

Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Anger Control Problems  
(Treatment suggestions from the work of Deffenbacher, Novaco, Meichenbaum)

1. Enhanced personal awareness.
2. Use of time out (TO) procedures.
  - a) identify early and interruptible cues
  - b) not view taking time out as rolling over, giving in, or selling out; view TO as an opportunity to exert control (use sports metaphor)
  - c) remove self for a period of time (e.g., 20 to 30 minutes, depends on the situation)
  - d) rehearse exit lines
    - "I need some time to think it over."
    - "I'll get back to you tomorrow."
    - "I am getting angry now and I will say things I do not mean."
    - "I need some time to calm down."
  - e) handle others' possible negative reactions to time out
    - "Call me what you will, but I am not going to get caught up in this."
    - "I need to get my act together."
  - f) role play and imagery rehearse the use of time out procedures
  - g) give oneself permission to take time out
    - "I am getting pissed off. It is okay to take time out."
    - "Let my feet do the talking, not my hands."
  - h) discuss and practice what to do during time out (e.g., not brood, not think about retaliation, curse, but rather use anger reduction procedures)
  - i) call time in (not avoid situation)
3. Use applied relaxation coping skills to reduce arousal. Practice over 6 to 12 sessions, use homework, concern about adherence, practice in nonstressful situations and with a hierarchy of imaginal coping scenes.
4. Cognitive restructuring procedures.
  - a) attend to catastrophic interpretation of events (use of dramatic terms, "awful", "can't stand it")
  - b) demanding and coercive language ("shoulds, oughts, have to, need to")
  - c) overgeneralizations ("always, never"), negative labels ("hopeless, stupid")
  - d) categorical thinking (inflammatory labels such as "jerk, slob, asshole, SOB")
  - e) misattributions (one track thinking)
  - f) either-or thinking
5. Problem-solving.
6. Self-instructional training.
7. Use of humor.
8. Skill building (listening, communicating, assertiveness, child-rearing, supervisory skills).
9. Relapse prevention.
10. Follow through.

## Self-thoughts to Control Anger

### Deffenbacher (1988)

Our thoughts play a key part in becoming angry and increasing our anger. Below are listed several types of thoughts that increase anger. Following each are some helpful alternatives which help manage anger and deal appropriately with frustrating, irritating, and disappointing situations.

1. Catastrophizing Thoughts: This is the tendency to make things worse than they are, i.e., terrible, awful, devastating, etc. You then respond angrily and perhaps attackingly as if these things were that bad.

Examples:

- This is the worst thing that's ever happened.
- I'll lose my job if I don't get this on time.
- I just can't stand the way that he/she is talking to me.
- This is terrible!

Helpful self-thoughts for catastrophizing:

- It's not the end of the world. It's frustrating.
- It's just not worth getting all angry about.
- I'll just make the best out of this situation that I can.
- Hang in there. It'll be over soon.
- Getting all bent out of shape doesn't help. Then I have two problems. What I am dealing with and being all angry.
- Hang loose and cope. Don't let it get you down. It's not worth it.
- Why should I get all upset? Who will know or care in a week anyway.
- Look, I'll do what I can. If it works, great. If not, well I did the best I can. No need to go crazy about it.
- So what if I don't get what I want?. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. There's no guarantee. No reason to blow up about it. Stay cool.

2. Demanding/Coercing Thoughts: This is the tendency to make your wants into demands for yourself or the rest of the world. It is the tendency to think that things "should," "ought," "need to be," "have to," "are expected to be," "must be," etc. be certain ways. When you demand that people or situations be a certain way, then you tend to become very angry and upset. You often feel justified in your anger when the demand is not met.

Examples:

- He/she should have known that would hurt my feelings.
- They should have done that.
- This has gotta be done by 5:00 p.m.
- It's not fair! (implying that it ought to be)

But who appointed you a god who gets to tell others how to live or be? Actually, only you did! Frankly, there is no absolute reason why things "should" be the way that you want, other than that you want it. Stay with your wants, desires, and preferences. It is frustrating, disappointing and inconvenient when you do not get what you want. Stay with that. You can cope with that.

Helpful self-thoughts for demanding/coercing:

- There's no one right way; we just have a difference of opinion.
- Look, I want it this way and am going to stick up for what I think, but they don't have to do it my way.
- I can't expect people to always act the way I want them to.
- I don't like this. It's not going my way. So what am I going to do about it? Getting all righteous won't help. How am I going to handle the hassle. That's it, focus on it as a problem to be solved.

- I don't really know why he/she did that. Maybe I need to ask him/her.
- So I don't get what I want. So what's that big deal. Sure, it's frustrating (disappointing, hurts, is a hassle, etc.), but I can cope.
- Sure it's not "right" from my point of view, but they have "rights" too. Who says they've got to agree with me?

3. **Overgeneralized Thoughts:** This is the tendency to go way beyond the facts in our thinking, to make things far bigger than they really are. These thoughts take irritation or frustration and blow them out of proportion, making you more angry.

