

# Your Anger



## Part A - Discovery: What Have You Become?

### INTRODUCTION

What we're not going to do in this module is describe the emotion of anger in general terms. We're not going to discuss all the good and bad functions of anger, nor all the good and bad ways of expressing anger, nor all the degrees of intensity of anger, nor all the active and passive forms of anger, nor all the situations when anger can become a problem, nor all the childhood-related reasons why some people can't feel and express their anger enough and others feel and express their anger too often and/or too intensely.

Some of that intellectual information is helpful in one to one support sessions, but not in group work where this module is focussed. Here we look at a few extreme, but *useful* examples of people going through the *process* of an anger episode, by examining a simple story.

Then you get to do the hard bit. Through the questions we want you to *use* these examples to explore *your* anger as you go through anger episodes. As the 12 Step Fellowships say: "Look for the similarities, not the differences." Through your own self-examination you will then get some insight into what you have become in respect of *your* anger. In that same way you will also get some insight into what you need to do about it.

## Two Extremes and a Balance In Between

Many of you have problems with anger. Indeed probably the majority of *addicts* in long-term residential recovery programs have problems of one sort or another with anger. At one extreme some of you avoid your anger, only to have it emerge in ways that are unpredictable, unhealthy, uncontrollable and often unrecognisable. 'Anger avoidance' is a pattern of using your intellectual, physical and emotional natures (i.e. your thoughts, actions and feelings) to avoid, deny and/or suppress your anger. You often don't recognise that you have an anger problem. You often see yourselves as having other emotional problems, such as too much fear, anxiety, depression or loneliness. In this module we'll call you 'No-Anger Addicts'.

At the other extreme, some of you are chronically angry, i.e. you are angry most of the time. For some chronically angry *addicts* your anger simmers just below the surface and frequently boils over. Other chronically angry *addicts* are constantly and unpredictably up-and-down. You're very happy one moment and very angry the next. 'Chronic anger' is a pattern of using your intellectual, physical and emotional natures (i.e. your thoughts, actions and feelings) to look for, live in, and/or prolong anger experiences. Many (not all) chronically angry *addicts* will, in your quiet and honest moments, admit that you do have a problem with your anger. However, you haven't the faintest idea how to deal with it, or you're frightened that if you lose your anger you will lose your identity and become a nobody.

It is true that some of you don't have any problems with your anger. You don't avoid your anger. You don't get angry frequently or feel angry all the time. Your experience and expression of anger is *balanced*. You are in the ideal category concerning your anger. Your problems are elsewhere. The advantage of this module is that you can serve as a reference measure, by which the majority of you can get a better handle on your anger problems. In this module we'll call you 'Balanced-Anger Addicts'.

**(A) Are you a No-Anger Addict, a Chronic Anger Addict or a Balanced-Anger Addict? (Keep asking yourself this question throughout this module.)**



## The Process of An Anger Episode

As you experience an episode of feeling and expressing anger, you go through a process that is normal for any emotion. It will help to break this process down into five stages, although each stage tends to blend into the next stage rather than be absolutely separate and distinct.

### **These stages are:**

1. An initial awareness of the feeling.
2. An *energy mobilisation* stage that focuses attention on the feeling.
3. An *action* stage during which the energy is transformed into some action or behaviour.
4. A *contact* stage that gives internal and external feedback on those actions.
5. A *withdrawal* stage when you withdraw energy and interest from that feeling and clear the ground for the next feeling of which you become aware (as the feeling cycle repeats itself continuously through your daily lives).



## 1. The Awareness Stage

This is the stage at which, ideally, you become aware of at least some level of anger. The Balanced-Anger Addicts are likely to describe this initial awareness with mild anger words like 'irritation' or 'annoyance'. The No-Anger Addicts might not have any experience that they recognise as anger. Instead, they may notice other feelings that generally hide their anger or keep it below the surface. These feelings are their anger substitutes. Such feelings include anxiety, fear, sadness and feeling depressed.

The Chronic-Anger Addicts will notice, not so much their anger (since that tends to be there all the time), but rather the invitation or cue to anger that is occurring in their environment. In a sense this is their justification for the anger that they are already feeling. They see themselves as being provoked.

Let's look a little deeper into the thought processes that are going on at this initial awareness stage. As explained in the modules *Your Emotional Nature* and *Your Intellectual Nature*, there is a close connection between your thoughts and your feelings. Indeed your thoughts are located in between you and any outside stimulus affecting you. What causes you to have any feeling, including anger and/or anger substitutes, is not the thing that happens to you - the stimulus - but rather your thoughts about that thing. This is covered in those other modules, but it bears repeating here. This is because, with practice, you can come to recognise and control those thoughts, and thereby manage your anger much more easily.

