

# *The Rational Management of Anger*

*A cognitive-behavioural approach to helping  
people manage hostility and rage*

*by Wayne Froggatt*

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Anger is possibly the most difficult emotion for human beings to change. Cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT), which focuses on the underlying belief system that creates dysfunctional emotions and behaviours, is able to help people move from hostile, destructive rage to a more constructive type of anger – and maintain their change in the long term. The procedures outlined in this article use strategies developed by key CBT theorists Albert Ellis (Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy), Aaron Beck (Cognitive Therapy) and Raymond Novaco (a specialist in the application of CBT to dysfunctional anger).

Anger is not in itself a problematical emotion. It has value when it serves as a motivator to change unwanted circumstances. But anger sometimes gets out of hand: it can take over a person's reasoning faculties and lead to rage, hostility and destructive behaviour.

Anger results from a combination of factors: biological, situational and psychological. Change in any of these areas can be used to reduce problematical anger, but the most useful focus of change seems to be the psychological area – in particular, modification of the thinking that creates specific episodes of anger.

## What causes hostile anger?

Frustration is a normal reaction to unwanted events and circumstances, and will result when a person fails to get something they want or gets something they don't want. Probably all human beings are subject to frustration, to some degree, every day of their lives, mostly taking it in their stride. Hostile anger, though, is what happens when a person fails to get what they think they *need* or *must* or *should* have. Such anger is an emotional response to a frustrated *demand* (as opposed to a frustrated *preference*).

If you ask someone with an anger problem what causes their rage, they will usually have a simple answer: 'other people cause my emotional upsets'. But this raises two questions. How can an *external* event create an *internal* reaction? And why is it that one person can be disappointed but calm in the face of a circumstance to which another reacts with rage? In reality, events and circumstances alone do not cause anger. Anger results from how people *view* what happens to them (Ellis, 1977; Novaco, 1975). Dysfunctional anger typically arises from one's *interpretations* ('inferences') of what is happening and the self-defeating *evaluations* that follow.

### ***Inferential distortions***

Human beings are constantly interpreting, or 'inferring' what is going on around them. According to Beck's 'Cognitive Therapy', there are certain ways of inferring that result in distorted, inaccurate views of reality (Burns, 1980). Here are the most common ones:

- *Mind-reading*: believing that you know what is going on in another person's mind; for example, thinking that someone is viewing you in a negative way.
- *Fortune-telling*: believing your own predictions of the future, e.g. 'If I don't get my partner under control then he/she might leave me'.
- *Overgeneralisation*: building up something so that it becomes bigger than it really is, e.g. 'Everything is going wrong in my life'.
- *Filtering*: seeing only the negatives 'there's nothing good about my life/this situation/this person/etc.'
- *Emotional reasoning*: believing that your emotions prove something about reality, e.g. 'I know that he/she has done something wrong – otherwise I wouldn't be angry!'

### ***Self-defeating evaluations***

According to Ellis' 'Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy' (Ellis, 1962), misinterpretations alone are unlikely to cause any emotional response. The real cause is the *evaluations* that follow from our inferences, where we consciously or subconsciously rate or evaluate those inferences. According to Ellis, there are four ways that human beings typically evaluate their experiences that create emotional disturbance and dysfunctional behaviour:

- *Demandingness*. Probably the main cause of hostile anger is expectations that are held as *demands*. Demandingness comes in two flavours: (1) *moralising* about how people 'should' or 'should not' behave; and (2) *musturbation*: believing that the world or one's circumstances 'have' to or 'need' to be a certain way.
- Demands directed outward typically lead to *low-frustration tolerance* or *discomfort-intolerance*, known colloquially as 'cant-stand-it-it-is' - viewing events and circumstances as 'unbearable', 'intolerable' or 'un-stand-able'.
- *Awfulising* refers to the way that people sometimes view an event or circumstance as the worst that could happen. Anger frequently results from anxiety, and violence often represents an attempt to ward off perceived threats. REBT suggests that such threats may be of two types (1) perceived threats to well-being (discomfort anxiety); and perceived threats to self-image (ego anxiety).
- *People rating* refers to the practice of globally evaluating people, for example labelling a person as a 'bitch', 'bastard', or in some other all-encompassing way that makes it easier to be angry with them.

Traditionally in REBT, demandingness is seen as the key type of evaluative thinking, with the other three types deriving from it. For example, we only think something is ‘awful’ or ‘unbearable’ because we demand that it not happen; or we evaluate ourselves as ‘failures’ only because we demand that we always succeed and never fail at anything important.

### ***Core beliefs***

Both Ellis and Beck agree that underlying our surface thinking or ‘automatic thoughts’ are a set of assumptions and rules about the world – ‘core beliefs’ that have their origin in childhood learning and are almost always held subconsciously. The inferences we draw and how we evaluate them are determined by our particular underlying beliefs. Here are some typical core beliefs that tend to be associated with anger:

1. Others must never do anything to devalue me.
2. I should be able to have the things I want, and live my life as I choose.
3. Other people must never behave in ways that frustrate or deprive me, or upset the stability of my existence.
4. The only way to get people to change their behaviour is to get angry with them.
5. People should always behave in a correct and right fashion.
6. People who behave badly are bad people - and they deserve blame and punishment.
7. To be a real, genuine human being you must always let your feelings show.
8. Anger is evil and destructive.

To illustrate how these underlying core beliefs determine what one thinks in specific situations, take belief number three. Holding this belief would make a person hypersensitive to anything that might be a threat to their comfort or stability, and thus more likely to (1) *misinterpret* the behaviour of others and (2) *evaluate* it as ‘awful’ or ‘unbearable’.

### ***The ABC model***

The role of cognitions in creating anger can be illustrated with the ‘ABC’ model developed by Albert Ellis. Here is an example:

|          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>Activating event</b> (experience, event or situation that started things off):<br>Children playing noisily, could not hear television programme.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>B</b> | <b>Beliefs</b> (self-talk that led from ‘A’ to ‘C’):<br><i>Underlying core beliefs:</i><br>1. I can’t stand to feel frustrated.<br>2. Others should never do things that frustrate or upset me, and when they do, I must get them under control.<br><i>Thoughts specific to the situation (but arising out of the core beliefs):</i><br>3. I can’t stand their noise.<br>4. They shouldn’t be so noisy when I am trying to relax.<br>5. I have to make them behave. |
| <b>C</b> | <b>Consequence</b> (reaction to the ‘A’):<br><i>Physiological signs:</i> Got very tense.<br><i>Emotions:</i> Felt angry.<br><i>Behaviours:</i> Went into lounge, shouted at children and called them abusive names.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

### ***Other causal factors***

Although anger results primarily from thinking processes, *physiological causes* (such as tension, agitation, or ill-humour) can exacerbate the emotion, along with *behavioural deficits* (like unassertiveness and poor problem-solving methods). An effective approach to anger management will take all factors into account.

## **Summary of the treatment procedure**

The overall aim of treatment is to help the client replace hostile dysfunctional anger (directed at people) with moderate, functional anger (directed at solving problems). Treatment involves raising frustration-tolerance through developing the client’s cognitive, physiological, and behavioural coping skills; then providing for

the practice of these skills with exposure to regulated doses of stressors that challenge but do not overwhelm the client's coping abilities.

### **Three treatment phases**

Treatment typically progresses as follows (though not necessarily in a rigid or linear sequence):

1. Assessment.
2. Introduce the client to new ways of viewing anger.
3. Teach coping techniques: cognitive strategies, controlling physiological symptoms, social skills.
4. Facilitate practice of skills via graduated exposure.

## **Assessment**

Start by helping the client (1) identify their motivations for change; (2) identify their personal anger patterns (their internal signs of anger and the external triggers) so they will be able to recognise anger at an early stage before it gets out of hand; and (3) identify the functions that anger may serve for them so they can deal with any factors that may hinder change.

### **Assess motivation for change**

Does the client really want to modify their anger? Do they see their anger as inappropriate? If they don't view the problem as internal and believe that they need to change, then the procedures that follow will not work. It will be necessary to help the client see (1) that their anger is not in their interests; and (2) that the cause of their anger is within themselves, not outside; and (3) that with appropriate training, change is within their power.

Even when the client is willing to change, it will still be useful to ask them to articulate why. Get them to list their reasons. This information will give them something to fall back on when the process of change becomes uncomfortable and they are tempted to give up.

### **Assess historical causes**

It is sometimes useful to help the client understand where their learning may have come from. Questions like the following will facilitate this exploration:

- 'How did your father / mother / siblings behave, and how did you know they were angry? Was there any violence or verbal/passive aggression?'
- 'What messages did you get from your parents about the expression of anger - OK or not OK? How did you know it was OK or not OK?'

