ANGER MANAGEMENT FOR TEENS

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There's no denying it. Everyone is likely to experience anger. A recent study found that adults feel anger, from moderate annoyance to rage, on the average of six times a day. Although the rate for children and adolescents has not been reported, we can assume that they are also likely to experience anger frequently.

Anger also has a positive side. We feel angry when we feel threatened or wronged, and it gives us extra energy to deal with the problem. In that respect, we're not unlike humans from eons ago, or even different from most other animals. Anger is part of what is known as the *generalized alarm response,* preparing us to threaten, fight, or run away (the three primitive and basic ways to solve a problem).

While these three options may be very useful if we're revved up because a bear is threatening our child or friend, it doesn't work in most of the social situations that we encounter today. Still, when our anger is moderate to intense, we experience that primitive and basic reaction. As our anger grows toward a rage, we lose our ability to reason logically. Instead, we make reactive, instinctual decisions, just like little kids.

Anger Versus Angry Response

It is important to see the difference between anger, which is a valid *emotional reaction* to perceived threat, and how we *behave* when we're angry. Anger is a common, natural response that can have value, even survival value. There is nothing wrong or unusual about feeling angry. Still, it can be a very discomforting feeling. The problem with anger usually begins when this rapid anger reaction reduces our ability to reason. Then, *what we do* when we are angry may be impulsive, dangerous to ourselves or others, damaging, or even disruptive. There is potential for danger in both reacting aggressively and in trying to deny our feelings, which can contribute to depression or physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or ulcers.

Steps to Manage Anger

Steps in managing anger fall into two main stages. The first stage, *tension management,* involves assessing the anger or tension level and then taking steps to reduce it if we're even approaching a danger level. The second stage, *problem solving,* involves using the remaining energy to fuel the action to solve the problem. However, it is *extremely* important to go through the first stage before trying to solve the problem.

Tension Monitoring and Reduction

Here are the steps to use in checking and reducing physical tension and anger:

Step 1. Recognize your anger. Check your body signs. When you're tense, your body shows it in more than 600 different ways that prepare you to fight, threaten, or run away. Some of the more familiar and easier to recognize signs include increased heart rate/heart pounding; rapid, shallow breathing; face feeling hot; jaw tensing; fists clenching; feeling energy through the body; upset stomach; shoulders hunched.

Step 2. Break from the action. If you're feeling even mild to moderate body tension, give yourself a *stop* command ("Stop! Cool it! Chill!").

Step 3. Relax/de-escalate. There are several ways you can do this. The easiest is relaxation breathing. Breathe slowly in through your nose and exhale very slowly through your mouth. Other methods include soothing self-talk ("I'm the boss of my body. I can manage myself.") or tensing and then relaxing various muscle groups.

Step 4. Check your level of self-control. Ask yourself, "Am I the boss of my body?" Check your body signs for reduced tension. If you aren't regaining self-control, continue with step 3 or get away from the stressful situation.

Problem Solving

Once your tension is reduced so that you can reason more clearly, proceed to the following steps:

Step 1. Define the problem.

- "My problem is _____."
- "I want _____ (to be left alone, to leave, an apology)."
- "I don't want _____ (to fight, get in trouble, hurt other's feelings)."

Step 2. Make a plan. The plan should address both what you want to accomplish and what you want to avoid. Include a back-up plan, so that if your first plan doesn't work, you'll feel confident and less likely to feel angered again and won't have to repeat all these steps.

Step 3. Implement your plan. Ask yourself, "Am I following my plan? Is it working?" If it's not working, have you given it enough time to work, or is it time to switch to the back-up plan?

Step 4. Evaluate your efforts. Be sure to give yourself credit for following your plan and managing your anger, even if it didn't turn out the way you'd hoped.