**(B) Do you recognise the critical role your thoughts play in your awareness of anger or any other feeling? Do you recognise that you can control and change those thoughts even if you can't change what is occurring outside of you?**



## 2. The Energy Mobilisation Stage

Here the Balanced-Anger Addicts let their anger develop, as they apply their mind (thought processes) to what is going on, and form a judgement that their developing anger is appropriate in the circumstances. Their anger is becoming dominant as an emotion, but not to the exclusion of other feelings, and especially not to the exclusion of their thoughts.

The No-Anger Addicts will unconsciously block any anger feelings by any one of a number of methods. They may decide that the situation is not important enough (e.g. “My son just robbed a bank, but it’s just a stage he’s going through.”), or they are not important enough (“I just do whatever others tell me to do since who am I to question them.”). This is called *minimising*.

Or they may deflect their anger by turning their attention and focus to something else, such as another feeling (“I’m not angry, just hurt.”). Or they may *justify* not being angry (“I didn’t really want the money my daughter stole from me”). Or they may *project* their anger onto someone else (“There’s nothing to be angry about, but I just know you’re angry.”).

The Chronic-Anger Addicts let their anger become their central focus, it can make them feel alive give them an adrenalin rush. They see an opportunity to lose themselves in the only ‘intense’ feeling they are ‘comfortable’ with. The Chronic-Anger Addicts become excited at this stage.

Look at the thought processes going on, either consciously or below the surface. For the Balanced-Anger Addicts, these thoughts are clear, reasonable and rational even though they lead to the anger feeling.

The No-Anger Addicts’ thoughts are less likely to be clear. However, they use all those confused thoughts to enable them to avoid their anger. Either they hide in their intellectual natures (being safe in their heads) or they embrace some other feeling apart from anger.

All Chronic-Anger Addicts can think about is the harm that is being done to them and the wrongness of it all.

**(C) When you get angry, are you aware of your thoughts and other feelings, like Balanced-Anger Addicts are? Do you do any of the things that No-Anger Addicts do, such as minimise, deflect, justify or project? Do you focus on the harm that is being done to you and the wrongness of it all, like Chronic-Anger Addicts do?**



### 3. The Action Stage

Obviously, this is the stage where each party to the anger situation takes their individual action, if they are going to at all. In practical terms it often blends or links into the next stage, the *contact* stage, where each person's action impacts on the other (and we get action and reaction, otherwise known as 'free-for-all'). In this analysis it is easier to consider these stages separately.

The *Balanced-Anger Addicts* respond to the situation by taking reasonable rather than extreme action in a slow, careful and deliberate way.

The *Chronic-Anger Addicts* tend to be impulsive and exaggerated in their actions. They use their bodies (including their mouths!) more than their brains (their physical natures more than their intellectual natures) as they respond aggressively to the intensity of their anger feeling. The *chronic-Anger Addicts* cannot talk the matter through like the *Balanced-Anger Addicts* can.

The *No-Anger Addicts*' behaviour will usually seem passive rather than active. They may convince themselves that they are confused, so that they don't have to take any action. Or they may feel paralysed into non-action, which achieves the same result. They may start hurting themselves in some way, such as, giving themselves cigarette burns, being accident prone, becoming ill, punching or kicking a solid wall (instead of a punching bag).

Finally, the *No-Anger Addicts* may simply *give in* by being doormats. ("I'm sorry that my foot is under yours. It's my fault.")

The *Action* stage and the following *Contact* stage may be the most talked about after an anger scene is over. ("I did this. He did that. And then guess what happened!") However, these stages are probably the least critical in terms of developing an appropriate anger management strategy. It's too late to bring those strategies into play here at the crisis point. They needed to be in place beforehand, so that a crisis point would not occur.

**(D) Is the action you take when you're angry - reasonable, careful and deliberate or impulsive and exaggerated?**



## 4. The Contact Stage

This *action* stage merges into the *contact* stage, where people make contact in two ways, one obvious and the other more subtle. The obvious contact is *with* the other person or people involved in the episode. Actions and reactions meet each other through words or deeds. The more subtle contact is the contact by each person with their own anger or anger substitute. Each person *feels* the anger or whatever other feeling is facilitating avoidance of anger.

For the No-Anger *Addicts* and the Chronic-Anger *Addicts* these feelings are in almost total control. For the Balanced-Anger *Addicts*, their anger is - naturally enough - *balanced* with their intellectual thought processes, so that they remain in control of themselves. Neither their emotional natures nor their intellectual natures have got the better of them.