Don't, though, fall into the trap of spending too much time on the client's past – the focus of attention needs to be on the factors that *currently* cause their anger:

### **Assess current causal factors**

Help the client identify the *activating events* that trigger their angry episodes, and the *consequences* (their physical, emotional and behavioural reactions). The purpose is for the client to learn to recognise these signs early in an angry episode. Have them keep a diary of A's & C's for a few weeks (if they cannot do this, they might either have a family member assist with the diary; or they could simply observe these factors and report them verbally at the next interview). Here is an example of an A-C diary:

| <b>A</b><br>Activating event                         | <b>C</b><br>Consequence                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Children playing noisily, couldn't hear TV programme | Got tense. Felt angry.<br>Shouted at them and abused them. |
| Partner arguing about money.                         | Mad 7/10. Stormed off in car.                              |

When they have got used to recording their 'A's and 'C's, get them to extend the diary to include the 'B's – the thoughts that create their reactions, like the following:

| <b>A</b><br>Activating event                         | <b>B</b><br>Beliefs / Thoughts                                                                                     | <b>C</b><br>Consequence                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Children playing noisily, couldn't hear TV programme | I can't stand their noise..<br>They shouldn't be so noisy when I'm trying to relax.<br>I have to make them behave. | Got tense. Felt angry.<br>Shouted at them and abused them. |

|                              |                                                               |                               |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Partner arguing about money. | She shouldn't tell me what to do.<br>She's a demanding bitch. | Mad 7/10. Stormed off in car. |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|

To identify the 'A's (*Activating events*) – the persons, situations, and states that trigger anger – help the client look for such things as rejection, rule-breaking by others, arguments, alcohol, feelings of anxiety, and perfectionistic behaviour on their part. You could also use the diary information to check out the (perceived) gains for the client from becoming angry (e.g. release of tension or frustration, control of other people, and the like).

To identify the 'C's (the physical, emotional and behavioural *consequences* they experience) suggest to the client that they look for:

- *Body signals* of tension and arousal: anxiety, muscular tension, stomach-ache, sweating or cold, changes in the depth and speed of breathing, headache, backache, and so on.
- *Behaviours* like blaming, sarcasm, forced humour, depression, withdrawing, acting over-nice and trying to please, going quiet, passive-aggressiveness, violence, change in eating or sleeping patterns, etc.

Finally, introduce the client to the most important causal factor: the 'B's (*Beliefs*) - the thoughts and attitudes that are activated by the 'A's. Help the client see that 'A' does not cause 'C'. Events and circumstances activate thinking, both conscious and subconscious, the thinking then creates the individual's emotional and behavioural reaction.

## Introduce the client to new views on anger

Help the client see that there is a difference between what one *feels* (the emotion of anger) and what one *does* (the aggressive verbal and physical actions directed at people or property); and that we can *feel* angry without needing to *act* on it.

Explain that anger in itself is not 'evil', and that it can be destructive or constructive. Deal with any secondary disturbance about having an anger problem, especially guilt. This will be important for some clients, because guilt only perpetuates anger. If clients engage in guilty self-downing – 'I am a rotten, useless bitch/bastard' – effectively they are convincing themselves that they can't change.

Explain the causes of anger – cognitive, physiological and behavioural – especially the significance of low frustration tolerance and the role of demandingness.

The purpose here is to help the client see anger in practical terms – that is, in terms of its consequences – rather than view it as a 'moral' issue; and accept their *self*, while rejecting their *behaviour*. It is often useful to help the client see anger as having three different forms (Froggatt, 2003a):

1. *Passive* anger is hostility that is expressed indirectly, often by omission rather than commission. Typical behaviours may include going silent, withdrawing, impatience, being late, 'forgetting' to do things, or denying sex or physical affection. It can lead to physical illness, relationship difficulties, and failure to seek change.
2. *Aggressive* hostility can create the above problems, but may also lead to violence and risk taking (as, for example, when a person is enraged while driving).
3. *Constructive* anger is very different to the other types. It involves moderate emotions like irritation, annoyance, dissatisfaction, displeasure and disappointment. These are still angry feelings - but will not cause people to lose their heads. Most importantly, constructive anger is directed against unwanted events and circumstances - not against people. It leads to problem-solving rather than people-harming.

## Teach cognitive coping skills

Now it is time to help the client learn how to identify and change the self-defeating beliefs that create and maintain their anger.

### Teach the procedure of self-analysis

Ask the client to extend the 'A-B-C' diary they kept earlier to include 'D' – disputing self-defeating beliefs, 'E' – developing a new emotional and behavioural goal, and 'F' – self-help work that they will complete between sessions. (The self-analysis procedure is described in detail in Froggatt, 1997 & 2003a, and there is an example of a completed analysis at the end of this article).

The *daily thought record* is an alternative to the rational self-analysis format that achieves a similar purpose in a more succinct format, and is often useful when the client needs to identify and change irrational thinking on a regular basis:

| A<br>Activating event                      | B<br>Beliefs / thoughts                                                                                           | C<br>Consequence                                                   | D<br>Disputation / rational response                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | E<br>New Effect         | F<br>Further action                                         |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Children playing noisily, couldn't hear TV | I can't stand their noise.<br>They shouldn't be so noisy when I'm trying to relax.<br>I have to make them behave. | Got tense.<br>Felt angry 8/10.<br>Shouted at them and abused them. | I don't like their noise, but I can stand it (after all, I'm still alive!).<br>I'd prefer them not to be so noisy, but that's how kids are – and there's no 'Law of the Universe' says they should be different.<br>I don't 'have' to make them change – I have a choice. | Felt annoyed but calmer | Practice relaxation.<br>Apologise to kids.                  |
| Partner arguing about money.               | She shouldn't tell me what to do.<br>She's a demanding bitch.                                                     | Mad 7/10.<br>Stormed off in car.                                   | Why shouldn't she have an opinion on how the money is spent. She's not demanding – she's just worried about how we are going to make ends meet.                                                                                                                           | Felt concerned.         | Read rational card.<br>Make a time to talk about the issue. |

Whichever approach is used, introduce the procedure by completing examples in the office, perhaps using a whiteboard so the client can copy them to take home. Self-analysis with anger problems will usually involve:

- Challenging demands directed at other people or the world, especially the idea that other people or the world 'must' conform to one's expectations; or the 'need' to punish others or control their behaviour;
- Developing the concept of accepting people, even when their behaviour is rejected.
- Increasing frustration-tolerance by challenging catastrophising. One way to do this is with the 'Catastrophe Scale' (described shortly).

### ***The skill of disputation***

At the end of this article there is a list of beliefs typically involved with angry reactions, along with rational alternatives. Disputation of self-defeating beliefs takes some skill - most clients (and therapists) need to learn how to do it effectively. Because of its self-righteous nature, clients with problematical anger usually need special help to see how their demands are illogical and self-defeating. Research (Kopeck, Beal & DiGiuseppe, 1994) suggests that effective disputation involves the use of three key strategies:

1. *Pragmatic* disputation - 'How does this belief affect you?' This dispute focuses on how *functional* or *helpful* it is to hold a particular belief. When the client can clearly see that an irrational belief leads to negative emotional and behavioural consequences for them, they will be much more likely to change it.
2. *Empirical* disputation - 'What is the evidence for and against this belief?' The goal of empirical disputation is to help the client see that their belief is inconsistent with reality, and that there is little or no empirical evidence to support it. This involves asking them to examine any evidence that may support or contradict their irrational beliefs.
3. *Logical* disputation - 'How does it follow?' Here you help the client examine whether their belief logically follows from the facts, asking questions like: 'How does it follow that because you would *like* you children to keep quiet that therefore they absolutely *must*?' or 'How does this thing that is *uncomfortable* become something you *can't stand*?'

### ***Other cognitive strategies***

- Assist the client to increase their motivation to change by listing and weighting the advantages and disadvantages of their anger. One way to do this is with the 'Benefits Calculation' (described below).
- Give the client reading (if they have adequate reading skills) to educate them about self-defeating thinking and how it can be changed.
- Help the client develop empathic abilities, using techniques like role-reversal.
- Help the client develop a task-orientated attitude to dealing with problems – that is, changing circumstances (where possible) rather than upsetting themselves.

### ***Preparing a 'Benefits Calculation'***

1. Ask the client to list all the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to behave in the old angry way;
2. Have them do the same with the new replacement behaviour;
3. Then ask the client to decide how much value or benefit each item has to them, negatively or positively, then add up the pro's and con's. A common format is to draw four boxes (alternatively, you can use four separate sheets of paper):

|               | Keep getting enraged with other people when they do things I dislike.   | Learn to keep my anger under control.         |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Advantages    | I feel superior 4                                                       | People will like me more 7                    |
|               | They usually go quiet 5                                                 | There will be less shouting in the house. 7   |
|               | They are more careful around me. 4                                      | I won't end up on more charges 5              |
|               | +13                                                                     | +19                                           |
| Disadvantages | People dislike me. 7                                                    | It will be hard to control my urge to shout 5 |
|               | Afterwards, I don't like myself. 8                                      | It will take more time to sort things out. 4  |
|               | They are only careful for while, then they go back to their old ways. 6 | I will miss the high I get. 3                 |
|               | -21                                                                     | -12                                           |
|               | <b>Overall total: -8</b>                                                | <b>Overall total: +7</b>                      |

Note that advantages to the first option will often represent disadvantages to the second option, and vice-versa (this may seem like doubling up, but it actually aids clarification).

