



THE
EIGHT
TOOLS OF
ANGER
CONTROL

BY DR. TONY FIORE

The Eight Tools of Anger Control

By Anthony Fiore, Ph.D.

The Anger Coach

Century Anger Management

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Anger in Our Society

It seems that anger is everywhere in our society. One just has to read the newspaper daily or watch the evening news to conclude that controlling one's angry feelings is a major challenge for many adults, teens, and children.

Uncontrolled anger is a major factor in domestic violence and spousal abuse, in aggressive driving violations, in workplace rudeness and disruption, and in marital conflicts and family fights. Several large and respected studies have shown that one-third of couples studied at least one incident of domestic violence during the course of their marriage. The same study found that about 1,500,000 children per year are severely assaulted (kicked, punched, beaten up, burned) in their homes.

Managing angry feelings requires mastering specific thought and action skills and then practicing these skills on a daily basis. The costs to persons who do not learn how to regulate their negative emotions are high and include increased risk of relapse, loss of relationships, conflicts at work, loss of respect in the eyes of loved ones, and lowering of self-esteem.

A particularly high cost of anger is on your children. The effect of children witnessing extreme conflict in the home can be devastating—more harmful most of the time than a parental divorce. It is estimated that between 2.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to intimate partner violence each year in the United States alone.

Although many adults believe that they have protected their children from exposure to domestic violence, 80-90% of children in those homes can give detailed descriptions of the violence experienced in their families.

What is Anger?

We view angry feelings as a normal emotional reaction to frustration in our everyday world. It is natural to become angry when we have a goal and this goal is blocked in some way. Anger isn't just one emotion, but a family of emotions that are related to each other both in our brains and in our behavior. People often give a variety of names to their angry feelings, which range from mild irritation to rage.

Once anger begins, it generates changes in our expressions, our faces, our voice, and changes in the way we think. It also creates impulses to action. In fact, the purpose of emotions such as anger is to organize and mobilize all of our bodily systems to respond to our environment in some way.

Anger, like all emotions, is regulated by that section of our brain called the "limbic system" (located in our mid brains beyond our inner ear) Emotional memories are stored in the "amygdala" and other structures which are located in this limbic system.

You may experience anger now in your life which may actually be caused by a mixture of what is triggering it now and experiences you have had in the past—even if you don't remember them. This "old anger" is activated by your brain in its attempt to protect you— even though the original danger is no longer present.

It is up to the thinking part of the brain, our frontal lobes, to find a way to deal with the angry feelings the amygdala and other brain structures have set in motion. Fortunately, as thinking human beings we have the unique ability among mammals to have choices regarding how we will deal with our feelings.

Our Model of Anger Management

In our view, anger management is NOT about never getting angry—that would be an impossible and ridiculous goal because angry feelings are “hard-wired” in your brain and probably serve a protective and survival function.

Rather, anger management is about learning how to regulate and express those natural angry feelings in a way that makes you a more effective human being. Persons who manage their anger well have better relationships, better health, and more occupational success than those who manage their anger poorly. They also get more of their needs met without antagonizing loved ones or colleagues.

Learning to manage anger involves mastering the eight tools of anger control that we have found to be highly effective in our local anger management classes. This model of anger management is not therapy and does not dwell on the past or the underlying reasons for anger. Rather, our approach is psycho-educational, skill-building, and practical drawing on recent research and findings in neuroscience, marriage/relationships, stress management, and the emerging science of happiness and optimism.



The Eight Tools of Anger Control

Tool 1 - Recognize Stress

Stress and anger tend to go hand and hand. The higher one's stress level, the easier it is to allow our anger to get out of control. It is a challenge for most of us to manage our stress levels in a complex world with many demands and expectations. Learning stress management techniques us an effective way to reduce the physical, behavioral, and emotional problems caused by too much stress.

Stress is often the trigger that takes us from feeling peaceful to experiencing uncomfortable angry feelings in many common life situations. Whether the stressor is external or internal, scientists have discovered that the major systems of the body work together to provide one of the human organism's most powerful and sophisticated defenses; the stress response which you may know better as "fight-or-flight" Before your stress response turns into anger or aggression, use stress management strategies to get it under control.