The Balanced-Anger *Addicts* see and hear what others are doing, while at the same time monitoring their own emotional and intellectual experience. They stay cool. The No-Anger *Addicts* lose themselves in some other feeling, or in their heads. The Chronic-Anger *Addicts* lose themselves in their anger, which is now a real 'rush'. They come alive! Who needs drugs, when they can 'enjoy' this emotional experience?

**(E) In an anger episode do you stay cool? Do you lose yourself in some other feeling? Do you do head miles? Or do you really come alive when you're angry? Do you tend to be bored most of the rest of the time?**

## 5. The Withdrawal Stage

Here, at the withdrawal stage conscious thought processes do return for No-Anger Addicts and Chronic-Anger Addicts (who largely lose them in the previous two stages). But those thought processes are *responding* to the emotional natures of each of these type of Anger addicts, rather than *controlling* those natures.

Ideally, the *withdrawal* stage is where the situation itself has come to a conclusion. So people 'let go' of both the situation and the feeling associated with it, whether that feeling be anger or some anger substitute. Thus, the Balanced-Anger Addicts move on to other thoughts, feelings and interests. However, people with anger problems have a hard time letting go.

The No-Anger Addicts, if they did get to feel any anger at all, tend to let go of it too quickly. They tend to do this with repeated apologies for having got angry. Then they get stuck in feelings of regret or remorse over what might have been an entirely appropriate experience of anger and expression of that anger. Alternatively, the No-Anger Addicts will stay stuck in whatever feelings they used as their anger substitutes. Then they go through all sorts of thought processes that justify and perpetuate those substitute feelings.

The Chronic-Anger Addicts will have great difficulty in letting go of their anger. They won't be able to focus on other things. Instead they will rehearse in their minds what happened and why the other party was wrong, and why their continued anger is justified.



The Chronic-Anger Addicts also tend to do something else. They add this particular anger episode to the one that occurred an hour before, and the two that occurred at breakfast, and the six or seven that occurred the previous day, and so on. They build each episode onto the last one. Yet they won't recognise that *they* are doing this. Instead they will say things like "everything built up", or "it all got too much".

In other words the Chronic-Anger Addicts won't take responsibility for *their* part in building anger episodes on top of each other. This is one reason they claim to be powerless over their anger. They 'give away' responsibility to the other people involved in each of the other episodes, as though they each conspired to build the episodes up. In this way the Chronic-Anger Addicts are able to blame 'them', or 'the system' or 'it' for whatever damage they do to themselves or others as a result of some straw-that-broke-the-camel's-back explosion.

Both the No-Anger Addicts and the Chronic-Anger Addicts, in their different ways, tend to extend the withdrawal stage indefinitely, simply by not withdrawing.

**(F) Does your withdrawal stage from anger resemble that of No-Anger Addicts or Chronic-Anger Addicts or Balanced-Anger Addicts?**

## Part B - Recovery: What Are You Going To Do About it?

What, if anything, have you learnt about your anger style? Do you now believe that you have an anger (or anger avoidance) problem? If so, what are you going to do about it? Here are some suggestions.

### SUGGESTION 1

Your anger is *yours*, nobody else's. You are responsible for it. Nobody else is. You are also responsible for your behaviour and actions when angry. Both your feeling of anger and your associated actions are your *response* to something happening outside of you here-and-now. *You need to accept that responsibility.* As we have said in other modules, you are responsible for your responses.

Your anger response is a *choice*. Don't shift that responsibility to others by saying *they* are responsible for the way you feel or act, or that *they made* you angry. This is so whether those others are part of your present life, or part of your past life.

### SUGGESTION 2

If often helps to resolve conflicts and to reduce your level of anger to make a conscious effort to look at a conflict from the point of view of the other person. Remember, whenever you are in a conflict with someone else, there is another point of view which seems reasonable from where that other person is viewing the situation. The other person may see parts of the situation that you can't, or they might not be able to see parts of the situation that you can.

### SUGGESTION 3

One of the things that the other person can't see is your own life history of learned behaviours and attitudes. Therefore don't expect the other person to be sensitive to the fact that, for example, your childhood has led you to see the world as hostile, or that you have been taught never to be angry or express anger.

Keep your conflicts in the here-and-now. Keep out baggage from the past. Recognise, for example, that you're not in enemy territory here-and-now, whatever your childhood history may have been. Recognise that here-and-now you are allowed to have anger and to express it. Reasonably!



## SUGGESTION 4

You need to recognise and accept the powerful effect thoughts play in leading to your feelings. Remember, it's not the things you see, hear, touch and smell that lead to your feelings. It is your thoughts about those things.

These thoughts include the lies that you have told yourself so often that you have forgotten that they are lies. Many of you may have lost conscious contact with those lies. On this idea read Part B of the modules *Your Emotional Nature* and *Your Intellectual Nature*.