### Using the 'Catastrophe Scale'

1. On a sheet of paper draw a line down the left side. Put 100% at the top, 0% at the bottom, and 10% intervals in between. Have the client insert the event to which they are reacting at the applicable level.
2. At each level, write in something the client thinks could legitimately be rated at that level. You might, for example, put 0% - 'Having a quiet cup of coffee at home', 20% - 'Losing my purse', 40% - being burgled, 80% - being diagnosed with cancer, 100% - being burned alive, and so on. The client will progressively alter the position of their 'activating event' on the scale, in relation to the other items, until they sense it is in perspective. Here is an example:

| CATASTROPHE SCALE Event: Boyfriend left me |                                   |                           |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 100                                        | Burning alive                     | ← original placing        |
| 90                                         | Becoming a paraplegic             | ← 2 <sup>nd</sup> placing |
| 80                                         | Being diagnosed with cancer       | ← 3 <sup>rd</sup> placing |
| 70                                         | Having my car stolen              |                           |
| 60                                         | Losing my job                     |                           |
| 50                                         | Being kicked out of my flat       |                           |
| 40                                         | House burgled                     |                           |
| 30                                         | Boyfriend leaving me              | ← final placing           |
| 20                                         | Losing my purse                   |                           |
| 10                                         | Catching a cold                   |                           |
| 5                                          | Missing my favourite TV programme |                           |
| 0                                          | Having a coffee at home           |                           |

The client can keep the chart and add to it from time to time. Whenever they are upset about something, they can ascertain what 'badness-rating' they are giving it and pencil it on their chart, then see how it compares to the items already there. Usually, they will realise they have been exaggerating the badness involved, and move the item down the list until it is in perspective.

### Teach physiological coping skills

Physiological treatment aims to reduce tension and ill-humour by working on the symptoms themselves. The client learns how to modify their 'C's' – in other words, to reduce the physical sensations that further fuel their anger. This helps them avoid exacerbating annoyance or irritation into hostility or rage. Strategies that are commonly used include:

- Relaxation training and stress management (see Froggatt, 1997).
- Anxiety management (see Froggatt 2003b).
- Encouraging the client to maintain a sense of humour – avoid taking oneself or the situation too seriously.
- Moderation of alcohol use (and no alcohol at all when angry or upset). Some clients will also benefit from reducing their caffeine intake, if they have more than five cups a day.

Physiological strategies are ‘palliative’ – that is, they ease the symptoms without addressing the causes – but are a useful adjunct to the therapist’s armoury.

## Teach additional skills as needed

Some clients will need additional skills training in how to use anger adaptively rather than destructively. The idea is for the client to learn how to minimise the dysfunctional aspects of their anger, and instead engage in problem-solving behaviour.

### *Time out*

‘Time-out’ is useful in the early stages of therapy, before the client has learned to deal with the underlying cause of their anger. The client prepares the scene by explaining to their partner what they will do and arranges their co-operation. When the client identifies the early stages of anger, they follow these steps:

1. Share with their partner that they are feeling angry, and say they are going to take time-out.
2. Leave the situation for about one hour. Avoid drinking or driving while angry, instead, do something physical (brisk walk, run, gardening, etc.), and/or do a *self-analysis* to deal with self-defeating thinking.
3. When the hour is up, return and check in with their partner and offer to talk about what happened.

### *Communication and assertiveness training*

The aim is for the client to change things they dislike without using anger. It involves (1) effective communication of feelings; and (2) asking for what they want and saying ‘no’ to what they don’t want. Suggestions for assertiveness are detailed in Froggatt, 1997 & 2003a.

### *Problem-solving training*

Train the client how to use task-oriented, problem-solving strategies. They will then be able to deal with problems straight away rather than bottling up their feelings. A problem-solving model is described in detail in Froggatt, 1997 & 2003a.

### *How to teach skills*

The best way to help the client gain coping skills is by: (1) explaining a technique; (2) modelling it; then (3) having the client rehearse the techniques with you before using them in the real world.

## Facilitate skills practice through graduated exposure

The final step is to help the client apply what they have learned. What follows is a process for helping clients do this in a graduated fashion. As mentioned earlier, therapy does not often proceed in a linear sequence - some stages may be mixed together or approached in a different order to that described. Techniques outlined in this section may be used to facilitate specific learning from earlier stages.

### *Step 1: Develop a hierarchy*

Start by having the client list anger situations they are likely to meet in real life (usually this would have been done earlier via their ‘A-C’ diary). Have the client rate the level of anger they would associate with each situation, then order the list into a ‘hierarchy’ according to the anger rating for each item. Here is an example of such a hierarchy:

| <b>Anger level:</b> | <b>Exposure Task:</b>                                                              |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4                   | Talk to the guy at work who supports that new Christian political party.           |
| 5                   | Go into the lounge when I know all the kids’ toys will be everywhere on the floor. |
| 6                   | Watch TV news.                                                                     |
| 7                   | Ask Diane’s opinion on the Christian party.                                        |
| 8                   | Go shopping with Dianne.                                                           |
| 9                   | Video my favourite programme, then watch it while the kids are playing.            |
| 10                  | Talk with Dianne about our finances.                                               |



### ***Step 2: Exposure via imagery***

Progressively using each hierarchy scene, expose the client to manageable doses of anger stimuli, via the use of imagery and role-playing. Use cognitive procedures such as *Rational-Emotive Imagery* (Maultsby & Ellis, 1974; Froggatt, 1997) and *Rational Self-Analysis* (Froggatt, 1997 & 2003a) to assist the client to identify and dispute the thoughts that create the anger they feel while carrying out the imagery exercise.

### ***Step 3: Exposure in real-life situations***

When the client is ready, move them on to 'in-vivo' (real life) exposure using *response-prevention*:

- The client deliberately (in a planned way) confronts the listed situations that would normally trigger anger.
- While engaging in the exposure, they inhibit their usual response (eg. argumentativeness, defensiveness, demanding of others, etc.) and instead use the new strategies they have learned.

The purpose is to give the client practice at increasing their frustration-tolerance and coping in a non-hostile way with a variety of situations, where the practice is under their control (see Froggatt 2002 for more information on the technique of controlled exposure).

## **The end of therapy**

Therapy usually comes to an end when client and therapist are satisfied that the targeted gains have been achieved to a level where the client is likely to be able to maintain them in the longer term. Two things are important here:

1. *Evaluate progress.* Check whether improvements are due to significant changes in the client's thinking, or simply to a fortuitous improvement in their external circumstances.
2. *Prepare the client for termination.* Prepare the client to cope with setbacks and ensure they know what to do when their angry reactions return, as they most likely will. Stress that from here on it is a matter of 'management, not cure'. Discuss their views on asking for help if needed in the future, so that you can deal with any blocks to returning for the occasional (usually brief) refresher.

## Appendix I: Summary of the helping process

1. Carry out assessment
  - Client's motivation for change
  - Historical / Current causal factors
  - Activating events & consequences (A-C diary)
  - Beliefs (A-B-C diary)
2. Introduce new ways of viewing anger
  - Difference between feeling and behaving
  - View anger in terms of its consequences rather than moralising about it
3. Teach cognitive coping skills
  - Thought recording / Self-analysis
  - Disputation
  - Benefits calculation / Catastrophe scale
4. Teach physiological coping skills
  - Relaxation / Stress management
  - Anxiety management
  - Moderation of alcohol use
5. Teach additional skills as needed
  - Time out / Problem-solving
  - Communication / Assertiveness
6. Skills practice via graduated exposure
  - Develop hierarchy
  - Begin with imagery exposure
  - When ready, extend to in-vivo exposure
7. Prepare client for the end of therapy
  - Evaluate progress
  - Develop plan to manage relapse.

---

## Appendix II: A sample of anger-creating irrational beliefs

### *Hostility-Causing Beliefs*

Others must never do anything to devalue me.

I should be able to have the things I want, and live my life as I choose.

I can't stand it when people get in my way.

Other people should never behave in ways that frustrate or deprive me, or upset the stability of my existence.

If the world were a better place I wouldn't need to get upset.

If I didn't get mad then things would never change.

People should always behave in a correct and right fashion.

People who behave badly are bad people - and they deserve blame and punishment.

People only do things to frustrate me.

I wouldn't be human if I didn't lose my cool.

Anger is evil and destructive.

### *Rational Alternatives*

The actions of others can't 'devalue' me. I don't magically change because of what others say or do

It's OK to want things my way (and to try and achieve it), but there is no law of the universe that says I *should* or *must* get what I want how I want it.

It's disappointing when people get in my way, but I can stand it - especially if I avoid demanding and catastrophising.

I'd prefer it if people didn't do things I dislike. But, in real life, they sometimes do! Anyway, it's not their actions that frustrate me - it's my own demanding thoughts.

