



UNIT-12

Anger Management

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Recognize how anger affects your body, your mind, and your behaviour.
- ✓ Use the five-step method to break old patterns and replace them with a model for assertive anger.
- ✓ Use an anger log to identify hot buttons and triggers.
- ✓ Control his/her own emotions when faced with other peoples' anger.
- ✓ Identify ways to help other people safely manage some of their repressed or expressed anger.
- ✓ Communicate with others in a constructive, assertive manner.

Unit 12

What is Anger?

About Anger

Anger is a universal experience; we all get angry from time to time. This course is not about teaching you to never become angry, or to hide your anger. It really is about managing your anger.

You don't have to be a psychologist to know that managing our anger is something we need to do well. The goal of anger management is to reduce your emotional feelings and the physiological arousal that anger provokes. You can't get rid of, or avoid, things or people who anger you, but you can learn to control what you do about it.

What we really want to do is to have a new type of relationship with our emotions; a relationship where we manage them rather than letting them manage us.

The most instinctive way to express anger is to respond aggressively. It is a natural way to respond to a threat, and it inspires powerful feelings and behaviors which help us fight back and defend ourselves if we are under attack. A certain amount of anger, then, is necessary for survival. In addition, **sometimes we resist saying what needs to be said** because we do not want to upset the status quo. However, without some degree of conflict, there may be no change or growth whatsoever, and that isn't good either.

Self-awareness is a key element for managing your own anger. The use of anger management skills presupposes that you know when you are angry and recognize that anger as a cue that something is wrong. Expressing your anger in an assertive, but not aggressive, way is safe and healthy.

The Five Dimensions of Anger

To understand and develop the skills associated with anger management, think of anger as five interrelated dimensions, all operating simultaneously.



For example, what you think when you are angry influences how you feel, how you feel when you are angry influences how you communicate, how you communicate affects how you think, and how you think affects how you behave.

Test Your Knowledge

Think of your own anger.

Can you identify the things that you normally think, feel, say, and do when you are angry?

How does the world look to you when you are angry?

The Costs of Anger

In addition to its cost to your relationships, **anger can also be bad for your health**. Think of a garden hose. Let's say you have two sizes: a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch and a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch hose. If you hook the $\frac{1}{2}$ inch hose up to the outside water faucet, you get a stream of water. However, if you hook up the $\frac{1}{4}$ inch hose, you get a

much stronger stream of water because the pressure has been raised. When we get angry, our blood vessels constrict and it's just like we switched from a ½ inch to a ¼ inch hose.

It's clear that **we need an outlet for anger**. Some of us keep our anger locked up inside us and deal with it by not thinking about it. Other people tend to explode when they are angry. Neither outlet is very constructive, so we want to find other ways to deal with this powerful emotion.

At least in part, **our anger is learned**. We've learned how to cope with our frustrations and our hurts this way, and it has worked, at some level. In some cases, we've learned that being angry and aggressive is not appropriate, and we've learned that expressing anxiety or depression are more acceptable. Either way, we're not managing our anger or channeling it in a healthy way. Sometimes we learn angry reactions, too. If our families are disruptive, chaotic, rude, or troubled, we can have a difficult time learning how to communicate our emotions.

We used to say that letting our anger out was a good idea. This is no longer considered safe, however. When people act out in anger, they can actually escalate anger and aggression, and are not doing anything to resolve the situation. Consider the costs and pay-offs to anger, and then learn strategies to handle your anger well.

What Are Your Anger Pay-Offs?

Could there really be a payoff to anger? Yes! There is usually some sort of pay-off for us: people do what we ask them to do, our tension is released, and for a brief moment we feel better, or we feel we've gotten revenge. One thing you should try to do is figure out what your pay-off is.

Payoffs are hidden reasons why we keep doing things that are damaging or unhelpful. If you often use anger to try to resolve situations, there may be a payoff behind your response. This worksheet is to help you to identify these payoffs and how to change them for the better. Below are some of the hidden reasons, or payoffs, why people don't change. There may be others.