You need to practise looking for, and analysing, the stinking thinking that is behind many of your fixed attitudes and beliefs. This is a skill that takes time and practice to learn. Time alone is not enough. Practice alone is not enough. Don't be discouraged by early failures. Please be patient with this practice. Look to God to help you with this practice. Adults take longer than children to learn new skills, such as learning to read and write, or to speak a new language, or play a musical instrument.

In the same patient way you need to develop your skill of discovering and monitoring your own thought patterns during times of crisis, and where necessary changing those thoughts.

## SUGGESTION 5

Notice that you are better able to manage your anger if you can 'catch yourself' while in stages 1 and 2 of an anger episode, the *awareness* and *energy mobilisation* stages. So stop yourself at these early stages and apply your intellectual nature to Suggestion 4 above.

When you get to the end of an anger (or anger avoidance) episode, observe how you might be using your intellectual nature inappropriately to frustrate the *withdrawal stage*. If you are an anger avoider, you might let go of the anger too quickly and unnecessarily apologise for it, or you might unnecessarily hold on to the substitute feeling(s). If you are angry too often, you might be using thoughts to justify *not letting go* of the anger.

## SUGGESTION 6

Get in touch with your spiritual nature. Get in touch with God. Seek God's help at every stage of the anger (or anger avoidance) process. Remember, if you do what you can, God will do what you can't.

## SUGGESTION 7

Actively seek the help of your peers to give you feedback on your attitudes and behaviour. Don't just stick to those who say what you want to hear. Listen you are capable of becoming, and consider what you don't want to hear. Recognise that your feeling of not wanting to hear 'confronting' feedback is itself one of the deranged 'defence' mechanisms that keeps you the way you are, and stops you from growing into what you are capable of becoming.

### **Ben is on a bush walk sees a snake becomes frightened. He looks for another track.**

Let's see what is going on underneath the surface of this story. The snake is there. That is the *fact*. Ben feels fear. That is the *feeling*. Ben has a belief that snakes are dangerous. That is an *attitude*. The fact that the snake is on the track is pretty clear. Ben is not wrong about that. Ben is also not wrong about having the feeling of fear. There is nothing wrong with simply having any feeling. But let's look at Ben's attitude about snakes. It is here that Ben could be wrong. (We could say that Ben gets right off the track here!)

A lot of the 'bad press' about feelings has really got very little to do with feelings at all. The feelings are neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. The problem, if there is a problem, lies in the attitudes. Wrapped up in these attitudes are all sorts of prejudices, pre-judgments, belief systems that may very well be wrong rather than right, or bad rather than good.

If you have feelings that bother you or interfere too much with the sort of life that you want to live, then what you need to do is examine the *attitudes* underneath the feelings. You need to decide whether the cost of the feeling is worth the effort of doing the work to examine and change the underlying attitudes. The cost may not be worth it. Ben may decide that taking another bush track is easier than learning all there is to know about snakes.

## Table: Stages of the Anger Process

### THE AWARENESS STAGE

#### No-Anger Addict

Awareness is blocked by denial and desensitisation

#### Balanced-Anger Addict

Initially experiences low level of anger, such as irritation or annoyance, that is not overwhelming

#### Chronic-Anger Addict

Over-sensitivity to anger cues, eagerness to 'accept' anger invitations

### THE ENERGY MOBILISATION STAGE

#### No-Anger Addict

Mobilisation is blocked by minimisation, deflection, justification and projection

#### Balanced-Anger Addict

The feeling of anger dominates but does not exclude thought processes or other feelings

#### Chronic-Anger Addict

Anger becomes central focus to exclusion of thoughts and other feelings

### THE ACTION STAGE

#### No-Anger Addict

Action is blocked by confusion, paralysis, self-abuse (retroflection), giving-in

#### Balanced-Anger Addict

Responds deliberately and reasonably with necessary but not extreme action

#### Chronic-Anger Addict

Responds impulsively and unreasonably with exaggerated and extreme action

## THE CONTACT STAGE

### No-Anger Addict

Contact is blocked by irrational feelings, including guilt and fear

### Balanced-Anger Addict

Sees and hears the response of others to action as well as monitoring own emotional and intellectual experience

### Chronic-Anger Addict

Experiences an anger 'rush'

## THE WITHDRAWAL STAGE

### No-Anger Addict

Withdrawal from anger is too rapid and apologetic, or withdrawal from substitute feeling is too slow

### Balanced-Anger Addict

Lets go of the anger and moves on to other feelings, thoughts and interests

### Chronic-Anger Addict

Inability to withdraw