Unfortunately, the world is not a better place. But I can avoid getting upset about this fact by changing the way I view it.

Getting mad disables me. I'm more likely to change things by keeping my head and being assertive rather than aggressive.

In real life, people don't always behave correctly. No amount of demanding is going to make this reality go away. Anyway, who decides what's right?

People are not what they do. Behaving badly doesn't make someone a bad person - it just shows they are a person who sometimes behaves badly.

Am I god, that I can see into the inner recesses of other's minds and discern their motivations?

Just because something is human doesn't make it desirable. Anyway, to be reasonable and understand someone else's viewpoint is also human.

Anger is neither good nor bad - it's just an emotion. I can choose to express it constructively rather than destructively.

## Appendix III: Rational self-analysis - an example

What follows is an example of a completed rational self-analysis. Note that it is usually most effective to proceed with an analysis in the following order: A, C, B, E, D, F:

|          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>Activating event</b> (what started things off):<br>Children playing noisily, could not hear television programme.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>B</b> | <b>Beliefs</b> (what I told myself about the 'A'):<br><i>Thoughts specific to the situation:</i><br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I can't stand their noise.</li> <li>2. They shouldn't be so noisy when I am trying to relax.</li> <li>3. I have to make them behave.</li> </ol> <i>Underlying core beliefs:</i><br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. I can't stand to feel frustrated.</li> <li>5. Others should never do things that frustrate or upset me; when they do, I must get them under control.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>C</b> | <b>Consequence</b> (how I felt and/or behaved):<br><i>Emotions:</i> felt angry.<br><i>Behaviours:</i> went into lounge, shouted at children and called them abusive names.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>E</b> | <b>New Effect</b> (how I would prefer to feel/ behave):<br>I would prefer to feel annoyed rather than hostile; and calmly explain that I like to relax after work, and ask them to play more quietly.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>D</b> | <b>Disputation and new beliefs</b> (that will help me achieve the new Effect I want):<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I don't like their noise, but I can stand it - it hasn't killed me yet.</li> <li>2. I would <i>prefer</i> them to play quietly when I am trying to relax, but what Law of the Universe says that they 'should'?</li> <li>3. It would be <i>helpful</i> to train them to behave, but I don't absolutely 'have' to.</li> <li>4. I dislike frustration, but I have always stood it!</li> <li>5. I would prefer others to not do things I dislike, but where is it written that they 'must' not? And, anyway, others don't frustrate me - I frustrate myself with what I think about their behaviour.</li> </ol> |
| <b>F</b> | <b>Further action</b> (what I will do to avoid the same dysfunctional thinking and reactions in future):<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Re-read the article on managing anger my counsellor gave me.</li> <li>2. Talk with my anger management group about better ways to communicate when people do things I dislike.</li> <li>3. Use 'time-out' for the next few months to practice increasing my tolerance for the kid's noise.</li> <li>4. Do a self-analysis when I take time-out, to chip away at my demanding rules.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                            |

## Appendix IV: References and further reading

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## Appendix V: Useful resources on the internet

- Introduction to Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy* - <http://www.rational.org.nz/prof/docs/intro-rebt.htm>
- Introduction to Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* - <http://www.rational.org.nz/prof/docs/intro-cbt.htm>
- Homework assignments in psychotherapy* - <http://www.cyberpsych.com/homework.html>
- New Zealand Centre for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* - <http://www.rational.org.nz>
- Raymond Novaco's web page* - <http://www.seweb.uci.edu/faculty/novaco/>

## Appendix VI: Client Handouts

The following pages contain some handouts which you can give to your clients to help increase their understanding of dysfunctional anger and how they can overcome it. As a practitioner, you may freely copy all items and pass them on to others, as appropriate, for therapeutic, self-help or training purposes, as long as they are printed in full (including any copyright notices). The handouts are formatted for double-sided printing, but can be printed single-sided if necessary.

# Who Controls You?

by Wayne Froggatt

*This version 29 October, 2006*

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Most people want to be happy. They would like to feel good, avoid pain, and achieve their goals. For many, though, happiness seems to be an elusive dream. In fact, it appears that we humans are much better at disturbing and defeating ourselves! Instead of feeling good, we are more likely to worry, feel guilty and get depressed. We put ourselves down and feel shy, hurt or self-pitying. We get jealous, angry, hostile and bitter or suffer anxiety, tension and panic.

On top of feeling bad, we often act in self-destructive ways. Some strive to be perfect in everything they do. Many mess up relationships. Others worry about disapproval and let people use them as doormats. Still others compulsively gamble, smoke and overspend - or abuse alcohol, drugs and food. Some even try to end it all.

The strange thing is, most of this pain is avoidable! We don't have to do it to ourselves. Humans can, believe it or not, learn how to *choose how they feel and behave*.

## As you think, so you feel

'People feel disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of them.' Ancient words, from a first-century philosopher named Epictetus - but they are just as true now.

Events and circumstances do not cause your reactions. They result from what you tell yourself about the things that happen. Put simply, thoughts cause feelings and behaviours. Or, more precisely, *events and circumstances* serve to trigger *thoughts*, which then create *reactions*. These three processes are intertwined.

The past is significant. But only insofar as it leaves you with your *current* attitudes and beliefs. External events - whether in the past, present, or future - cannot influence the way you feel or behave until you become aware of and begin to think about them.

To fear something (or react in any other way), you have to be thinking about it. The cause is not the event - it's what you tell yourself about the event.

## The ABC's of feeling & acting

Psychologist Albert Ellis, the originator of *Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy* (REBT), was one of the first to show how beliefs determine the way human beings feel and behave. Dr. Ellis developed the 'ABC' model to demonstrate this.

'A' refers to whatever started things off: a circumstance, event or experience - or just thinking about something which has happened. This triggers off thoughts ('B'), which in turn create a reaction - feelings and behaviours - ('C').

To see this in operation, let's meet Alan. A young man who had always tended to doubt himself, Alan imagined that other people did not like him, and that they were only friendly because they pitied him. One day, a friend passed him in the street without returning his greeting - to which Alan reacted negatively. Here is the event, Alan's beliefs, and his reaction, put into the ABC format:

### A. What started things off:

Friend passed me in the street without speaking to me.

### B. Beliefs about A.:

1. He's ignoring me. He doesn't like me.
2. I could end up without friends for ever.
3. That would be terrible.
4. For me to be happy and feel worthwhile, people must like me.
5. I'm unacceptable as a friend - so I must be worthless as a person.

### C. Reaction:

Feelings: worthless, depressed.

Behaviours: avoiding people generally.

Now, someone who thought differently about the same event would react in another way:

### A. What started things off:

Friend passed me in the street without speaking to me.

### B. Beliefs about A.:

1. He didn't ignore me deliberately. He may not have seen me.
2. He might have something on his mind.
3. I'd like to help if I can.

### C. Reaction:

Feelings: Concerned.

Behaviours: Went to visit friend to see how he is.

These examples show how different ways of viewing the same event can lead to different reactions. The same principle operates in reverse: when people react alike, it is because they are thinking in similar ways.

## The rules we live by

What we tell ourselves in specific situations depends on the rules we hold. Everyone has a set of general 'rules'. Some will be rational, others will be self-defeating or irrational. Each person's set is different.

Mostly subconscious, these rules determine how we react to life. When an event triggers off a train of thought, what we *consciously* think depends on the general rules we *subconsciously* apply to the event.

Let us say that you hold the general rule: 'To be worthwhile, I must succeed at everything I do.' You happen to fail an examination; an event which, coupled with the underlying rule, leads you to the conclusion: 'I'm not worthwhile.'

Underlying rules are generalisations: one rule can apply to many situations. If you believe, for example: 'I can't stand discomfort and pain and must avoid them at all costs,' you might apply this to the dentist, to work, to relationships, and to life in general.

Why be concerned about your rules? While most will be valid and helpful, some will be self-defeating. Faulty rules will lead to faulty conclusions. Take the rule: 'If I am to feel OK about myself, others must like and approve of me.' Let us say that your boss tells you off. You may (rightly) think: 'He is angry with me' - but you may wrongly conclude: 'This proves I'm a failure.' And changing the situation (for instance, getting your boss to like you) would still leave the underlying rule untouched. It would then be there to bother you whenever some future event triggered it off.

Most self-defeating rules are a variation of one or other of the '12 Self-defeating Beliefs' listed at the end of this article. Take a look at this list now. Which ones do you identify with? Which are the ones that guide your reactions?

## What are self-defeating beliefs?

To describe a belief as self-defeating, or irrational, is to say that:

1. It distorts reality (it's a misinterpretation of what's happening); or it involves some illogical ways of evaluating yourself, others,

and the world around you: *awfulising*, *can't-stand-it-it-is*, *demanding* and *people-rating*;

2. It blocks you from achieving your goals;
3. It creates extreme emotions which persist, and which distress and immobilise; and
4. It leads to behaviours that harm yourself, others, and your life in general.

