

## Dealing With The Anger Habit

Back in the 1700's there was a British physician called John Hunter. He had a very bad temper and, not surprisingly, suffered from angina pectoris. He used to say: "My life is at the mercy of any scoundrel who chooses to put me in a passion". This was prophetic. At a meeting of the board of St. Georges Hospital he became involved in a heated argument, walked out, and dropped dead.

### **What anger does to us?**

For thousands of years it has been recognised anger contributes to a number of physical illnesses, especially heart disease as in John Hunter's case. And it also has other, more immediate, unpleasant effects. Chronic or on-going anger consumes huge amounts of mental and physical energy, takes from our enjoyment of life, interferes with constructive and useful thinking, threatens our relationships and career prospects, undermines our self esteem and, in extremes, can so obsesses us that it crowds most other thoughts from our minds.

After an angry exchange you can be affected for hours or even days as you endlessly go over the event in your mind, churning up the anger feelings and adding to them. And during this period your mood is being ruled by the memory of the person with whom you are angry. You are not in charge. You are a victim of the event.

### **What is anger?**

Anger is the feeling we experience when events in our world are not going according to our plans or rules. It's as if we have an inner idea of how things, events and people should be - and when they don't 'march to our tune' we get angry and either feel frustrated or try to change them.

### **Right... or Happy?**

We often feel quite justified in our anger and think along the lines: 'Well, if the world ran according to my rules it would be a much better place - so who can blame me for feeling annoyed with the stupidity or thoughtlessness of others - with their refusal to recognise that my way is the best way...'

This, of course, is silly. The world does not and will not run by any one person's rules. (Mussolini tried it, and got the trains in Italy to run on time, but he didn't last too long.) The world will always be quite chaotic. That's reality - and there is no point in getting worked up about it. It is also a reality that the world is peopled by lots of people with (by our standards) rather crazy rules, values, and behaviours.

They will continue to drive their cars differently to us - and to have different views about what is or is not respectful behaviour, punctuality, tidiness, honesty, etc. Becoming angry is pointless because it changes nothing. Not that we even have the right to change other people.

You may feel that you are in the RIGHT when you get angry. But the key question is: does it make you HAPPY? Does it contribute towards your happiness and that of the people in your life?

*An angry man is again angry with himself, when he returns to reason. (Publius Syrus)*

#### **How does it occur?**

Understanding the 'mechanics' of your anger is the first step in mastering this mood. These mechanics are quite simple. You have a version of how things 'should' be and you continuously compare reality with your version - and feel angry when reality gets it wrong!

As part of this process you have mental list of triggers that you test reality against and when reality gets it 'wrong' you feel angry.

*Two things a man should never be angry at; what he can help and what he cannot help (Anon.)*

#### **What to do about anger?**

(1) Keep it in - or let it out?

Some experts say you should 'express' your anger rather than bottle it up. They point out that suppressing anger can lead to heart disease. Other experts say that expressing anger makes things worse because it exacerbates the difficult situation and can have unpleasant consequences for your relationships, your career, and even your personal freedom.

The choice appears to be get it off your chest and you won't get ill - but you may end up lonely or in prison. Or suppress your anger and you will be more popular - but you may get ill! Fortunately there is a third option - not to get angry in the first place.

(2) Dissolving anger

The best way of dealing with anger habit is to stop it occurring in the first place. Get to know which triggers that evoke your angry feelings and systematically defusing each of these. As you do this recognise how these triggers have controlled you, because they do - you encounter the trigger and off you go - on automatic pilot, out of control, ruled by your emotions.

Start making an on-going list of all the triggers that spark you off. As you do this consider the cost of being in 'their' control. For example, your self esteem suffers - you afterwards feel bad with yourself because of how you've let yourself down and lost control. You feel bad about how others view you. Your family, partner, friends tend to treat you with caution, because they cannot relax in your company but have to remain on guard, waiting for the next

explosion. Then there's all the apologising and making up - 'I'm sorry. I'll never do or say that again, I promise!' And no-one believes you.

And there's the cost to your peace of mind of endlessly going over events, re-running them and re-feeling the feelings over and over again! And each day watching for all the opportunities to feel annoyed.

### (3) A trigger a week

Take a trigger each week and defuse that. Decide that from now on you want to be *happy* more of the time even if you have to let people 'get away with things'. Write down the cost to your health, happiness, relationships, etc. of remaining a victim to this trigger.

Just doing this won't stop you becoming angry. You need to do a bit more. Immediately after becoming angry calm yourself with some breathing exercises and then have a rational chat with yourself - 'OK, I did it again. I let myself down. I fell for it once again. But I'm learning to take things more easily because I know the cost of letting the triggers control me and I've had enough of being a victim to them!'

Developing your awareness in this way and on a regular basis will gradually defuse your tendency to fly off the handle. It will also defuse the tendency to justify your anger. In NLP we call these triggers anchors.

*Epileptics know by signs when attacks are imminent and take precautions accordingly; we must do the same in regard to anger. (Seneca)*

### **It's not all 'bad'**

Do remember that not all anger is unhealthy. Sometimes anger is quite appropriate - it can be our final defence against allowing other people to manipulate or dominate us. And it can motivate us to take action against injustice. Anger is healthy when it is not on-going but is usefully channelled into appropriate action.

*"People who say that life is not worthwhile are really saying that they themselves have no personal goals which are worthwhile... Get yourself a goal worth working for. Better still, get yourself a project... Always have something ahead of you to 'look forward to' - work for and hope for."*

*Maxwell Maltz*

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