

# Anger Management Course Workbook

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## **3. Strategies to manage your anger**

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## **Where are we so far?**

We are now in week 3 of the course and it might help to think back to the picture we drew up in week 1 to help understand anger. Anger can be understood by considering the effects it has on your body, thinking and what you do. Anger is usually set off by hassles, a sense of unfairness or feeling abused. There are times when anger can be helpful but often, getting angry can cause problems. Only you can tell if anger is a problem for you, but usually if the costs of anger are greater than the benefits of anger, it is a problem.

Last week we looked at recognising how anger affected you. We considered learning how to identify early warning signs so that you may have greater control over your anger and also to react differently. We then introduced the idea of a thermometer to help you rate how angry you felt. This week we look at ideas for managing your anger more effectively.

## What can stop us reacting to anger?

Anger is not inevitable and you can probably think of some examples where you might have got angry but for some reason didn't. There can be a number of reasons for this. One reason might be that you thought that the costs of getting angry would be too great. Here are some examples where this might be the case:

### **Sarah**

Sarah was out drinking one night when someone she knew came up and started insulting her. She felt very angry, especially as she was out with mates from work. However, her boss was also out with her and she didn't want to risk losing her job by shouting and hitting the person who insulted her.

### **John**

John came home late one night and his girlfriend had not prepared any dinner, even though she had been in all day. He was really irritated but decided just to leave it as they had argued every night that week and he thought that one more fight might just push the relationship over the edge.

Another reason that you might not get angry could be that you use a strategy to manage your anger. Here are some examples of this:

### **Jack**

Jack noticed that his teenage son had left the car empty of petrol again. He felt really annoyed and could feel his heart beginning to race and his jaw tensing. He was able to notice this and stopped himself, saying to himself, "it's not worth getting into a fight with the lad, I did the same myself when I was his age".

### **Tanya**

Tanya was really angry in the supermarket. Someone had pushed her aside to get to what they wanted and she was thinking "how rude, have they no manners". She realised she was beginning to boil and decided to walk away and count to 10.

**Exercise 1: are there things that you already do?**

Think back to an occasion when you didn't get angry or when you stopped yourself losing it completely.

Why didn't you get angry? What would have been the costs of getting angry?

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.....  
.....

What did you do to stop yourself getting angry? Are there things that you did?

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.....  
.....

**Monitoring anger, a reminder**

Before you can begin to stop or reduce your anger you will need to notice that you are getting angry and a way of doing this is to monitor how your body feels as you get angry. Anger is not an all or nothing thing and you will get better at noticing the early warning signs. Thinking about the anger thermometer can help you to do this.

## **STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING YOUR ANGER**

The ideas and strategies described in this workbook are based on high quality research. These strategies are tried and tested. They are unlikely to work first time so you need to persevere, practise and plan.

These ideas are probably not new to you and they are not the only way to stop or reduce your anger. You may already be doing other things that help. The key is, if it stops or reduces your anger then do it again!

This week we will consider the following issues and strategies:

1. Stop, think & act
2. Self-talk
3. Frustration
4. Venting
5. Rumination
6. Problem solving

## STOP – THINK – ACT

We looked at this last week, but it is a useful strategy to revisit. This section is about pulling together all the things we have talked about so far. The first step is to use a time out technique to press the pause button and buy yourself some time. You then have time to think about what you might do next. It is important that you think about the consequences or costs and benefits of each option and decide whether you think that it will work. Finally, you need to put it into action.

Think about what you might feel comfortable doing next time you feel your anger rising.

- What will I do to press the pause button? (*Walk away, count to ten, distract yourself, keep quiet / bite your tongue*)

.....

.....

- What things might I try to stop me getting angry? (*breathing, self talk, exercise, talking to someone I trust, assertiveness*)

.....

.....

## SELF TALK

Again, it is not inevitable that you get angry. Two people in the same situation may not both get angry, what is different is how they think about the situation.

*Example:* your friend does not wave to you when you see them in Northumberland Street. You think:

- 1) how rude, they must be deliberately ignoring me  
OR
- 2) oh, I guess they didn't see me, it is a busy Saturday and they seemed to be looking the other way.