Some Pointers

- *Recognizing anger:* Since many people grow up with the message that anger is bad, most people tend to deny or minimize their recognition of their own anger. Some can also do this because they don't know how to manage their anger, and so they are afraid of it.
- *Know your body's signals:* Identify and get to know two or three of your signs of tension. Choose ones that you are aware of and that you are aware of even when you're feeling only mild tension. Two or three are enough. If you're aware of your body tensing in these areas, you can be assured that it's happening in many other ways also. Get to know what these body signs feel like so you can gauge your tenseness.
- *Stress check:* Some families or classrooms make a rule that anyone can call for a stress check whenever he or she feels tension building or becomes aware that it is building in others. When a stress check is called, everyone should mentally give himself or herself a "stop" command and check body signs for tension level. This is important for everyone, because if one person in a group is becoming angered, others who are reading that anger may be feeling more tense and defensive.
- *Take a break:* If your efforts to de-escalate aren't working and you're feeling like you might blow up into some inappropriate behavior, getting away from the tense scene is a good and prudent action. Take a break. Maybe say to the other person, "Look, I'm feeling so angry that I can't think straight and I'm not hearing what you have to say. I need a break for 10 minutes to calm down." They are more likely to respect this request because you're not blaming them but instead taking responsibility for your own anger. When you include a time to resume the discussion, they know you're not just trying to get out of confronting whatever issue you're arguing about. *Note:* This technique works best if you've discussed it with family members or others beforehand so they understand what's going on.
- *Plan ahead:* While it can be better to verbalize your feelings, some kids (and adults) find this to be very difficult. If you're like very many others and can't say what it is that's making you angry, you may need to find alternative ways to express and release your tension. Plan ahead. Identify methods that don't hurt anyone or place anyone at risk (you or others). Don't break anything that is valuable, irreplaceable, or belongs to others or do anything that disrupts others, but still is effective in reducing the tension. Some families have identified places where family members can go to yell (basement, garage, inside a parked car) or some physical exertion (tearing up old newspaper, smashing ice cubes on the sidewalk) that is approved and won't be punished (so long as the newspaper gets cleaned up later). You'd be surprised how much family tension is avoided when someone goes to the approved place to yell instead of yelling at others, and demonstrates effective self-management rather than out-of-control disrespect for others.
- *Substitute an acceptable behavior:* If you are in the bad habit of yelling put-downs or names at others, try substituting roaring like a lion. This avoids saying things that you later regret. Most families who have used this technique report that they begin to laugh, breaking the tension and leading to a more cooperative interaction.
- *Relax:* Other tension reducers include tensing and the relaxing muscles, relaxation breathing (more on this later), visualizing a relaxing place, or counting slowly to 10. Try counting backward, and visualize a

temper thermometer with the red liquid going down with each number as your tension reduces.

- *Use humor:* Humor is a great tension reducer. Use it liberally for yourself, but be careful about using this with others if they're angry. They might think you are ridiculing them or not taking them seriously.
- *Identify the cause:* Anger is actually a reaction to other discomforting feelings of threat. Try to identify the primary feeling behind your anger. It may be feeling hurt, misunderstood, disrespected, or frustrated. When you identify this primary feeling, it will help to guide your action plan to resolve the anger.
- *Find a balance:* People who tend to think only about what they *want* and don't consider what they want to *avoid* will probably become aggressive. People who focus on what they want to avoid without balancing what they want are more likely to turn their anger inward, becoming passive, or depressed, or suffer from physical symptoms such as headaches or nausea.
- *Respect yourself:* We don't always get what we want, but we can still respect ourselves when we judge that we've managed ourselves effectively and haven't been emotionally distracted from our plan.

Relaxation Breathing

This is the most useful and readily available technique for reducing tension. It not only works in anger management, but also at other times when you're feeling tense or anxious. Actors, singers, athletes, and public speakers use it all the time. It's also helpful to use during tests if you're feeling worried. This technique may not make you feel totally relaxed in a tense situation, but can take the edge off your tension so that you can function more effectively. Here's the technique:

- Square your body, so that you are not twisted one way or the other. Rest your hands in your lap or on the arms of the chair if you're sitting. Position your arms by your sides if you're standing or lying down.
- Breathe in deeply and *slowly* through your nose. Fill your lungs. You'll know you're doing this when your lungs are so full that your stomach sticks out.
- Exhale *slowly* through your mouth. Don't push the air out, just open your mouth and let the air flow out gently by itself. Our body relaxes as we exhale, so the longer you can prolong this breathing out the more relaxed you'll feel. (Don't hold your breath before starting to exhale. Holding your breath increases your tension instead of decreasing it.)
- Repeat this at least four times, but as often as you need to take the edge off your tension. Repeat whenever you start to feel the tension build again.

Summary

Anger is a natural and functional response to perceived threats. When we learn to effectively manage our anger, we can direct that energy into positive solutions to our problems that respect others and ourselves.

Resources

The following books and games are available from the Creative Therapy Store, 12031 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025-1251; (800) 648-8857; *www.creativetherapystore.com*

Berg, B. *The anger control workbook.* For grades 5 and up. Dr. Berg also has written self-help workbooks that cover social skills, social conflict, self-control, achievement, and the changing family.

Rubinstein, F. *From rage to reason.* For grade 8 through adult. In this game, players follow Randy on his job and in his daily life, and earn money by giving Randy good advice about frustrating and anger-provoking situations. A relaxing way to learn about anger control and skills needed on the job and in the community.

Wilde, J. *Hot stuff to help kids chill out.* For grades 4–12. A set of small books to help kids learn to handle angry feelings in constructive ways.

Website

Creative Therapy Store—*www.creatvetherapystore.com* This is a great resource for games that help kids identify inappropriate and harmful anger expressions and to replace them with more functional and helpful solutions that respect everyone involved. These games include *Peacetown* for elementary and middle school children and *Sticks and Stones* for the middle school and high school kids.

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