We face many stressors in today's society that can greatly contribute to frustration, anger, and relationship discord. These include money stress, parenting stress, and time stress. In relationships, often the biggest stress is not having your needs met within the relationship as you had expected.

Dealing with these stresses is very challenging. The first step is to recognize you are stressed and identify where most of it comes from. This process is called mindfulness, a skill that can help a great deal. Being more mindful of what is causing it sometimes leads to ways we can re-adjust our lives to reduce stressors (like cutting down our commute time to work).

Please visit recent blog entries on mindfulness, if you wish to find out more about it: <http://angercoach.com/index.php/mindfulness/>

If we cannot change what is stressing us, our next step is to find ways to more effectively deal with it.

- Exercising and sleeping well are at the top of the list as a stress busters. We can just cope with things better when we feel good, have more energy, and feel rested.
- Next comes finding a way to change our attitude toward the stressor. To a large extent stress "lives" in us – not in the external thing that is causing it. For instance, your kids are fighting and you feel stressed out of wanting to protect one from the other. But, you could greatly reduce your own stress by either putting them both in a "time out" or making them resolve their own conflict without your involvement.
- As another example: you could feel much stress because your partner is always late. To reduce your stress, you could accept that he/she will probably always be this way and see your challenge as finding a way to cope with it because their positive qualities far outnumber this one character flaw.
- Achieving Better Life balance and making sure your core needs are being met is an excellent way to reduce stress in your life. Have something to look forward to every day (It can be a little thing, but it can make a huge difference). We all have basic needs of love, security, self-esteem, sex, social recognition, and achievement or contribution. If these needs are not satisfied on a regular basis, we start feeling stressed, unfulfilled, frustrated, and uncomfortable.

Tool 2 - Develop Empathy

Have you ever been in a restaurant and noticed that the customers at the table next to you were speaking louder than anyone else? It was as if they had no idea that they were being so loud and intrusive to the rest of the patrons. This lack of awareness is often a sign of not being emotionally or socially alert. Or, have you ever been in a situation where you tried to express your feelings and it backfired in some way?

Some of us are very good at knowing how we feel and expressing it, while others struggle to do so. It is crucial to express emotion in order to relate to those around us. Our ability to know how we are feeling as well as our ability to accurately sense the feelings of those around us help us make positive connections with others. This characteristic is often called "empathy."

The empathy is in seeing it, in communicating that you see it and in understanding that they need to know that you see it also from their point of view.

Lack of empathy leads to poor communication and a failing to understand others. To manage anger, it often helps to see our anger as a combination of other people's behavior and our lack of empathy toward them or their situation.

How does increasing empathy decrease anger? The answer is that anger is often fueled by our telling ourselves things like "How can they be so stupid," or "Why can't they just do it like I know they should?" or "They should do it my way for their own good." Becoming aware that they may have another viewpoint of things often softens our anger as we come to understand that they too might have good reasons for their behavior or actions.

Increasing empathy also helps to manage our future anger episodes once we are mindful of how others are experiencing us when we are insensitive or appear angry. For instance:

- How do you suppose you look to your child when you are raging?
- How do you think your partner feels toward you when he/she sees you as abusive toward your children?
- How do co-workers/peers react to you if you "lose it" at work and become nasty, offensive, bullying, or abrasive?
- How would you look to yourself if you could see yourself on a video cam acting the way you do when enraged or upset?

To empathize is to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, and to feel with the heart of another.

It is the skill of putting oneself in another person's shoes; to see things from their point of view, even if you don't agree with it.

The “Bus Story”

I have a friend who often rides a bus in Long Beach, California. One day a man with three children sat down. The children were about 8, 9, and 10 years old. At first, they were well behaved but after several bus stops they started acting up: jumping up and down on the seats, swearing, being loud and obnoxious, shoving each other.

My friend looked over at the older man, their father, expecting him to do something. But the man just sat there staring down at the floor. No reaction at all.

My friend, not wanting to cause a scene, just endured more and more inappropriate behavior from the children. Now they are loudly telling dirty jokes to each other, with total disregard for the other passengers.

Finally, my friend could take no more. He approached the father and said: “Sir, you children are out of control and obnoxious. Please do something.”

“I know they are out of control,” replied the father, “but, you see, we just came from the hospital visiting their mother... and she died.”