### Four ways to screw yourself up

There are four typical ways of thinking that will make you feel bad or behave in dysfunctional ways:

1. *Awfulising*: using words like 'awful', 'terrible', 'horrible', 'catastrophic' to describe something - e.g. 'It would be terrible if ...', 'It's the worst thing that could happen', 'That would be the end of the world'.
2. *Can't-stand-it-it-is*: viewing an event or experience as unbearable - e.g. 'I can't stand it', 'It's absolutely unbearable', 'I'll die if I get rejected'.
3. *Demanding*: using 'shoulds' (moralising) or 'musts' (musturbating) - e.g. 'I *should* not have done that, 'I *must* not fail', 'I *need* to be loved', 'I *have* to have a drink'.
4. *People-rating*: labelling or rating your total self (or someone else's) - e.g. 'I'm stupid /hopeless /useless /worthless.'

## Rational thinking

Rational thinking presents a vivid contrast to its illogical opposite:

1. It is based on reality - it emphasises seeing things as they really are, keeping their badness in perspective, tolerating frustration and discomfort, preferring rather than demanding, and self-acceptance;
2. It helps you achieve your goals and purposes;
3. It creates emotions you can handle; and
4. It helps you behave in ways which promote your aims and survival.

We are not talking about so-called 'positive thinking'. Rational thinking is *realistic* thinking. It is concerned with facts - the real world - rather than subjective opinion or wishful thinking.

Realistic thinking leads to realistic emotions. Negative feelings aren't always bad for you. Neither are all positive feelings beneficial. Feeling happy when someone you love has died, for example, may hinder you from grieving properly. Or to be unconcerned in the face of real danger could put your survival at risk. Realistic thinking avoids exaggeration of both kinds - negative and positive.

## The techniques of change

How does one actually set about achieving self-control and choice? The best place to start is by learning how to identify the thoughts and beliefs which cause your problems.

Next, learn how to apply this knowledge by analysing specific episodes where you feel and behave in the ways you would like to change. It is most effective to do this in writing at first, and later it will become easier to do it in your head. You connect whatever started things off, your reaction, and the thoughts which came in between. You then check out those thoughts and change the self-defeating ones. This method, called *Rational Self-Analysis*, uses the ABC approach described earlier, extended to include sections for setting a goal or new desired *effect* ('E'), *disputing* and changing beliefs ('D'), and, finally, *further action* to put those changes into practice ('F').

That final step is important. You will get there faster when you put into action what you have changed in your mind. Let us say you decide to stop feeling guilty when you do something for yourself. The next step is to do it. Spend an hour a day reading a novel. Purchase some new clothes. Have coffee with a friend or a weekend away without the family. Do the things you would previously have regarded as 'undeserved'.

## Overcoming obstacles

While change is possible, it is not easy - mainly because of a very human tendency known as 'low-discomfort tolerance'.

Most of us want to be physically and emotionally comfortable. But personal change means giving up some old habits of thinking and behaving and 'safe' ways of approaching life.

Whereas before you may have blamed others for your problems, now you start to take responsibility for yourself and what you want. You risk new ways of thinking and acting. You step out into the unknown. This could increase your stress and emotional pain - temporarily. In other words, you may well feel worse before you feel better.

Telling yourself that you 'can't stand it' could lead you to avoid change. You might decide to stick with the way things are, unpleasant though it is. You know you would be better off in the long run, but you choose to avoid the extra pain now.

Or you might look for a quick solution. Do you hope that somewhere there's a fancy therapy which will cure you straight away - without you having to do anything? I meet many people who

try therapist after therapist, but never stay with one approach long enough to learn anything that will help. They still live in hope, though, and often get a brief boost from meeting new therapists or therapy groups.

As well as fearing discomfort, you may also worry that you 'won't be a real person'. You think that you will end up 'pretending' to feel and behave in new ways, and imagine yourself as false or phoney. Somehow, it seems, to choose how you feel seems 'less than human'.

You are, though, already choosing your reactions - even though you may not be fully aware of doing so. And using conscious choice is what sets humans apart from instinct-bound animals. It is also what makes you a unique person - different to every other. So give up the notion that it is false and machine-like to use your brain to avoid bad feelings. Getting depressed, worried, and desperate does not make you more human.

You might worry that learning self-control will make you cold and unemotional, with no feelings at all. This common fear is quite misguided. The opposite is true: if you learn how to handle strong feelings you will be less afraid of them. This will free you to experience a fuller range of emotions than before.

While self-improvement may be hard, it is achievable. The blocks I have described are all self-created. They're nothing more than beliefs - ideas you can change using practical techniques you can learn.

Rational thinking is not just academic theory. People from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds have already used it successfully. You will be able to as well.

It is true that human beings start life with a biological predisposition to irrational thinking, which they then add to by learning new and harmful ways of behaving and viewing life. But there is a positive side to human nature - we also have the ability to think about our beliefs and change the dysfunctional ones.

What about problems you can't sort out on your own? Some outside help may be a useful supplement to your self-help efforts. Whether or not you have such help, though, taking responsibility for your feelings and actions will be the key to success. You will also need some hard work and perseverance. But, happily, by learning how to identify and change self-defeating beliefs and attitudes, these things can be within your control - and happiness within your reach.

# FROM SELF-DEFEAT TO RATIONAL LIVING

## 12 Self-defeating Beliefs

1. I need love and approval from those significant to me - and I must avoid disapproval from any source.
2. To be worthwhile as a person I must achieve, succeed at what ever I do, and make no mistakes.
3. People should always do the right thing. When they behave obnoxiously, unfairly or selfishly, they must be blamed and punished.
4. Things must be the way I want them to be - otherwise life will be intolerable.
5. My unhappiness is caused by things outside my control - so there is little I can do to feel any better.
6. I must worry about things that could be dangerous, unpleasant or frightening - otherwise they might happen.
7. I can be happier by avoiding life's difficulties, unpleasantness, and responsibilities.
8. Everyone needs to depend on someone stronger than themselves.
9. Events in my past are the cause of my problems - and they continue to influence my feelings and behaviours now.
10. I should become upset when other people have problems and feel unhappy when they're sad.
11. I should not have to feel discomfort and pain - I can't stand them and must avoid them at all costs.
12. Every problem should have an ideal solution, and it is intolerable when one can't be found.

## 12 Rational Beliefs

Love and approval are good things to have, and I'll seek them when I can. But they are not necessities - I can survive (even though uncomfortably) without them.

I'll always seek to achieve as much as I can - but unflinching success and competence is unrealistic. Better I just accept myself as a person, separate to my performance.

It's unfortunate that people sometimes do bad things. But humans are not yet perfect - and upsetting myself won't change that reality.

There is no law saying things have to be as I want. It's disappointing, but I can stand it - especially if I avoid catastrophising.

Many external factors are outside my control. But it is my thoughts (not the externals) which cause my feelings. And I can learn to control my thoughts.

Worrying about things that might go wrong won't stop them happening. It will, though, ensure I get upset and disturbed right now!

Avoiding problems is only easier in the short term - putting things off can make them worse later on. It also gives me more time to worry about them!

Relying on someone else leads to dependent behaviour. It is OK to seek help - as long as I trust myself and my own judgement.

The past can't influence me now. My current beliefs cause my reactions. I may have learned these beliefs in the past, but I can choose to analyse and change them in the present.

I can't change other people's problems and bad feelings by getting myself upset.

Why should I in particular not feel discomfort and pain? I don't like them, but I can stand it. Also, my life would be very restricted if I always avoided discomfort.

Problems usually have many possible solutions. It is better to stop waiting for the perfect one and get on with the best available. I can live with less than the ideal.

Did you find this article helpful? You may wish to read the book from which it was adapted:

***Choose To Be Happy: Your step-by-step guide***

by

**Wayne Froggatt**

(HarperCollins, Auckland, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2003)

Also, by the same author, specialist books on stress and anxiety:

***FearLess: Your guide to overcoming anxiety***

***Taking Control: Manage Stress to get the most out of life***

(HarperCollins, Auckland 2003 & 2006)

For more extracts from all books, and information on how to obtain them, look on the internet at:  
[www.rational.org.nz](http://www.rational.org.nz)



# Anger:

Who's in charge?

By Wayne Froggatt

(This version 25-Oct-06)

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Anger is a troublesome emotion for many people. Some bottle it up and feel bad inside. Others let it out in ways that are destructive to themselves and those around them.

We also complicate anger by turning it into a moral issue. Like many, I grew up with the idea that because anger was evil you should never even feel it, let alone express it. Then I began meeting people pushing an opposite extreme. It is good to feel angry, they claimed, and you should always let it out.

These opposing points of view cannot both be correct. How can we decide what is right for us?

We could start by noting that it is often harmful to bottle up anger. Annette will vouch for this. She would feel angry inside, but if she expressed it, guilt would follow. As a result, she learned to hold her feelings in. But that created other problems. Because she didn't want anyone to see her as hostile, Annette behaved unassertively. Although she had a full-time job, her husband and two teenage children came and went as they pleased, leaving her to cook and clean up after them. She wouldn't say anything for fear of losing her cool. Sometimes, unknowingly, she got back at the others by 'forgetting' to wash their clothes, burning meals or losing their things — but again she would feel guilty. Her repressed emotions were so powerful she began to suffer stomach pains.