The person who had the first thought is likely to get angry, whilst the person who had the second thought is more likely to stay calm. So how you think can decide whether you get angry.

"Hot" thoughts are those that wind you up and calming or "cool" thoughts are those that calm you down. Here are some examples:

<b><i>Hot thoughts</i></b>	<b><i>Calming or Cool thoughts</i></b>
- How dare he!	- Don't let it wind you up
- She's trying to humiliate me	- I probably don't have all the facts
- It's the same things over again	- It might be different this time

It can be difficult to identify your thoughts but it can help to see them as "self talk" or talking things over in your head. This is a normal thing to do and it can be really helpful to think "cool" thoughts. You can use "self talk" to help you when you are going into a difficult situation in which you might get angry, to get through the situation, or after the difficult situation, to review what you did. Here are some examples of calming "self talk":

- Try not to take this too seriously
- What is it I have to do?
- Stay calm
- If I start to get mad I'll just be banging my head against a brick wall
- It's not worth getting so angry
- Take a deep breath
- It could have been worse
- He'd probably like me to get angry, well I'm going to disappoint him

If you are using “self talk” try to notice the effects on your anger thermometer. You will need to think of what words and phrases will work for you. Our words that we have here are not necessarily the ones for you. If you decide to do this, write down a few examples of calming “self talk” that you would like to use. There is some space below for you to do this.

***My calming “self talk” statements***

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## FRUSTRATION

People with anger difficulties often talk about being frustrated and then getting angry.

### **What is frustration?**

Frustration is an emotion that we all experience from time to time – it's a fact of life. Frustration is the feeling that happens when you are thwarted or hindered whilst trying to do something or reach a goal. It's the emotion you get when you expect something different to what really happened. On the plus side, frustration can be helpful as it leads to new ways of thinking about a problem.

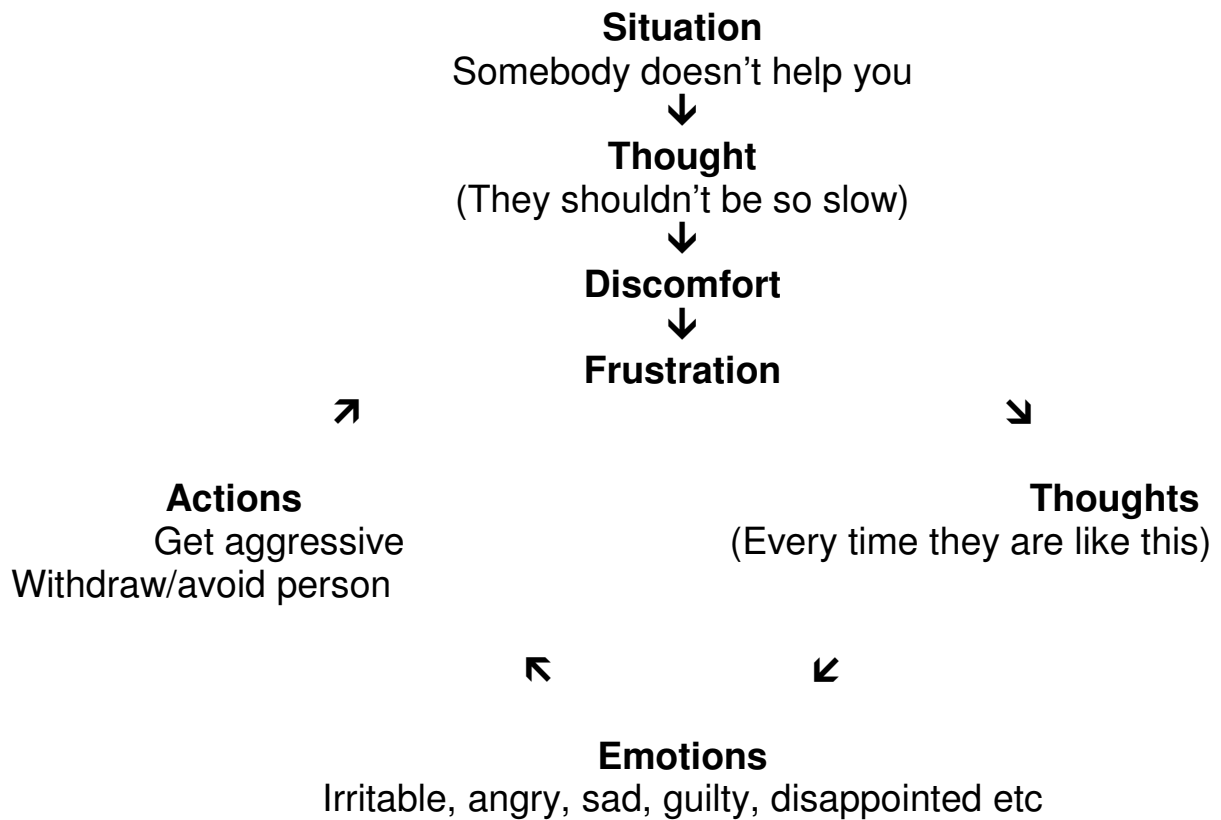
Frustration is basically about not getting what we want or getting what we did not want. It's the feeling we get when we meet an obstacle that stops us from reaching our goals. Therefore finding ways to manage frustration may improve our quality of life.