“I have no idea how to deal with these children”

Now, I ask the reader: Did your emotions change as you read this story?

What did they start out as?

(most people say they were initially irritated with the children and the father)

What were you feeling at the end of the story?

(most people say “compassion, not angry any more” or “more tolerance”)

If your feelings did change, what caused the change?

Note: (1) The father didn’t change his behavior toward the children.

(2) The children’s behavior didn’t change.

Yet, your emotions may have changed...due to empathy; being able to put yourself in the shoes of the father and/or the children.

What a powerful way to change emotions!

Tool 3 - Respond Instead of React

Many times we become angry because we find people and situations that literally “push our buttons,” and we react just like a juke box that automatically pulls down a record and starts playing when you make a selection. Rather than reacting to anger triggers in this fashion, you can learn to choose how to deal with frustrating situations— to respond rather than automatically react like that juke box.

There are many advantages to learning to how be more flexible in dealing with the stresses and frustrations of life. At the top of the list is a sense of empowerment. It just feels good and powerful to know that you are in charge of your response, rather than being controlled by other people or circumstances. Many people notice their anger level going down as their feeling of empowerment goes up.

Responding instead of reacting means that we need to separate the emotion of anger from the behavior of anger (e.g., shouting, yelling, throwing things, insulting others, etc). Stop and think for a moment instead of doing what you normally do. Ask yourself, How could I handle this differently? What other choices do I have?

For instance:

- Take in a deep breath
- Step away for a moment
- Lower your voice instead of yelling back
- Try to see it from their point of view
- Acknowledge your part in the conflict, etc.

The idea here is to be flexible instead of rigid. If doing what you always do doesn't work, try something else that might. If you don't, you may get grid locked with each other in a never ending cycle of pissing each other off!

Tool 4 - Change That Conversation With Yourself

“For some reason whenever I get upset I am always putting myself down” said one woman in an anger management class. “Even my friends tell me I am just too hard on myself,” she said. “When I get upset, I will often say things to myself like, “I’m such a loser,” or, “If I don’t make it on time, everyone will think I’m a jerk,” the woman explained. “Some times I even tell myself that I am worthless and stupid when I make mistakes.”

A crucial tool in dealing with angry feelings is that of challenging that conversation with yourself. Like the woman described above, you are constantly telling yourself all kinds of things which cause you to have certain feelings or emotions—even though you may not realize it. Learning to change that “self-talk” empowers you to deal with anger more effectively in terms of how strongly you feel the anger, how long you hold onto your anger, and how you express your anger.

A key to using this tool effectively is to NOT try to stop these negative thoughts from occurring. In fact, recent research shows that the more you try to stop certain thoughts from occurring, the more they occur!

Instead, challenge the thoughts themselves so that they no longer have the power to make you feel negative things or behave in ways you don’t want to. Just observe the thoughts you are having without judgment. After all they are just thoughts. Thoughts are not necessarily reality. For instance, if you have a thought like “I am a loser,” tell yourself “I am having the thought that I am a loser; that doesn’t mean I AM a loser...it is just a thought.”

Here are some other popular “self-talks” that have helped hundreds of other people by challenging what is occurring in their heads automatically

- Things don’t always have to go my way
- I can handle this; I have dealt with harder things in the past
- Maybe I am expecting too much from them (or myself)
- Maybe they see things differently; I will try and see it from their point of view
- I am not the center of the universe
- Just because my thoughts tell me something I don’t have to believe them

Tool 5 - Communicate Assertively

Good communication skills are an essential ingredient to anger management because poor communication causes untold emotional hurt, misunderstandings, and conflict. Words are powerful, but the message we convey to others is even more powerful and often determines how people respond to us and how we feel toward them.

Anger expressed toward others is often a misguided way of communicating a feeling we have or a need that is not being satisfied by other people or situations. Assertive communication—as distinct from aggressive communication—is a set of skills to honestly and effectively communicate how you feel and how you are responding to things—without getting angry or hostile about it.

Many times we get angry and explode because we hold feelings in too long (suppress them) instead of dealing with them at the time. Let people know how you feel without losing control or exploding. For instance, it is much better to say “You hurt my feelings when you said....” instead of “I am sick of you always criticizing me and putting me down.”