Does Annette's experience show that it is always better to let your anger out? Unfortunately, no. This can have its problems, too — as Dean found. 'I've had a temper since I was a little kid,' explained the heavily built mechanic. 'My father used to beat hell out of me whenever I lost my cool, but it's made no difference. I guess I'm just a guy with a strong idea of what's right and what's wrong. I'm okay when everyone's acting like they should, but if someone crosses me, watch out!'

People did watch out for Dean. His workmates were careful around him. People would often avoid him entirely. His wife had moved out, taking their young son. When Dean came after them and attacked her, she obtained a court order to keep him

away. Dean also ended up with a conviction for assault, a suspended sentence and a suggestion from the judge that he had better get help from the local Men Against Violence organisation.

Expressing anger, contrary to popular belief, tends to reinforce it: the angry person just gets angrier and behaves in even more hostile ways.

By now you may be asking, 'If it doesn't help to express anger, or to bottle it up, then what on earth can people do?' There is a third alternative. *Eliminate the excessive anger itself* — by modifying the cause. This suggestion may surprise you. Perhaps it sounds like another way of telling you to hold your anger in. After all, doesn't everyone know that once you are steamed up you have to let it out, otherwise it just gets suppressed? Not necessarily. Emotions don't have a life of their own. You create an emotion through what you tell yourself, and the thoughts which start it keep it alive. If you change the thoughts, the feeling changes.

## Identifying anger

Shortly we will see how you can modify anger-producing thoughts. First, let us clarify what we are talking about. Anger is what you feel when one of your expectations isn't met — that is, when you don't get something you want, or someone breaks a rule you regard as important. You can feel angry not just about things that are happening in the present, but also about events in the distant past or even events you anticipate will take place in the future.

Anger comes in three different forms: passive, aggressive and constructive. The first two, examples of which we have already seen, are based on hostility. Annette felt hostile toward her family, but passively kept it inside. Dean also felt hostile, but aggressively expressed it outwards. Both types of hostile anger are problematical.

*Passive hostility* can lead to physical illness — disturbed sleep, tiredness, hypertension, heart problems, ulcers and other health problems. It can make you unhappy. Getting preoccupied with past hurts or future revenge will stop you enjoying life

in the present. If you turn your anger against yourself, the resulting guilt and self-downing can develop into depression. It can also stop you working on the problem. Fixating on the 'wrongness' of what has happened and the evil of the offender may get in the way of making changes.

*Aggressive hostility*, too, can create most of these problems, and a few more. It may lead to inconvenience. If you get mad because you cannot find something, this makes it hard to think out calmly where you left it. Damaging something because you cannot get it to work could be expensive.

Then there is the chance of physical danger. Distorted judgement can make you take risks you would normally avoid — for example, becoming aggressive with people larger than yourself or getting steamed up behind the wheel of a car. Hostility can get out of control and lead to violence against someone you are close to, or even people you don't know. If there is a weapon to hand, rage could lead to results you cannot undo.

Relationships get damaged, too. Overreacting, saying things you don't mean, raving on, demanding and getting violent can put a real strain on your 4relations with other people. Domestic violence is, unfortunately, quite common. About 30 per cent of all assault cases dealt with by the New Zealand justice system arise out of domestic disputes.

You may lose control to others. If other people realise you cannot control your emotions, they can use this to manipulate you. Children, in particular, are adept at pressing the right buttons to get a reaction — it gives them a feeling of power over their parents. Others may retaliate. The people on the receiving end of your tantrums can get back at you physically, withdraw or not cooperate, dismiss you from employment, or react in other ways you hadn't bargained for.

At this point we are concerned only with problem anger, but soon we will look at a more helpful type. *Constructive anger* is a very different story: it avoids the disadvantages outlined above, and it is not directed against *people* — rather, it is concerned with *solving problems*.

### ***Recognising your anger and its triggers***

Start by identifying the situations which trigger your anger (the *As*), and the internal signs and outward behaviours (*Cs*) that are clues you are getting uptight:

*Identify the triggers.* Note the people, situations or personal states which tend to trigger your angry episodes. Do they usually involve children, other family members, friends or workmates? Do they occur most often when you are driving, sorting out your finances, when someone disagrees with you, or when you think people are rejecting

you? Are you more prone when you are tired, have been drinking, are tense or have something on your mind?

*Note the physical cues.* Watch for the physical signs which suggest you are losing your cool: tightness round the chest, general muscular tension, a burning sensation in the stomach, change in your breathing, shaking, your head feeling as though it is expanding.

*Observe your behaviour.* Note how you behave when you are getting uptight. Passive hostility shows in sarcasm, ridiculing, going silent, withdrawing, impatience, being late, 'forgetting' to do things or denying sex and other forms of physical affection. Aggressive hostility can be expressed through verbal attacks (yelling, screaming, raving on, abusing, ridiculing and threatening) and physical violence (hitting people or things, breaking objects, driving dangerously and so on). Be aware when you stop thinking straight, overreact, get impatient, take risks you would normally avoid, become aggressive or violent, rave on, demand, hold resentments, seek revenge or act in any of the other ways described above.

To help learn how to recognise your anger at an early stage, keep a two-column diary for a while. In the first column, record the events you react to (e.g. 'Son got home two hours later than we'd agreed on'). In the other column, write down your reactions — emotions, physical sensations and behaviours (e.g. 'mad', 'tense', 'headache coming on', 'yelled at him'). Keeping the diary will help you become aware both of recurring situations or events you tend to react to and the internal signs of anger.

## **Uncovering the beliefs that cause hostility**

What makes humans get angry? 'That's obvious,' Dean said. 'Other people! They get to me, and I lose my cool. If they didn't act like they do and make life hard for me, I wouldn't need to get uptight. I'm only angry because I'm frustrated. It's as simple as that.'

Dean made it sound as though there was a button on his nose that people pressed and off he went. After all, how else could an *external* event cause an *internal* reaction? He also missed an obvious point. How is it that some people can lose their cool in response to a circumstance which has no effect on others? People usually do feel frustrated when they don't get what they want, but not everyone who feels frustrated also becomes hostile. Some engage in self-pity, others put themselves down. Still others react with disappointment (a more rational response). Some even see it as a challenge.

Frustration by itself doesn't cause anger, but the way you *view* frustration does. Extreme anger results when things don't happen as you want *and* you believe (a) that because you want things to be a certain way, they *must* and *should* be that way; (b) that it's *awful* and you *can't stand it* when they are not; and, therefore, (c) that you must find someone to *blame* and *punish*. In other words, people get hostile not because they have been frustrated, rather because they believe that they *should not* be frustrated. They impose fixed, absolute and indisputable rules on the world and the people in it, and see it as catastrophic and unbearable for these rules to be broken. They also believe that rule-breakers are not just people who do *bad things*, but are themselves *bad people* who need punishing and putting right.

Why would anyone hold such unrealistic beliefs? They arise mainly from the two types of fear we reviewed in Chapter 10.<sup>1</sup> The first is fear of discomfort. This stems from the notion that you can only be happy when your world is secure, safe and predictable. The second is fear of self-devaluation. This results, partly, from believing that you can only feel good about yourself if other people recognise, accept and like you.

Beliefs like these will make you overreact when you think others are breaking the rules. Why? Because you perceive their behaviour as a threat to either your sense of security, your self-image, or both.

### ***You feel your comfort is threatened***

Hostile anger is, foremost, the result of a frustrated demand. One of your 'rules for living' has been broken. Something is happening other than how you think it should or must happen. Demands like the following will be involved in anger that arises from discomfort anxiety:

- 'I should be able to have the things I want, and act and live my life as I want to.'
- 'Other people should not do anything to frustrate me or deprive me of the things I want or believe that I need.'
- 'They must not disrupt the orderliness and security of my life.'
- 'When other people behave badly, I must get angry and let them know how I feel — otherwise they'll keep doing it and things will get worse.'

Do any of these ring a bell for you? Because they are stated quite bluntly, you may be tempted to deny them. But be honest with yourself — without thoughts like these, you are unlikely to get hostile.

Demands of this kind are often linked with catastrophising. Dean, for instance, told himself that if a meal wasn't ready on time, this was the ultimate in inconsiderate behaviour and the end of the world because it meant the household was falling apart. In reality, things weren't anywhere near that bad. Often, what we react to are self-created illusions of disaster. Anger may be a bellow of outrage against an interruption of our ordered and predictable world. Underlying this 'low frustration-tolerance' are beliefs like, 'Because life should always be predictable and safe, it's *awful* and I *can't stand it* when things go wrong.'

