

ANGER AS A DRUG

Does it seem strange to call anger a drug? We usually think of drugs as chemicals, like alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, and heroin. We talk about being addicted to a drug if we keep using it when the consequences are more bad than good and find it hard to quit. People also behave addictively with activities like gambling, sex, eating, spending, and work, and with some emotions. Addictive activities and emotions can cause as much trouble as any substance.

What do these things have in common? They can change the way we feel, quickly, on demand. Physically and emotionally, we can use them to block pain or to feel great. We can become addicted to anything that makes us feel good quickly and easily.

Anger can feel good. If we're anxious or depressed, we may feel weak, uneasy, and ashamed. When we get angry, we feel strong and sure of ourselves. Anger also makes us feel more alert, awake, and energetic. So we may use anger to cope with uncomfortable feelings. Fear, anxiety, or shame can trigger anger so fast we may not realize the first feeling was there.

Like other drugs, anger has negative consequences. It leads to destructive actions. It damages the immune system and raises the risk of cancer or heart disease. In this exercise, you'll look at your anger to see if you've used it as a drug and to find better ways to handle painful feelings.

1. When you've been very angry, in a rage, have you felt weak or strong? Uneasy or sure of yourself? How does anger feel to you?

2. Next think about a time when you got very angry. What happened just before that feeling?

3. When you think about what was going on before the anger, how did it make you feel? If your anger came up so fast that you didn't have time to be aware of other feelings, what painful emotions such as anxiety, fear, hurt, or shame would be natural in that situation?

4. Another characteristic of many drugs is a rebound effect when they wear off. You may have found that when the anger wore off painful emotions returned. What rebound effects have followed your anger?

5. Some powerful natural mood-lifting and pain-relieving chemicals are produced in the brain by cardiovascular exercise, by meditation, and by laughing hard. Please list some ways you'll try to feel happy and energetic or to cope with emotional pain without using anger or another drug.

6. The next time painful emotions start to trigger your rage, how can you redirect that reaction to something else that gives you better results? If other people can help, what can they do? List two people who can help and describe when and how you'll ask them to help you.

Be sure to bring this handout back to your next session with your therapist, and be prepared to talk about your thoughts and feelings about the exercise.