Fact is, if you don’t express feelings in a direct, assertive way, they often get expressed in destructive ways. At the top of the list is a pattern of communication and behaving called “passive-aggression.” The passive aggressive person doesn’t yell or scream when they get angry. Instead, they sabotage, they retaliate with hurtful words or deeds, or they relate with sarcasm. When confronted, the passive-aggressive person often denies they are doing anything wrong, they make excuses for things not working out, or they shut you out by not communicating at all. More advanced passive-aggressive people refuse to take responsibility for any decisions made, but then blame you for making the wrong one.

Another destructive communication patterns that some people use instead of assertiveness is “defensiveness.” In intimate relationships, this comes out in one or both partners not being open to influence from the other. No matter what the issue, your partner refuses to admit it is an issue, will argue for hours about it, won’t take any ownership of the issue, and makes you feel like there is something wrong with you because you bring it up in the first place. When you are with a defensive person, issues never get resolved because they are never dealt with.

For instance, your partner starts the argument by saying something like “we never have fun anymore like we used to because you are never home.”

Defensive response: I have to work. Where do you think the money comes from for that new Mercedes in the garage? We go out more than any the friends we know. You are the one that is tired all the time and doesn’t want to go out. If you were more fun, I’d want to go out more.

Non-defensive response (being open to influence from your partner: You know honey, I agree. I have felt the same way. I would like to have more fun with you too. Let’s figure out a plan and make it happen. We’ll have a “date night.”

Learning to communicate assertively, honestly and directly is not easy, but it can make a huge difference in how you deal with anger and how others respond to you when you have an issue.

Tool 6 - Adjust Expectations

John and Samantha had a great courtship for 3 years. Both were older, wanting to make sure they found their right partner before jumping into marriage. They were both faith-based in their life values, so they didn't want to live together before marriage, preferring to date and have fun. Unfortunately, this prevented them from seeing aspects of each other that later would cause much conflict. Specifically, John was a self-proclaimed "neat-freak" while Samantha was a free spirited artist who believed there were many many better things to do with one's time than clean the house. They had never discussed this difference in values; John had expected that Samantha would be as neat and tidy as he was once they were married. Samantha had expected that John would be cool and tolerant of her artistic creations and materials cluttering the entire house. Much angry conflict ensued because of their faulty and unexplored expectations of each other. Ultimately they had to divorce due to inability to accept the values of the other.

As John and Samantha experienced first hand, many negative emotions can be generated when there is a gap between what we expect and what we get. But, what is an expectation? It is a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future.

Although we may not say it out loud we have many expectations about things, situations, or people in our lives. This includes our relatives, our partners, our children, our employees, and even ourselves. Being more mindful of what expectations we have (and other people have) is important because most of us assume that we other people in our world will have similar expectations to ours in given circumstances or situations.

The folly of such thinking is often discovered when suddenly we find ourselves in conflict with someone that we thought we were "on track" with. Examples would include:

- Business partners who disagree on who should do what based on faulty expectations.
- Couples who find they have very different ideas on how money should be spent or how children should be raised.
- Couples who experience a horrible vacation because they didn't discuss what each expected to happen (shopping vs sports fishing) ahead of time.

Conflicting expectations is a cauldron for the creation of frustration and anger. To a certain extent, this can be prevented by simply and openly discussing expectations ahead of time. Make sure you are on the same page before you get into it! Dating couples should not expect that whatever bothers you now will probably get better after you are married. It may. But often it does not and may even get worse. Marrying "potential" (and then expecting change) should be an undertaking only for the very very stout of heart. Others should expect that what they see now is what they are going to get!

Discussing expectations to avoid anger also makes for very good parenting advice. Children and adolescents often act badly because what is expected of them is not clear, or not consistently clear. Making house rules and posting them in a public place (like on the refrigerator) is a great way to promote family peace.

But what do you do if you do discuss expectations, but they differ and neither party will yield? Here you basically should realize that you have three choices, based on your answer to these questions:

- Do you value peace or do you want to stay angry much of the time?
- Is the issue a deal breaker or can you live with it?
- Would you be willing to find a way to accept that you may never agree with each other on the issue?