### ***When, where and how does frustration happen?***

Frustration can occur anywhere and any time. There appears to be variety of factors that can trigger it and below are some examples:

<i>Thoughts:</i>	Unrealistic expectations, plans, ideas for self or others (thoughts that include the words <i>should, must, ought</i> : "they should do what I told them".
<i>Bodily sensations:</i>	muscles tensing.
<i>Situations:</i>	particular places or tasks
<i>Relationships:</i>	particular people

Below is a typical sequence how frustration can affect our thoughts, feelings and actions.



### ***Why does it happen?***

It's a characteristic of being human. We want to get or do things (goals) and we have standards or expectations of ourselves and others regarding these goals. When we are thwarted or our efforts are blocked in achieving a goal, we become frustrated.

### **Unrealistic expectations that prevent us achieving our Goals**

Frustration often occurs when we have expectations for ourselves or others, which are too high or not reachable.

## ***So what can you do?***

### ***Frustration Tolerance***

Frustration tolerance refers to the ability to continue living a balanced, healthy life despite encountering repeated interferences. It refers to how robust we are in the face of life's stressors and challenges.

#### **Low Frustration Tolerance**

Low frustration tolerance happens when a person gets easily frustrated when they can't get what they want. Their frustration is intolerable and they can't cope. This way of thinking leads to the discomfort being increased. People with low frustration tolerance underestimate their ability to cope with the discomfort ("I can't bear it!" or "I can't stand it"). Describing something as 'intolerable' frequently makes situations appear more daunting or off-putting than they actually are. The most effective approach to overcoming low frustration is to develop an alternative attitude of *high frustration tolerance*.

#### **High Frustration Tolerance**

High frustration tolerance is the ability to tolerate discomfort whilst waiting to get what you want. Basically it's about toughing things out. Increasing tolerance for frustration helps to experience normal levels of healthy annoyance in response to being blocked. High frustration tolerance enables people to be more effective at solving problems or accepting things that, at present, will not change. Examples of high frustration tolerance statements are:

- "This is an uncomfortable situation but I can stand the discomfort"
- "This situation is hard to bear but I can bear it – some difficult things are worth tolerating"
- "Even if I feel like I can't take it anymore, past experience has shown chances are that I can"

To increase tolerance for frustration, ask these types of questions when life seems difficult:

- "Is this situation really terrible or it just highly inconvenient?"
- "Can I remember being in this situation before and coping with it?"

- “Is it true that I can’t stand this situation or is it more true that I don’t like this situation?”
- “Is this situation truly unbearable or is it really just very difficult to bear?”

Being less extreme in our judgement of negative situations can help us have less extreme emotional responses, such as energy consuming anger.