1. **Feeling Powerful**
The quick hit of adrenaline that comes from blame, violence or hurting others. Wanting to have power over another person.
2. **Self-pity** Indulging in feeling sorry for yourself.
Feeling like you are the victim. If I am the victim, I have a right to retaliate.
3. **Self-righteousness** Needing to be 'right'.
Feeling that it is a weakness to admit you are wrong.
4. **Scared of being vulnerable/ insecure** Not admitting that you are sad, afraid or helpless - so you get angry instead.

Generally, people hold onto negative payoffs because they are missing a positive quality, feeling or experience. For instance, if you have a payoff of needing to feel powerful, what you may really need is a sense of personal confidence. As an example, if people are laughing at you may choose to feel powerful by throwing a punch. However, if you were personally confident enough, you would ignore the comment or laugh it off.

Exercise

Step 1: Identify which payoff you use most.

Think back to a recent angry moment you have had, with the idea of payoffs in mind. Reflect upon why you felt the anger and what the main payoff was. There may be more than one payoff. However, choose the first one that comes to mind.

Step 2: What is the antidote to your payoff?

Now you have identified your payoff, look for the positive quality, feeling or experience that you are really wanting. An example has been given, but you might like to add your own.

FEELING POWERFUL:

Are you really looking for personal confidence? Or

SELF PITY: Are you seeking love? Or

SELF RIGHTEOUS: Are you looking for a sense of self-esteem?

Or

INSECURE: Are you really needing to feel safe?

Or

Step 3: Finding ways to feel better about yourself

What can you do to create the positive quality, feeling or experience that does not require the angry payoff? Make sure it is achievable and realistic.

.....
.....
.....

Pay-Off List

Test Your Knowledge

For each anger pay-off below, do a mental inventory of relationships and situations in your life, such as anger with your family, friends, or co-workers; anger when driving; or anger at inanimate objects. See if that pay-off is in any way influencing or reinforcing your anger. If it is, write an example in the space provided.

Reduce stress

Hide emotional pain

Get attention

Punish and get revenge

Change the behavior of others/get people to do what you want

The Anger Process

What is the Process?

Anger is a two-step process:



First there is the **pain**. It might be emotional, like a feeling of loneliness, loss, or rejection. Or it might be physical, like a headache or a pain in your stomach. This is the fuel of anger. It's like a can of gasoline sitting there.

The second part of anger is the **trigger**, the match that sets the can of gasoline on fire.

Then there is the **anger itself**, which has three parts. (Remember the dimensions of anger that we referred to earlier.) Our **physical reactions** might include:

- Ñ Our heart beats faster
- Ñ Our pupils dilate
- Ñ We breathe faster
- Ñ Our face may redden
- Ñ Our legs might turn to jelly

All of this is because our body is preparing for fight or flight. Our **emotional reactions**, in addition to the anger, may include:

- Ñ Tears
- Ñ Sadness
- Ñ Pain
- Ñ Loneliness
- Ñ Depression

These emotional and physical reactions influence our **behaviour** when we are angry (both how we act and how we express our anger). This might involve:

- Ñ Swearing
- Ñ Yelling/speaking loudly
- Ñ Talking faster
- Ñ Smashing things
- Ñ Calling people names

This, of course, affects the remaining dimension: the way that we experience the world and the treatment that we receive from others.

Understanding Trigger Thoughts

Part of managing your anger is identifying what makes you angry and managing the root of the problem. Generally, there are two categories of things that make us angry: hot buttons and triggers.

- Ñ **Hot buttons** are things that are true about ourselves that we may feel ashamed of or try to pretend do not exist.
- Ñ **Triggers** are experiences that can remind us of (or have us relive) grief or traumas from the past.

Personal Hot Buttons

Do you know things about you that are true but you would prefer to avoid? When people make comments about things that we are ashamed of or that we try to deny, we say that they are “pushing our buttons.”