Examples of overgeneralized thoughts:

- That ruins the whole evening (time).
- He/she is always inconsiderate.
- This always happens to me when I am in a hurry.
- I'm never going to get over this.

Rarely are things "always" or "never" a certain way, even though they may be negative in a given situation. Stay with that. You can cope with a specific situation. Big broad labels are rarely true, e.g., "worthless", "worst", "total junk", etc. Try to stay with the realistic negative feelings and cope with that, rather than blowing them out of proportion and going way beyond what is true.

Helpful self-thoughts for overgeneralized thinking:

- What's really true? So it's frustrating. Stay cool and cope with that. It's only this hassle in this situation, nothing more.
- It's frustrating, but I don't need to make a federal case out of it.
- This irritates me, but that's all. I don't have to let it get to me.
- All things considered, this is pretty small.
- This is negative, but other things are going positive.
- Stay with the situation. I'm the one who really suffers when I get really angry and out of control.
- No big deal. No need to make myself all upset about this.

4. **Categorical Thinking:** This is the tendency to label situations in very extreme, angering terms. For example, labeling someone a "jerk," "slob," "bastard," "an ass," "son of a bitch," "worthless," "no good," etc. just cranks your anger up. Many of these expressions tend to be obscenities and carry with them extra anger automatically.

Examples of categorical thinking:

- That jerk (slob, son of a bitch, ass, etc.)...
- God damn it.
- That thing is just a worthless piece of crap.

These categorical labels and obscenities increase anger, but rarely are they true. Think for example of the two common meanings of the word "ass". One is a small horselike animal and the other the buttocks. Now what has that got to do with the person or situation to which it has been applied? Try to replace these with realistic, often negative descriptions.

Examples of helpful self-thoughts for categorical thinking:

- He/she is not an ass, just a person with whom I have a disagreement.
- God damn it? No, it's just frustrating and not the way I want, but I can cope with that.
- It's just broke, that's all.
- There I go "helling again." It's not hell, just a hassle. Hassles I can deal with.

5. **One-track Thinking:** This is the tendency to think of things only one way, often tending to personalize the reasons, rather than thinking about multiple reasons for why things happened the way that they did. If you hold a negative interpretation that is not true, your anger will follow at a higher level.

**Examples of one-track thinking:**

- He/she is doing that to get to me.
- They wouldn't have done that if they were my friends.
- It's all my (their) fault.

Sometimes your interpretation may be true. Staying with reality, this would lead to frustration, disappointment, hurt, loss, etc. However, often there are other reasons or explanations you have not thought of. Your anger may be at an inappropriate or exaggerated level if you had all the facts.

**Helpful self-thoughts for one-track thinking:**

- Don't jump to a conclusion. Check out the facts.
- Maybe they didn't know. I better check it out first, before going off half-cooked.
- I may not have all the facts.
- Getting angry does not help me figure out what went wrong.
- Where's my evidence that this is the only reason?
- Maybe there just "brain damaged" ("constipated" or some other humorous explanation).

## II. Helping the Client Change His or Her Automatic Thoughts and Learn a Different Thinking Strategy

As Hollon and Garber (1990) observe, cognitive restructuring procedures can be reduced to three general classes of questions that the therapist and client collaboratively consider:

- 1) Evidence-based questions -- therapist and client work together to help the client view his or her automatic thoughts as "hypotheses worthy of testing", rather than as "God given assertions" or as incontrovertible facts.
  - review data or so-called already existing evidence at hand. For example, client says "I am a nobody" and the therapist plays "Columbo" conveying confusion between that automatic thought and other data that the client has offered indicating competence (therapist is specific in noting these). Note, the client being depressed and seeking help can be reframed as a strength ("in touch with feelings").
  - encourage the client to collect additional evidence by running behavioral experiments.
- 2) Alternative-based questions - therapist helps the client to generate and consider alternative explanations for events in addition to those he or she first adopted. For example, "Any other possible explanations for how he reacted?"
- 3) Implications-based questions - therapist helps the client examine whether his or her initial belief, even if true, necessarily implies everything that, at first, it seemed to imply.
  - Use a "downward arrow technique" as the therapist may ask the following questions:
    - a) "Suppose that indeed did happen to you, what would it mean to you?"
    - b) And if that were true, why would that be so upsetting?"
    - c) Well, assume that happens. Why would that be so upsetting?"
    - d) And if it is true, that you haven't fully done X, what does that mean to you?"
    - e) Perhaps, you can ask yourself such questions as "If it were true, why would it be so upsetting to me? What would it mean to me?"

Therapist helps the client realize how he or she may unnecessarily magnify negative implications.

The therapist can use metaphors such as, "depression acts as a prism, a set of blunders coloring how you see things, or introduce the metaphor of "prejudice" (as suggested by Christine Padesky) to convey the nature of cognitive restructuring efforts.

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