

IS MY ANGER DUE TO UNMET EXPECTATIONS?

People in treatment and recovery programs often say that anger always boils down to fear—fear that we will lose something we want to keep, or that we won't get something we want. Usually, though, the things that we think we will lose or won't get aren't life-and-death matters, and we often react as if they were. A good example is the road rage we've all seen or felt. People have killed each other over who was going to get to the next traffic light three seconds sooner. This seems to make no sense.

When we look more closely at what's going on, though, we'll usually find that when possible losses or disappointments trigger intense anger in us, it's because we expected something different and are disappointed. Sometimes our expectations are based on what we feel is right and fair. These are what some people call the “shoulda-woulda-couldas” (e.g., that the person in the next lane should let us merge instead of speeding up to crowd us out, or that people should be honest and considerate with us). Also, sometimes we expect something just because we want it badly and convince ourselves it should happen the way we want it to.

However, our expectations are often not realistic. That's what leads many old-timers in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs to say, “An expectation is nothing but a premeditated resentment.” By that they mean that when we form expectations, we are often setting ourselves up for disappointment and the anger that follows.

Do you want to avoid getting angry unnecessarily? It's a good idea to do so; anger interferes with a person's judgment, making him/her more likely to act impulsively and do things that damage relationships; undermines recovery; and even weakens the immune system and leaves him/her more vulnerable to cancer, heart disease, stroke, and other life-threatening illnesses.

This exercise will help you get into the habit of avoiding unrealistic expectations, and thereby becoming able to be calm and at peace more of the time and angry less often.

1. Please think back to the most recent time you got angry. What happened?

2. Was the event that triggered your anger something you felt should not have happened the way it did—if so, what was your expectation, and why did you have that expectation?

3. Often we expect things that experience tells us are unlikely (e.g., expecting someone who is usually late to show up on time, expecting people to be polite in rush-hour traffic, expecting that police officer not to pull us over even though we were speeding). If experience told you that what you expected was unlikely, what would have been a more reasonable expectation?

4. As you may be seeing, our expectations are often just plain mistakes in our thinking. If we learn not to make that kind of mistake, we won't be unpleasantly surprised. Acceptance is more comfortable than resentment. Remember, to accept something doesn't mean that we like it, or that we believe it's right—acceptance just means admitting that things are the way they are, and deciding to deal with reality rather than with our fantasies. If you find yourself facing the same situation again, and base your expectations on reality—on what experience tells you is likely to happen—rather than on what you hope for or what you feel should happen, what will your reaction be if events match that different expectation?

5. Here are some of the basic mistaken expectations we form and then get angry over. Please give an example of each from your own experience.

- a. Expecting someone to behave differently than the way he/she usually behaves (e.g., expecting love and warmth from a person who is normally cold and sarcastic, expecting consideration from someone who is usually thoughtless and selfish).

Example: _____

- b. Taking things personally (e.g., expecting others to be thinking about us rather than about themselves) or expecting to be the center of someone else's world.

Example: _____

- c. Perfectionism (e.g., expecting ourselves or others to do something perfectly the first time, or the twentieth time, rather than recognizing that we are human and make mistakes).

Example: _____

- d. Over-optimism (e.g., expecting everything to go the way we want, though it seldom does).

Example: _____

- 6. Some other emotions that arise when we form expectations and they aren't met are self-pity, anxiety, and discouragement. In your experience, how have anger, resentment, self-pity, anxiety, and/or discouragement been triggers for your past addictive behaviors?

- 7. Because these emotions can be relapse triggers, success in recovery depends on managing them as much as possible. The best way to do this is to avoid setting yourself up for them. The fewer expectations you have, especially unrealistic ones, the less often you'll find yourself feeling miserable, and the easier it will be to stay in recovery and avoid relapse. Please briefly describe a plan to monitor your thinking and emotions, avoid unreasonable expectations or detect and correct them as soon as possible if they come up, and regain your serenity.

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.