

IS MY ANGER DUE TO FEELING THREATENED?

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. Develop a program of recovery that is free from substance abuse and dangerous/lethal behaviors.
2. Terminate all behaviors that are dangerous to self or others.
3. Decrease the frequency of occurrence of angry thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
4. Verbalize core conflicts that lead to dangerous/lethal behaviors.
5. Recognize the first signs of anger and use behavioral techniques to control it.
6. Think positively and realistically in anger-producing situations.
7. Come to see that anger is a secondary emotion responding to fear or anxiety in response to a perceived threat.
8. Learn to self-monitor and shift into an introspective and cognitive problem-solving mode rather than an emotional reactive mode when anger is triggered.
9. Shift from a self-image as a helpless or passive victim of angry impulses to one of mastery and ability to choose responses to feelings.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS FOR WHICH THIS EXERCISE MAY BE USEFUL

- Dangerousness/Lethality
- Oppositional Defiant Behavior
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH CLIENT

The “Is My Anger Due to Feeling Threatened?” activity is suited for clients who are capable of introspection and who desire to change reactive patterns of anger. It may be useful when clients describe perceptions of being unable to control their anger, have patterns of impulsive anger disproportionate to the triggering event or situation, or express regrets over their actions when angry. Follow-up can include keeping a journal documenting angry impulses and the client’s use of this process to manage his/her reactions.

EXERCISE II.A

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A wise person once said that every problem starts as a solution to another problem. When anger becomes a problem it is often this kind of failing solution to another problem. Once we see this, it’s easier to let go of the anger and find another solution that works better.

What kind of problem makes anger look like a solution? When is anger useful? It’s good for one

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What kind of problem makes anger look like a solution? When is anger useful? It's good for one thing: energizing and preparing us to fight. It's the "fight" part of the "fight or flight" instinct that is any creature's response to perceived (whether real or not) danger. When we feel angry, chances are that we feel threatened.

This instinct developed in prehistoric people over thousands of generations. Nearly all the threats they faced were physical (e.g., wild animals or hostile strangers). In those situations anger served them well.

Some dangers are still physical, but more often we face threats we can't fight physically, like bills we can't pay. There are threats to our self-images and our beliefs about the world, which can feel just as dangerous as threats to our careers or health.

In this exercise, you'll think about a situation that has triggered your anger and identify both the threat that the anger wants to fight and another solution that will work better.

1. First, it's important to recognize anger as soon as it starts to develop. To do this, you need to watch for the early warning signs of anger, physical and mental.

a. Here are some common physical effects of anger. Please check any you experience.

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|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Muscle tension or shaking | Rapid heartbeat |
| Rapid, shallow breathing | "Butterflies in the stomach" |
| Reddening of the face | Agitation and restlessness |

b. Our thinking changes with anger, often in these ways. Again, check any you experience.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Impulsiveness and impatience | Feelings of power and certainty |
| "All or nothing" thinking | Taking things personally |
| Inability to see others' perspectives | A sense of having been wronged |

10 ANGER

EXERCISE II.A

2. Now think of a situation that has been an anger trigger for you—one that comes up over and over or has led to serious consequences because of your angry actions. Briefly describe the situation.

3. Study the situation, and identify the threat that triggered your anger. What was threatening to happen? Were you at risk of not getting something you wanted, or of losing something you already had and valued? The item under threat could be physical well-being, a relationship, a career or life goal, your self-image, or even your values and beliefs about the way the world works. Explain how this situation threatens you.

4. Think of a solution that will give you better results and cause fewer problems than acting in anger. Describe the solution and how you'd put it into action.

5. After you've thought about triggers and solutions, what are your thoughts and feelings about the situation? Do you feel more in control?

6. When you feel your anger building, pause to ask yourself, “Where’s the threat, and what else can I do about it?” This way, you can take control of your feelings and actions. This is hard at first, but if you keep doing it, the pause and the question become automatic, just as the flash into rage was automatic. When you pause automatically and think this way, you control your anger, rather than it controlling you. At first, reminders help; think of someone you trust to help you with this. Explain what you’re doing, and ask him/her to watch your mood and if you start looking angry, remind you to pause and find the threat. Who is that person, and when will you talk with him/her about this?

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