- Ñ “When did you become a race car driver?” (criticizing our driving)
- Ñ “Are you sure you should be eating that?” (criticizing our diet)
- Ñ “You don’t belong here.” (insulting our membership in a group or workplace)
- Ñ “Why don’t you learn to speak the language?” (insulting our command of the local language)

Depending on how well we have accepted our own shortcomings, and how we respond to people’s comments, you may have more or fewer hot buttons at different times of your life. A lazy Saturday afternoon that is interrupted by someone saying “You never do anything around the house,” can push a lazy button and a guilt button. You may start thinking, “Should I be cleaning that bathroom right now?”, or, “I knew I should have vacuumed before I sat down!”

Feeling bad about our bodies is a common hot button. You might secretly think, “I am too fat/skinny/pale/dark/ugly.” A comment from someone else can set us off.

Triggers

Have you ever had an experience that reminded you so powerfully of something else that you could remember everything about the original event? When people have survived a traumatic event, a small

thing can bring a memory flooding back. These triggers can be a smell, sound, emotion, gesture, or even a single word.

If you ask someone what they had for lunch last Tuesday, they may struggle to remember. However, in North America, asking someone what they were doing on 9/11 brings a barrage of memories, just as the assassination of John F. Kennedy did for the generation before. On a more pleasant note, if you hear the first line of a poem that you had to memorize in school and then find yourself reciting the entire verse, you have also just responded to a trigger.

Triggers are a powerful reminder when it comes to anger. A trigger can bring a memory of an argument or conflict flooding back, and all the physical effects (such as an increase in your heart rate, flushed face, or tense muscles) also recur. Even if you are not in the midst of the conflict, but observe it, the trigger can stimulate your memory.

Being aware of your triggers and how you behave when they occur are important steps in learning healthier behaviors.

Using an Anger Log

Using the Anger Log

An effective way to explore what your own triggers and hot buttons are, as well as your reactions, is to keep an anger log. Keeping an anger log will help you to become more aware of the number of times that you become angry, as well as what your reactions are. If you consciously commit to raising your emotional intelligence about anger, you will find that your reactions become more constructive. You can then focus on moving ahead rather than being stuck in a pattern of repeating unhealthy behaviors.

There are different terms for an anger log; some try to put a positive spin on it and call it something different. However, we are looking at managing anger as a positive development in your life, so calling it an anger log keeps it real and helps you to focus.

Each anger event gets a separate entry in your log. When you get really comfortable using the anger log, you can memorize it and use it to work through tough situations. For example, if something happens on your way to the bus and you would normally record it, you will find yourself going through the steps in the log quite naturally.

In order to remember the steps easily, you can use the acronym **SEFAC**, which stands for:

- Ñ Story
- Ñ Examine beliefs
- Ñ Feelings
- Ñ Actions
- Ñ Challenge

Anger Log Example

Date _____

Story

Describe what happened in less than three lines. If you write more than three lines, you will focus on the situation or the other person and actually become angrier.

Examine Beliefs

What beliefs, distorted thinking patterns, and judgments contributed to this situation?

Feelings

What feelings were you experiencing at the time? We know that you were angry, of course, but how would you describe it? What was the intensity like on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is not angry at all, and 10 is when you flew off the handle and had the scariest reaction you can imagine having?

Actions

What did you do about it? Here you can write more than three lines; develop your emotional intelligence as you expand your library of anger response options. This will also give you a concrete record of how you apply anger management techniques.

Challenge

This is a fun way to work through your anger. Challenge your own assumptions about the event. Look at the judgments that you are making. Talk out what happened, the actions you took (or will take if you cannot act immediately), and the healthiest way to resolve the problem.

Template

Date	
Story	
Beliefs	
Feelings	
Actions	
Challenge	

Considering Our Anger

Test your Knowledge

Let's get some practice using the anger log. To start, think of any incidents during the past week where you were angry. Now, choose the three most memorable instances, and complete an anger log for each of them.