Most of what we now think is intolerable, was not in the past. Many situations are difficult to tolerate but we have tolerated similar in the past. We have found that they were hard to bear but in the end they were bearable, unpleasant and inconvenient. We can stand them, if we choose to think about these situations in a different way.

Therefore, it may be helpful, if we are able to find ways of controlling the degree of frustration that we experience in our day-to-day life. This may be achieved by changing things we do, or thoughts we have, when we feel frustrated.

Alternatively, there may be nothing we can do, in which case, it may be less energy consuming if we are able to learn to accept and tolerate the uncomfortable experiences. The strategies below for improving our acceptance of frustration are separated into a number of categories. Not all strategies will be 100% beneficial. But before dismissing a particular strategy, try it first. And as with all new skills, practice is a key factor to success.

### ***What can you do to tolerate frustration?***

- Know the enemy – what are the triggers to your frustration
- Know yourself – unrealistic expectations & beliefs
- Accept that you are struggling and have a problem to solve
- Follow problem solving routine (see end of this booklet)
- Set realistic and achievable goals for yourself & others
- Communicate more effectively (next week’s class)

## **VENTING**

Venting means letting out pent up feelings of anger or getting things off your chest. Venting is often explosive and can be very aggressive. When a person vents their anger, they often feel better immediately afterwards. However not long after venting their anger, most people report feeling guilty, ashamed or sad for the hurt that they caused another person.

### **Research**

Originally venting was thought to be helpful and healthy for reducing anger difficulties. However a recent large body of research has found that venting is not healthy because it increases the chances of further anger in the future. So the mind and body are like a hair trigger, easily fired into an angry reaction or outburst.

### **Reducing venting**

The following procedure will help you express your anger in a healthy way:

1. Recognise & label your angry feelings
  - ◆ “I am feeling angry because .....
2. Calm Emotional Brain (relaxation, self-talk etc)
3. Questions to ask Thinking Brain:
  - ◆ Is it important or unimportant?
  - ◆ If it is important, can you influence or control it?
  - ◆ If it is important and you can control it, are there strategies that are necessary in order to implement the actions? (If so, then list them)
  - ◆ If the incident is not important, dismiss it and move on to other more healthy issues.

## **RUMINATION**

### **What is rumination?**

Rumination is brooding, dwelling, thinking deeply about something. Everybody does it from time to time. So why mention it? Well some forms of rumination can be unhealthy both emotionally and to physically.

The word "ruminate" comes from the Latin for chewing cud, in which cows grind up, swallow, then regurgitate and re-chew their feed.

People also ruminate. However instead of bringing food back up and chewing it again, we bring things into our minds (thoughts, memories, imagined events) and chew them over and over and over.

### **Unhealthy rumination**

While ruminating helps cows to digest, it doesn't do the same for people's mental health. Ruminating about the darker side of life can lead to anxiety, depression and anger. Rumination can impair thinking, motivation, concentration, memory and problem-solving, and can drive away people who could support us. It can also increase stress.

*Anxious rumination* is present in many problems. So for example, when people worry, they chew over thoughts about bad things happening to them or other people. In social anxiety, people chew over what others might think of them and also they chew over things they think they've done wrong in a certain situation. In health anxiety, people think that they have serious illnesses.

*Depressive rumination* involves dwelling on the causes (e.g. loss or failure) and consequences of feeling depressed (lack of motivation or hopelessness). Depressed men in particular may ruminate on injustice. Depression can be related to a fear of anger and ruminating over hurting others.

*Anger rumination* can focus on injustice, angry memories, thoughts of revenge, angry afterthoughts and understanding of causes. In ruminative anger, cortisol and adrenalin levels increase as part of the fight-or-flight system. However, if the person does not run or fight, the cortisol and adrenalin stay in the body affecting the immune system, sleep and emotional well-being. These hormones have been linked with both heart disease and depression.

The way we think about things affects our emotions and bodies. For example if you are hungry and see your favourite meal, your mouth will water. However just thinking or imagining your favourite meal will have a similar effect because our thoughts stimulate areas of the brain responsible for digestion. Likewise, imagining or ruminating about something will trigger the fight-or-flight response, getting our bodies fired up.