### ***You feel your self-image is threatened***

If you believe, as many do, that you have to see yourself as 'worthwhile', then you will be oversensitive to any real or imagined slight from others. You will interpret their behaviour as belittling or discounting you. Annette, for instance, rated her family's inconsiderate behaviour as somehow meaning she was a 'nonentity'. It plugged into doubts she already had about herself. Such self-rating is usually combined with demands like the following:

- 'Other people should not criticise me, put me down or behave in any way which threatens my sense of self-worth.'
- 'They must always treat me fairly and justly and give me the love, approval and recognition that I need.'

Do you think that if people act unfairly toward you, this reflects on your worth as a person? What you are saying is that you cannot feel OK about yourself unless other people give you recognition, acceptance and love, and never reject you or behave badly toward you. When someone does something you dislike, you tell yourself, 'The way they're behaving shows they think I'm nothing. If that's true, then it makes me nothing.' Your anger (which is a defence against feeling bad about yourself) results from the additional thought, 'They shouldn't make me feel that way and they're swine for doing so.'

### ***Other anger-producing thoughts***

*Rating* the other person can add to the problem. If you label him or her (or them) in a negative and absolute manner — 'bitch', 'hypocrite', 'lazy' — this will fuel your hostility by making you think that you are somehow justified in being angry.

Misinterpretations (*distortions of reality*) can initiate the demand–hostility cycle. A common example is *mind-reading* — thinking that you can fathom other people's motives for what they do. You are more likely to get angry with others if you tell yourself that their actions were deliberate and calculated. You can make this worse with

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<sup>1</sup> All references to 'Chapters' in this article refer to the book *Choose to be Happy* from which the article was adapted (details on last page).

*personalising* — thinking that they are trying to get at you in particular.

Watch for *fortune-telling* — predicting that if things aren't as they 'should' be, bad things will happen. Your resulting discomfort will, in turn, feed the demand that people and things must be a certain way if disaster is to be avoided.

*Filtering* may lead you to see only negatives and view yourself as powerless to control what is going on. This will contribute to your anxiety, and you will get angry by blaming others for your feeling of weakness.

*Emotional reasoning* can fuel the blaming process. If you tell yourself that because you are angry this proves someone must have done something wrong, you justify the anger in your own mind. If you are inclined to moralise about anger, emotional reasoning can also contribute to a train of thought like, 'I'm angry, I shouldn't be angry, it's awful to be angry, and I must punish the people who made me angry.' In effect, you get angry about being angry. Human beings often observe their own feelings in this way and then develop additional feelings about the original ones.

To summarise, when looking for the thoughts involved in an angry episode, ask yourself these questions:

1. In what ways might I be misreading what is happening or *distorting reality*, e.g. mind-reading, personalising, fortune-telling, filtering and emotionally reasoning?
2. What *demands* (shoulds and musts) am I making? Am I telling myself that other people must never do anything to frustrate my wants or disrupt my sense of order and security?
3. How am I *rating* the person or people I'm angry with?
4. In what way am I seeing things as a threat to my self-image? How might I be rating *myself*?
5. What am I telling myself I *can't stand* because it is disrupting my life and frustrating me, or threatening my sense of self-worth?

## Replacing your anger-producing thoughts

Is there a more rational way to respond to events and circumstances you dislike? Yes: respond to frustration with the third type of anger mentioned earlier — *constructive* anger.

Constructive anger involves moderate emotions like irritation, annoyance, dissatisfaction, displeasure and disappointment. Sure, these are still angry feelings — but they won't cause you to lose your head. Constructive anger also involves moving beyond feeling angry to acting on it — in other words, doing something about the events and circumstances you dislike.

How do you make the change? Begin by giving up any moralising about your anger. Moralising is pointless, because anger is neither 'good' nor 'bad' — it is just an emotion. And it is more useful to assess emotions in terms of their effects than it is to sermonise about them.

It is quite reasonable to feel displeased about things you don't like. It makes no sense to feel good when you don't get what you desire, or things aren't as you want them to be. Anger can be constructive when it energises you to change situations you are unhappy with. Anger only becomes a problem when it turns into hostility, grows out of proportion and takes you over; so see anger as being neither 'good' nor 'bad'. Evaluate your own feelings of anger in a *practical* way. Is it helping? Is it motivating you to change whatever you are unhappy with?

The next step is to tackle the demands that underlie your hostility and replace them with preferences. If you don't get what you think you *need* or *must have*, or something doesn't happen as you think it *should*, you will be prone to going over the top. But when a *want, desire* or *preference* isn't met, you are more likely just to feel disappointed or annoyed.

To help yourself move from demanding to preferring, ask, 'Where is it written that people should behave in certain ways, that I must never suffer bad feelings, that I need love and respect and others should give them to me, and that things generally should be the way I want?' Recognise that, in the real world, some of the time you get what you want, some of the time you don't.

When you identify the underlying rules that keep creating your anger, there are two questions you can ask. First, 'Is this rule still valid, or is it now outdated or irrelevant?' For some help with this, see the check list in Chapter 6 (page 42). Second, 'What about the rules I feel *are* still valid?' Well, you can keep your ideals — you don't have to give up your values and forget about things which are important to you. All you do is turn them from *demands* into *preferences*.

Dean, for instance, used to get angry when he wanted sex but his wife didn't; so he learned to see it as disappointing to be sexually frustrated, rather than telling himself it was a major deprivation he shouldn't have to suffer. He didn't have to stop *wanting* regular sex. He just changed it from a 'need' into a desire.

As for Annette, she came to accept that family members are human and will, therefore, act in inappropriate ways at times. This reduced her disabling hostility, leaving her free to be assertive and ask for some changes.

If you expect human beings to act imperfectly and the world to be less than fair, you are simply staying in touch with reality. You don't have to

agree with the way things are or stop trying to make changes. Just avoid any demands that past and present realities not exist when you know they already do, then you will avoid unnecessary emotional pain. Remember: your demands will hurt you more than they will others.

You can also reduce your hostility by disputing the idea that people are what they do. How is it that someone who *behaves* stupidly, unfairly or in a bastardly way *becomes* stupid, unfair or a bastard? Condemning the total person because of one action is like saying a car is useless because the radio doesn't work.

Deal with your own insecurity. Confront the idea that if people behave unfairly toward you it is a challenge to your worth as a person. This kind of thinking shows that you are relying on other people always liking and accepting you in order to feel good about yourself. Deal with the underlying problem, the idea that you have to be a 'worthy' person. Learn how to accept yourself (Chapters 7 and 14 will help you with this). Make sure, too, that you accept yourself angry and all. As we saw earlier, anger is not a moral issue. If you down yourself for getting angry, and rate yourself as an 'angry person', you risk living down to your label.

Is the sky really going to fall in? You *can* stand it when things aren't as you want. After all, you are still here to tell the tale! Remind yourself that although it may be unpleasant, it is not the end of the world when things don't go right or when someone behaves badly.

Again, however, keep in touch with reality. Don't try to tell yourself negative events are quite all right. This won't work, because you know it isn't true. View adverse circumstances as uncomfortable, unpleasant, disappointing or annoying — but not as disastrous or intolerable. If worry contributes to your angry reactions (as it does for many people), see Chapter 10.

If you can, recheck your interpretations. Did the other person in fact do what you are blaming them for? If they did, how do you know what goes on in their mind and what their real motivations were? How do you know they were trying to get at you? Try to think of alternative motives for their behaviour. Remember, though — don't just settle for questioning interpretations. Concentrate mainly on the *ratings* that are the main cause of your hostile anger — the demanding, catastrophising and labelling of other people and yourself.

## Acting against hostility

### *Techniques for interrupting hostile anger*

Now it is time to put your new rational beliefs into practice. As a starting point, you may want to know how to interrupt your anger after it has be-

gun. Keeping a diary as described earlier is one way—it can help by making you stop and think. Here are some more action strategies to help you check angry episodes before they get out of hand:

- Time out. If aggressive hostility — especially violence — is a problem for you, use the time-out technique. It is an effective and well-proven way to quickly interrupt the anger cycle. Talk (in advance) to your partner or others with whom you would like to use time out. Explain the technique to them and obtain their agreement to cooperate. It works like this:
- When you detect the early signs of hostile anger, tell the other person how you are feeling; then leave the room, and don't return until you have cooled down (about an hour seems right for most people). Do something physical, like going for a brisk walk or run. Don't drive or drink alcohol. When you are ready to come back, return and check in with the other person and offer to talk about what happened. Sometimes it will help to do a self-analysis before you reopen the discussion. You can get your thoughts sorted out and deal with any irrational beliefs likely to set you off again.
- Keep in mind that the purpose of time out is to stop an angry response from escalating, not to avoid discussing uncomfortable issues. You and the other person may agree to postpone discussing the problem until another day, but don't make a habit of leaving issues unresolved, otherwise they will only mount up.
- Handle any personal states that trigger or aggravate aggressiveness. If you are more likely to lose your cool when you are tense, worried or tired, do something about these tendencies. If you are often tired, look for the causes. Are you unfit? Are you trying to achieve too much in a day? Are you drinking too much alcohol? Don't just drift along — do something about it.
- When the body is physically tense, you are more likely to fly off the handle. Relaxing can help reduce your arousal level. The trick is to 'let your body go' whenever you feel yourself becoming angry and tense. See Chapter 10 for advice on how to relax.
- Reward yourself for avoiding hostility. Make a contract with yourself or the others you live with to take a reward if you have, say, a full day without behaving aggressively. The reward can be anything you find pleasurable.
- Accept the consequences of aggressive hostility. If you have behaved aggressively, do what you can to put it right. This may involve fixing things you break, comforting people upset over your behaviour, or apologising. As well as helping repair the damage, this will help you see that aggressiveness isn't worth it.