Again, letting anger and resentment build is a choice. If you value peace and/or harmony (instead of fighting) you need to make that decision, remember that you made that decision, and behave accordingly. If the issue is a deal breaker, then it is what it is and you should re-arrange your life accordingly. In relationships, for example, you have a right to absolutely expect that you need not tolerate domestic violence, child abuse, chronic substance abuse, lying, dishonesty, and perhaps infidelity.

Most of the time, however, issues on which you cannot agree are not necessarily deal breakers. Rather, you should see your expectation (and theirs) as a preference, a value judgement. Therefore, try to be less judgmental about it and more tolerant of how they see it or want to do it.

Cutting down on “shoulds” is a great tool to reduce conflict and promote peace. Maybe you were raised, for example, with the expectation that “partners should put their husband or wives before their family of origin.” While many people may believe this and hold it as a value as well as an expectation of their partner, do you know that this is NOT a universal opinion?

As a matter of fact, many people do believe that one’s parental family should take precedence and priority over one’s partner or spouse. Why necessarily would your preference be right and theirs’ wrong?

Couples who are successful have tolerance for the views, expectations and beliefs of their partner and work very hard at cutting down the “shoulds” in their thinking and attitude. Partners in successful relationships do not think they are right all the time, they can live with differences of opinion without becoming defensive or demanding of how things must be done, and they do not develop contempt toward their partner who may have a different, but equally valid, opinion on things

Tool 7 - Forgive But Don't Forget!

Joan and Bill walked into my office for their first appointment. Joan was obviously upset over something; I assumed perhaps they had a fight on their way to marriage therapy.

I asked how long they had been married.

Joan said 30 years and Bill nodded in agreement with obvious pain on his face.

"You look angry," I observed to Joan. "Can you verbalize what the problem is?"

"Yes," she said. "Bill here did not buy me the wedding ring I wanted for our wedding day 30 years ago."

I thought I had heard her wrong. Hardly anybody comes to marriage therapy with an issue that old.

But, alas, it was true. In his defense, Bill said he didn't buy the ring because he couldn't afford it on a teacher's salary, but he did buy her a \$20,000 ring ten years later when things improved.

Her response? "Yes, but it wasn't there on our special wedding day."

Joan must hold some kind of record for holding a grudge or resentment the longest in a relationship where there were few other obvious problems or issues.

She simply could not let it go. Because of this she was constantly angry at him and often spoke to him with the most destructive kind of anger a marriage can experience: contempt.

Anger is often the result of grievances we hold toward other people or situations, usually because of our perception and feeling of having been wronged by them in some way. Resentment is a form of anger that does more damage to the holder than the offender. Holding a grudge is letting the offender live rent free in your head. Making the decision to "let go" (while still protecting ourselves) is often a process of forgiveness – or at least acceptance – and is a major step toward anger control for those folks like Joan who simply cannot deal with the grievance and move on with their lives.

Joan was stuck. Bill was also stuck because there was nothing he could do at this point to rectify the situation or make it right. Only Joan could do that, but she didn't see herself as the one that had to do the work to get past this perceived injustice. To the contrary, she saw herself as a victim and unfortunately was hell-bent on remaining one.

Should you forgive someone who has wronged you (or you perceive as having wronged you?) That, of course is a personal decision that only you can make. In our anger management classes, clients often say they can forgive some things a lot easier than other things.

For instance, accidental acts that harm you are more forgivable than purposeful acts against you. Showing remorse about what was done to you makes it easier to forgive those who have wronged you. So do sincere apologies and honest changes in behavior to ensure that the offense will not occur in the future. Like controlling drinking, ceasing social media conversations with old flames, taking anger management, or not overdrawing your checking account from now on.

Clients tell us that they know they have forgiven someone when they can see that person or think about what they did, but no longer feel the negative feelings in their heart. Sometimes it takes a long time to get to the point of wanting to “give it up,” so you should be patient with yourself if you don’t feel it right now. Even if you forgive, trusting again may take even longer because forgiveness and trust can be separate issues.

Research does show that people who forgive have better lives, are more successful, and generally are happier than those who hold on to grudges. You might consider letting go of that resentment before it becomes a part of who you are and what you are. It should not define you. Try not to give it the power to direct your life.