### **Research on anger, rumination and health**

Increases in blood pressure and heart rate occur not only in the immediate presence of what makes a person angry, but also later whilst thinking about those experiences. Evidence suggests that these delayed responses, such as those produced by ruminating about previous angering experiences, may play an important role in the development of cardiovascular disease. "Even after a week, there is no sign of any reduction of the effect," (Glynn, Christenfeld and Gerin, International Journal of Psychophysiology, 2007). Anger has been connected to a higher risk of heart disease and other health problems. Research suggests that hardening of the arteries appears to speed up in people who score high in anger and hostility tests. Stress hormones may constrict blood vessels, raise blood pressure and increase the heartbeat.

One of the worst things about rumination is the more you feed it the bigger it grows. Also, the more you do it, the harder it is to change. Try to remember the last time you ruminated? Close your eyes and recall the event, now feel your body change (does your body become tense? Heart may beat faster?). Now the longer you focus on this event, the longer you will feel wound up, so its time to distract yourself by doing something that focuses your mind on something else.

Only about 10% of people act on their ruminations, the other 90% either do not express their angry thoughts and feelings or they deny having a problem.

## Know yourself

This is another situation where getting to know yourself is the first step in changing your anger.

- ◆ What happens when you ruminate/brood/ dwell on negative events?

- Physically \_\_\_\_\_
- Behaviourally \_\_\_\_\_
- Emotionally \_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ What do you ruminate about (triggers)?

- Themes – hurt others have caused; revenge

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ What is being avoided by ruminating?

- You might be putting something off?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- ◆ What are the consequences of ruminating?

- Feel angrier, depressed. Stuck, not making progress

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING UNHEALTHY RUMINATION

As with all aspects of anger, the first task is to recognise when you are doing it. So whenever you start to dwell or chew over something that makes you feel angry, remind yourself that you are ruminating – “WARNING I’m ruminating”. The best thing you can do is stop as quickly as possible. However this may be easier said than done if ruminating has become a habit. And as with all habits, patience and practise of new behaviours are essential.

1. Say to yourself “stop ruminating”
2. Calm yourself by breathing, relaxation, meditation or exercise.
3. Question the purpose and value of ruminating:
  - Does ruminating over something help me?
  - Would I advise a friend to think in this way?
  - What would a friend say to me if they knew I was ruminating?
  - Am I looking at the whole picture?
  - Does it really matter that much?
  - What would I say about this in 5 years time? Will it be that important?
  - Do I apply one set of rules or standards to myself & another to other people?
  - Have I got the facts right?
  - Am I tired and irritable?
4. Challenging statements and questions
  - Maybe there’s been a mistake or I’ve misunderstood.
  - Have I checked there is no other reason for this situation?
  - Have I explained myself clearly?
  - What’s this doing to my health?
  - Maybe I jump to conclusions too quickly?
  - I will act when I’m calm and have thought about it clearly.
  - Ruminating like this may be harming me
  - Get calm and remind yourself of what you were doing before you started ruminating.

## 5. Mindfulness

When people ruminate they tend to revisit past injustices or go into the future and fantasise about revenge. So bringing your mind into the present moment can be a powerful strategy. Say to yourself “be here now”. When you realise that your mind has wandered back to ruminating, gently bring yourself back to the present and say “be here now”. Another mindfulness technique is to focus your mind on your senses and become aware of what is around you: the sights, sounds, smells and textures. You may find it useful to do the breathing exercise we practiced last week and focus on how it feels to breathe in this way.

## 6. Rumination time

As already stated, it may not be that easy to stop ruminating, so try the following technique:

- Step 1: Set aside a regular time each day for ruminating – about 15-20 minutes once a day, and no more, so set an alarm clock. Pick a time when you are free of interruptions.
- Step 2: Pick a place to ruminate, somewhere that you don't associate with relaxation (not your bed, or favourite chair); some people sit at the foot of the stairs or sit at a table, with a formal chair. This will be the only place you should ruminate.
- Step 3: On a piece of paper write down the negative thoughts, all the things that you are dwelling on.
- Step 4: Ensure you stop when time's up – remember to set an alarm clock.
- Step 5: If any negative thoughts come up during the day, write them down on a piece of paper, and then tell yourself to stop thinking about them until your allotted time.