- Analyse angry incidents. The most effective long-term solution is to do a self-analysis as soon as possible after every angry episode. This will show you what thoughts tend to make you overreact, and before long you will be able to identify these at an earlier stage. Patience and consistent hard work will pay off. If your anger is the passive type, do an analysis while you are still inwardly stewing. This will help you feel better, and free you to do something about whatever it is you are stewing over.
- Ask the other person for their point of view. Part of assertively communicating with others is to find out what is going on for them. Check whether you are misreading their motives. If possible, ask them directly. Listen to what they say without arguing until they have fully explained their point of view. Even if you end up disagreeing, to understand the other's viewpoint can at least make it easier to 'live and let live'.
- Negotiate a solution. Assertiveness will help you work toward solutions to your concerns which everyone can live with. This may mean compromising, but it is often possible to reach a deal which is an improvement on how things have been until now. Keep in mind, though, that there will be some things you cannot change, so make sure you recognise and deal with any demands. Then, when you don't get what you want, you will at least be able to hack it without excess pain.

### ***Changing the things you dislike***

As well as interrupting your hostile anger, take steps to deal with the triggering events and circumstances. Use your frustration about something as energy to change it. Here are some action strategies to help you move from people condemning to problem solving:

- Do something about problems before they get out of hand. Don't sit on resentments, concerns or disagreements. Address the little things as they occur — before they become big things. If you talk to other people at an early stage, you will have fewer reasons to get hostile in the first place.
- Assert yourself in a level-headed manner. Communicate assertively with the people involved. Share with them what you are concerned about and what you would like to see changed. Responsible assertiveness will increase your chances of getting what you want. Assertiveness is not aggression; rather, it involves saying what you think, feel and want in an honest and direct fashion, while respecting other people and taking into account their feelings and interests. See Chapter 15 for help with this.

Once again, analyse your irrational thinking. While the preceding action strategies will often help you improve your circumstances, they won't deal with the underlying cause of your hostility. Deal with those irrational ideas that you need to be 'worthy' and other people must never do anything to make you feel unworthy, and you should not have to endure the awfulness and discomfort of frustration. Analysing your angry episodes on a regular basis, using a procedure like Rational Self-Analysis, is the most effective way to achieve fundamental and lasting change.

Note, too that the self-analysis technique is as relevant to dealing with resentments from the past as it is to handling angry episodes in the present. If you are sitting on bad feelings about something that happened 40 years ago, analyse them. Don't hurt yourself any longer over things that are gone.

## **From hostility to constructive anger**

To keep anger under *your* control, change what you tell yourself. Compare the two lists below:

### ***Hostility-Causing Beliefs***

I can't feel good about myself unless others recognise, accept, and love me.

Others must never do anything to devalue me.

I can only be happy when life is secure, safe, and predict-able.

### ***Rational Alternatives***

Relying on the behaviour of other people to feel good is too risky. The only sure way is to learn to accept myself.

The actions of others can't 'devalue' me. I don't magically change because of what others say or do

I can try to make my life safe up to a point, but total stability is impossible. Best, then, I learn how to stand it when things go unexpectedly wrong.

I should be able to have the things I want, and live my life as I choose to.

Other people should never be have in ways that frustrate or deprive me, or upset the stability of my existence.

If the world were a better place I wouldn't need to get upset.

If I didn't get mad then things would never change.

Anger helps me keep others in line.

People should always behave in a correct and right fashion.

People who behave badly are bad people and they deserve blame and punishment.

People only do things to frustrate me.

I wouldn't be human if I didn't lose my cool.

Anger is evil and destructive.

It's OK to want things my way (and try to get it), but it's not a law of the universe. It's disappointing when things go wrong, but I can stand it - especially if I avoid demanding and catastrophising.

I'd prefer it if people didn't do things I dislike. But, in real life, they sometimes do! Anyway, it's not their actions which frustrate me - it's my demanding thoughts.

Unfortunately, the world is not a better place. But I can avoid being upset about this fact - by changing the way I view it.

Getting mad disables me. I'm more likely to change things by keeping my head and being assertive rather than aggressive.

Do I want others to co-operate with me only out of fear? What happens when they learn to stand up to me? I'd be better to negotiate their willing co-operation.

In real life, people don't always behave correctly. No amount of demanding is going to make this reality go away. Anyway, who decides what's right?

People are not what they do. *Behaving* badly doesn't make a bad *person* - just a person who sometimes behaves badly.

Am I god, that I can see into the inner recesses of other's minds and discern their motivations?

Just because something is human doesn't make it desirable. Anyway, to be reasonable and understand someone else's viewpoint is also human.

Anger is neither good nor bad - it's just an emotion. I can choose to express it constructively rather than destructively.

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## A quick summary: How to handle angry episodes

When anger is getting out of control, it can be hard to think rationally. To help at such times, here is a check list of the steps to take:

1. Acknowledge your anger. Don't deny that you are feeling hostile.
2. Admit that it is irrational.
3. Take responsibility for your anger. Recognise that you are creating it.
4. Don't moralise about the fact you are angry.
5. If necessary, interrupt your anger by using time out, relaxation or any other way to distract yourself until you calm down.
6. Talk over, in an assertive (rather than aggressive) way, whatever it is you are unhappy about: (a) explain what you are concerned about, (b) find out the other person's point of view, and (c) negotiate a solution.
7. At some stage, during or after the episode, fully analyse the irrational thoughts which created your anger in the first place. Look for shoulds and musts, awfulising and can't-

stand-it-itis, ratings of the other person and any self-downing. Retain any realistic wishes, but dispute your demands and turn them into preferences.

## Overcoming the blocks to change

It isn't easy to get rid of hostility. One of the main reasons for this is that hostility is based on self-righteous demands. We are convinced that our way of looking at things is the right way, and few of us are keen to surrender our 'rightness'.

The answer, as already stated, is to analyse your thinking when you feel burned up, or as soon as possible thereafter. In the latter instance this may seem like locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, but you will be chipping away at the underlying rules which create your anger, and with time you will find yourself overreacting less and less.

Another block is the belief that you need to get worked up before you can change things. Sure, moderate anger can energise; but getting hostile stops you thinking clearly, so you are less able to

act constructively. Furthermore, because of the moralising which underlies hostility ('People should not behave the way they do'), you can get stuck in the groove of rating people rather than solving problems.

Do you worry that you would be less human if you were not flying off the handle? Remind yourself that hostility is indeed human — along with depression, anxiety, alcoholism, cancer, war and unemployment. Being human doesn't make these things any more desirable.

Another block to giving up hostile anger is that you might be getting something out of it you are loath to do without. Are you, for instance, trying to control other people by flying off the handle? Stimulating guilt or fear is a common way to manipulate people. Or do you lose your cool to protect yourself against feeling bad? No one likes to think they are a failure, and blaming someone else when things go wrong is one way to feel better — perhaps even superior — about yourself.

Are you afraid to get close to others out of fear you will get hurt? Staying angry toward someone can give you an excuse to keep your distance without admitting to yourself that you feel inse-

cure. Maintaining anger may also be a way to avoid the pain of change. Thinking that the world should treat you fairly can lead to self-pitying anger which protects you from looking at yourself.

As you become aware of the psychological 'gains' you get from being angry, tackle the problem areas concerned. Work on your self-downing, fear of intimacy and avoidance of change. For further help, check out Chapters 6 (on demanding), 7 (on self-rating), 10 (worry), 11 (guilt), 15 (assertiveness) and 16 (perfectionism).

### ***Keep anger in perspective***

In this chapter we have considered mainly excessive anger, but don't forget that anger can be functional — if it is under your control and kept in perspective, and if you are going to do something constructive with it. I hope that working through these pages will help you feel more confident about being in charge.

As you work on your anger, then, keep in mind that it isn't a moral issue. It is a practical one. Anger can damage, but it can also help. Why not give up any idea that it is right or wrong and, instead, learn to evaluate your anger according to its results?

Did you find this article helpful? You may wish to read the book from which it was adapted:

### ***Choose To Be Happy: Your step-by-step guide***

by

**Wayne Froggatt (1993 / 2003)**

Also, by the same author:

***FearLess: Your guide to overcoming anxiety(2003)***

***Taking Control: Manage stress to get the most out of life (2006)***

(all published by HarperCollins, Auckland)

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