Tool 8 - Retreat and Think Things Over

Jim and Mary Jones loved each other deeply, but often went into horrific verbal battles over any number of issues. However, they were unable to give each other “space” during an argument insisting they solve the issue immediately. Even worse, Mary often physically blocked Jim from leaving and would follow him from room to room demanding discussion. Needless to say, this is a dangerous practice as it can escalate levels of anger even further and cause partners to do and say things they don’t really mean and may later regret!

Research shows that we are pretty much incapable of resolving conflicts or thinking rationally in an argument when our stress level reaches a certain point. To avoid losing control either physically or verbally, it is often best to take a temporary “time-out”- and leave. This tool of anger management works much better if (a) you commit to return within a reasonable amount of time to work things out, and (2) you work on your “self-talk” while trying to cool down.

Why do we insist on arguing with each other when the issue usually is not that important to begin with? I have asked my anger management classes this question for many years and the answers I get are fairly consistent. Here are some of the reasons given: Can you relate?

- I wanted to win
- I wanted to be right
- I couldn’t quit until he/she understood my reasoning on the issue
- I had to defend myself from his/her attacks

Research has shown that the need to win may be hard-wired in our brains, as a mechanism for survival. It stems from the part of our “old” brain (sometimes called the lizard brain) whose job it is to protect us from enemies. Problem is, it does not put the “threat” into any perspective— resulting in a fight/flight response to protect us, no matter if the threat is a lion chasing a giraffe or an angry partner yelling at us.

Anger lives in the amygdala, a brain structure in the limbic system which is thought to play a key role in emotions and motivation. It is one of the first parts of the brain to become activated when you sense a threat of some kind. Fortunately, human beings also have a frontal cortex where thinking, reasoning, and logic occur.

To use tool 8 for anger control it is important to step back, and put a gap between what angers you and your response— before your amygdala can flood you with emotions. You can stop anger from escalating and getting out of control by just (1) not responding immediately, (2) physically getting away from the situation until things calm down, or (3) thinking different thoughts to de-escalate the angry emotions.

Of course, in real life there may be some complications in doing this—like your partner won’t let you leave, they follow you around continuing to argue, or they keep escalating the argument until there is a point of no return.

The best way to handle this complication is for you and your partner to AGREE on this procedure BEFORE you get into your next argument. After that, it is important to come back after a specified period of time to deal with the issue instead of avoiding it. From 20 minutes to one hour is a reasonable length of time. This time period allows both of you to cool down and think things over.

During the “cooling off” period, it helps if you do something to sooth yourself and heal those emotional wounds. Exercise, listen to mood-altering music, take a walk, or meditate.

You should also work on your self-talk before you return and try to work out the issue with the other person. More specifically, remind yourself that:

- Most issues that couples fight about are not matters of right or wrong; conflict arises out of different opinions on the issue.
- Some issues in a relationship are NOT solvable; you and your partner will always disagree on them. But, that doesn't mean you need to get angry at each other. You can agree to disagree. You can decide to accept the difference while giving each other the right to disagree.

Remind yourself to let go of the control issues and power struggles around the issue. Leave your ego at the door. Instead focus on solving the problem at hand, no matter who you think is right or wrong.

Remind yourself that almost all issues have two parts: a content part (for example, “you don't keep the house clean enough”) and an emotional part (“it really makes me anxious when I come home and the house looks like a war zone”). Just dealing with the content part of the issue will usually not solve it, if the issue has a strong emotional component to it. When you return after an argument, deal with the emotional components with your partner (how it makes you feel, how it makes you feel toward your partner) as well as the content. This can make a drastic difference in the outcome of the argument. Here is a simple formula that will guide you:

I feel... (angry, sad, anxious, unappreciated, distant from you, unloved, etc)

When you... (don't clean the house, don't pick up, etc)

Because... (it is a major issue for me in our relationship)

I need... (for us to find a solution, work together to have a cleaner house)

Tony Fiore, Ph.D, is a practicing psychologist, marriage therapist and anger management trainer in Southern California.

He can be reached at 714-771-0378, on the web at www.angercoach.com , www.drfiore.com or via email at: drtony@angercoach.com.

He has developed an online anger management program explaining and applying these tools in much more detail at: www.angercoachonline.com