## 7. Become assertive

If there have been a genuine injustice or hurt, then explain to the other person how you feel and what needs to be changed. Review the assertiveness booklet (next week's class 4).

## 8. Understand your anger

If you accept that your emotions are neither good or bad, but that they are actually messengers, then you can ask yourself what they are trying to tell you.

When you feel angry or experience any emotions related to anger (upset, annoyance, frustration, resentment or judgemental), then ask yourself:

Is my anger masking feelings of fear or loss?

→ if so, then deal with these feelings.

If not, then what part of me or my beliefs is being violated?

→ think about your rules for living. Consider how helpful these rules are. Often they are rigidly held. Try to revise these rules by changing them to more helpful, flexible and kinder ones.

## 9. Cost-benefit analysis – **is it worth getting angry?**

This is strategy that helps you weigh up the advantages (benefits) and disadvantages (costs) of doing something. So draw up to columns on paper and in one column write the costs for continuing to ruminate and in the other write the benefits. Hopefully you will find that whilst there may be a benefit, there will also be a number of costs. Next time you start ruminating look at the costs column and ask yourself if its worth thinking in this way.

## 10. Effective problem-solving

As already noted, not only is rumination a poor form of problem solving, it also impairs normal problem solving abilities. So use the routine described on the next page to get out of your ruminative mind.

## **PROBLEM-SOLVING ROUTINE**

We can become angry when we are faced with certain problems. Avoiding the problem or getting angry are not good solutions in the long term. The more you believe that the problems can be solved the more likely to you are to succeed. Using the following strategy you will learn to stop your anger growing into something unmanageable and you will have a tool that gets you out of your angry mind.

### **Ask yourself the following questions:**

Step 1:

What's bothering me?

Step 2:

How does it make me feel?

Step 3:

So I need to get calm and tell myself to: (i.e self-talk)

- Now if there is a problem to solve, I'll do it, but only when I'm calm.
- If I need to assert myself, I'll do it, but only when I'm calm.

**Now that I'm calm let's think it through....**

Step 4 Does this really need dealing with?  
 ↙ ↘

<p><b>If No:</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p>It's not worth getting angry over.</p> <p>I deserve to keep myself calm!</p> <p>Remove yourself</p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>Be Calm ✓✓</b></p>	<p><b>If Yes:</b></p> <p>↓</p> <p>This is just a problem to solve</p> <p>↓</p> <p>Blaming others does not solve it</p> <p>↓</p> <p><b>Blaming is inflaming</b></p>
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Step 5: What do I want to happen? - Be specific. Be realistic.

Step 6: What can I do?

Solution A	Solution B	Solution C

Step 7: Consider the **consequences** of solutions A, B and C.

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>Advantages</b>			
<b>Disadvantages</b>			

Step 8: What is my decision?  
→ Circle the best option above

Step 9: Plan how to carry out your chosen solution

Step 10: Now do it!

Step 11: How did it work?

This problem solving routine will probably seem to be a bit drawn out to begin with. However with practice before, during and after an anger event will improve your problem solving skills. To start with you may like to think about the pros and cons of a choice you are about to make and what the immediate/short term consequences would be and what the long term consequences would be.

Another way to practice is to use this routine for any problem you have or when you are watching a drama or film on TV try to think up solutions for the character.

## **Summary**

This week we have looked at ways of stopping yourself getting angry. We have introduced a number of strategies, or tools, which you may find helpful. Not all will be helpful to all people. We would suggest that you try them out and decide which ones are most useful for you. Take time to read this handout several times so you are familiar with the strategies and then write a personal plan for how you are going to use any one of them in your life. This plan does not need to be very long but you do need to plan before you get angry, this will give you the best chance of success. Next week we will think about obstacles to managing anger.