anything different

Labelling

- Don't make judgements about the other person

Overgeneralisation

- Make a conscious effort to look for exceptions

Magnification

- How bad is it *really*? Look at the whole picture
- Be very accurate & precise in your answer

Expectations - What do I want?

Our expectations about the way something ought to be can also lead to anger. High expectations lead to high standards, which may not be met. If things are seen as "not good enough", this may set off anger. Expecting bad things to happen is like looking for trouble and expecting provocation.

Examples of expectations contributing to our anger include:

- Feeling angry because something didn't go the way it was supposed to.
- Feeling angry because you made a mistake.
- Feeling angry as a result of trying to complete too much in a day.
- Routinely getting angry with someone because you expect them to wind you up.

It is important that your expectations are realistic and flexible. Link your expectations to situations and change them if the situation changes. What is realistic today may not be realistic next month. Try to be patient with yourself and others.

It's important to bear in mind, your goal in the situation. This is when we need to return to our ABC form and consider all the consequences to our actions, and think: 'what's my goal here?'

Helpful Strategies: Coping by talking to ourselves

Thinking influences our feelings through the things that we say to ourselves. Unhelpful thoughts can add fuel to the fire and play a large role in keeping anger going after the event has passed. However, using helpful self-statements (or 'cooling thoughts') can be a good way to manage our anger and guide our behaviour. Examples of these include:

- Chill out
- Calm down
- Breathe away the anger
- Don't yell
- Don't give them the satisfaction of seeing you angry
- It's not worth it
- Give them a chance to have a say

To use this strategy we need to break anger into several stages:

- Getting ready for provocation: when we know we are going to face something that will make us angry.
- During the event: early signs of anger are cues to use coping strategies.
- Coping with stress: early attempts at anger management may not be successful.
- Reflecting on provocation: time to evaluate the effect of the experience on you, continue coping or give self praise.

Below are some examples of self-statements for each of the four stages. It will help if you can identify self-statements that you plan to use in each stage.

Preparing for a provoking situation

- This is going to upset me but I know how to deal with it
- What is it that I have to do?
- Stick to the issues and don't take it personally
- Try not to take this too seriously
- Time for a few deep breaths of relaxation
- Easy does it, remember to keep your sense of humour

During the event

- Stay calm, just continue to relax
- Think of what you want to get out of this
- There is no point in getting mad
- It's really a shame that she has to act like this
- If I start to get mad I'll just be banging my head against the wall
- What he says doesn't matter. I'm on top of this situation and it's under control

Coping with stress

- My muscles are starting to feel tight, time to relax and slow things down
- It's just not worth it to get so angry
- Time to take a deep breath
- Try to reason it out. Treat each other with respect
- He'd probably like me to get really angry. Well I'm going to disappoint him

Leaving the anger and looking back

- Try to shake it off. Don't let it interfere with your job
- Remember relaxation, it's a lot better than anger
- I handled that pretty well. It worked!
- It could have been a lot worse
- My pride can sure get me into trouble, but when I don't take things too seriously, I'm better off

Think back to earlier classes about using reflection to learn from experience e.g. What went well? What could you do differently next time?

SUMMARY

To begin with, try to get practised at using self-talk when in angry situations. When you feel confident using this then you may wish to try to challenge your unhelpful thinking. This is quite difficult, so do not worry if you find it hard to grasp. It helps to break it down into steps and your diary sheets you have hopefully been keeping will help here. The steps are ABCD:

A: Start to notice your anger triggers

B: Recognise what you are thinking and believing

C: Notice the consequences: did your actions get you what you wanted? Are you falling into patterns of unhelpful thinking?

D: Challenge any unhelpful thinking that you notice by disputing your thoughts and asking yourself questions to see if there are any other ways to view the situation.

Discover if there are any other strategies you could make use of such as 'coping talk' to try and manage your anger differently. Always try and reflect afterwards to see what you have learned.