

Anger Management Module 5 - The Aggression Cycle

On Page 21 of the workbook, the discussion of the Aggression Cycle begins. During this module, you will use what you have already learned and reviewed to help identify and manage the aggression cycle. Using the anger meter, mindfulness and awareness, and breathing techniques, you can slow the progression of the cycle, and gain skills in stopping it before it reaches uncontrollable levels.

Episodes of anger consist of three definable phases: buildup, explosion, and aftermath. These are the phases of the aggression cycle. Recall that in previous modules, we discussed cues that can help you recognize that anger is building. These cues are warning signs, and signal that a buildup may be occurring. During this phase, you have the best opportunity to stop the buildup in its tracks and avoid the possibility of an explosion. The tools and techniques previously discussed should be employed to successfully prevent explosive anger (distraction, breathing, time outs, self-talk, etc.). Avoiding the explosion means preventing the aftermath and potential consequences that can be life-damaging (legal issues, loss of relationships, loss of job) and painful (shame, guilt, regret).

We have used the Anger Meter in previous lessons. This should be used consistently, even on a daily basis, as a tool to measure your day to day experience of anger and emotional upset. As you look at the meter, understand that the points on the meter that are below 10 represent the buildup phase of the aggression cycle. The explosion is the 10, representing loss of control that ultimately may lead to verbal or physical aggression and negative consequences.

Review the Aggression Cycle on page 22. Notice the examples of things you may notice during the buildup phase. These are the cues that were previously discussed – physical cues (increased heart rate, getting flushed and hot, clenched fists, pacing), cognitive cues (violent or aggressive fantasies and images, hostile thoughts and self-talk), emotional cues (the feelings underlying the anger such as hurt, jealousy, etc.). Can you see how learning to be an observer of these cues will help you arrest the buildup and eventual explosion?

On Page 23, review the **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** technique. After reading through the instructions, get comfortable in a chair, and read through them again. This time, follow the instructions to practice the technique. After practicing this technique a couple of times, try doing it on your own with your eyes closed. Notice the sensations in your muscles, and embrace the relaxation.

When you are ready to move on, complete the exercise on Page 24.

Anger Management Module 6 – Cognitive Restructuring

On Page 27 of the workbook, the A-B-C-D Model is outlined. Understanding this model is important, as it can be useful not only for managing anger, but for improving your response to all sorts of issues. When we are upset by something, it is not the event itself that causes us problems. Our issues arise because of our underlying beliefs and our interpretations about the event. Challenging these beliefs and considering alternative interpretations of the event will help to avoid reactions that cause negative consequences.

In short, when there is an activating event (the “A” in the model), we view that event through a filter – the filter is our belief system, our view of the world (“B”) – and then we react accordingly. Let's say that as a result of many experiences, I have developed a belief that people will let me down. Now, a friend cancels plans at the last minute. For most, this is a minor inconvenience, and creates minimal upset. But based on my beliefs, it confirms my view of the world. I start a buildup that includes negative self-talk (“he/she did that on purpose – why did they want to hurt me like this?”, “that is so typical, I'm furious about this!”, etc.), and start to experience emotional consequences (“C”). If I fail to dispute these beliefs and interpretations (“D”), the buildup continues and I may react angrily and potentially lose a friend or experience other consequences. In this case, I can dispute the belief (“This isn't personal – something just came up just like they said”). Our automatic thinking is a result of firmly held beliefs. The idea is to challenge these beliefs by replacing the automatic thoughts with self-statements that will de-escalate the situation and our thought processes. Having done so, you can take a more realistic and healthy view of the event.

Another approach to managing anger and emotional upset is called “thought-stopping”. It can be used quickly as an alternative to the A-B-C-D model. When experiencing a reaction to a red-flag event, you tell yourself to stop thinking the thoughts that are upsetting you. You may tell yourself, “I need to stop thinking about this, it is only upsetting me and will lead to trouble if I let it continue”, or “Don't go there”. When using thought-stopping, you are not disputing your beliefs and reactions, you are looking to stop your thoughts in their tracks. Later, you may return to the A-B-C-D Model to break things down further. Some people find it helpful to not only use self-talk to stop thoughts, but to imagine an image that helps – for example, you may visualize a stop sign.

Review the material in the workbook, and complete the exercises on page 27 and 28. Don't forget to also complete the Monitoring Anger for the Week section starting on page 29. Congratulations, you have completed more than half of the modules!