Event One	
Date	
Story	
Beliefs	
Feelings	
Actions	
Challenge	

Event Two	
Date	
Story	
Beliefs	
Feelings	

Actions	
Challenge	

Event Three	
Date	
Story	
Beliefs	
Feelings	
Actions	
Challenge	

How Does Anger Affect Our Thinking

Is Anger the Best Response?

Sometimes we find ourselves responding to particular events with anger, and because we always respond with anger, we begin to think it is the event itself that is making you angry. However, the culprit isn't the event. It's how you interpret the event that makes you angry. We cannot physically respond to every person or event with anger: the law, social norms, and common sense place limits on how far we can let our anger go.

As well, **anger affects your thinking**. Memory, creativity, and concentration weaken. Your thoughts become accusatory, exaggerated, and rigid. You treat assumptions as facts; you may become irrational.

To help you determine whether anger is your best response, ask yourself: **Is my anger helping me or hurting me?**

If the answer is "hurting," it's a message that your anger is needless; it is making the situation worse. In these instances it's time to respond differently.

The art of anger management (being able to transform anger from a negative experience into a positive one) is learning how to use your thoughts and feelings and behaviors so they work for you, not against you.

Distorted Thinking

We know that how we think about things determines to a large degree what we experience, and this is particularly true about anger. Anger is a strong emotion and can quickly become irrational, even when it seems justified. Use cold, distant logic with yourself to avoid your thoughts becoming distorted. The most common forms of distorted thinking are:

- Ñ Magnifying
- Ñ Destructive labeling
- Ñ Imperative thinking
- Ñ Mind reading

Magnifying

This type of distortion turns the consequences of a negative event into a catastrophe.

For example, if you usually get angry when you are two minutes late for a meeting or miss a particular call, you are probably magnifying the problem. Ask yourself if you are making a mountain out of a

molehill. Do you have a tendency to take something that is unfortunate and turn it into the worst possible situation?

There are some things you can do to control your tendency to magnify a bad situation. These three steps can help you neutralize your anger:

- Ñ Make a realistic assessment of the situation. How bad is it really?
- Ñ Be very precise and accurate in the language you use to describe the bad situation. For example, this wasn't the worst restaurant you've ever eaten at. The soup was cold and service was slow.
- Ñ Look at the whole picture, not just the annoying piece.

Here are some **coping thoughts** that you can use:

- Ñ "Yes, this is frustrating but it's not the end of the world."
- Ñ "By next week, none of this will matter."
- Ñ "It's a setback; it's not worth getting all bent out of shape."

Destructive Labeling

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. When you use destructive labeling, you broaden one or two qualities into a negative, global judgment. Examples may include calling your boss a jerk, your girlfriend a hag, or your colleague a loser.

Destructive labeling creates and perpetuates anger because it forces you to focus on only the negative characteristics you find irritating in another person. Sometimes we label others in an effort to protect our own self-esteem. However, when you hear yourself labeling someone, step back and describe the annoying behavior with precision.

Here are some **coping thoughts** that you can use:

- Ñ "Why am I swearing?"
- Ñ "I feel frustrated and things aren't going the way I'd like them to, but I can cope."

Imperative Thinking

This is when you have a list of inflexible rules about how you and others should act. For example, "You should have called me back right away if you weren't interested."

Imperative thinking creates anger because it implies that we are entitled to get what we want in a specific situation, or that people should be the way we want them to be. Then, when our imperatives are violated, we think an injustice has taken place.

Violating our own self-requirements (for example, thinking, “I should have done a better job”) also creates anger because we perceive the violation as failure. Usually what this means is that we have unrealistically high expectations. This is a trait we often see in a chronically angry person.

Here are some **coping thoughts** that you can use:

- Ñ “I’m not being reasonable here.”
- Ñ If you use the words should, must, or always, stop yourself and ask, “Is that really true?”
- Ñ Try thinking of the situation from someone else’s perspective.

Mind Reading

With this type of distorted thinking, you rarely check out your presumptions. Instead, you act as if they were true. (For example, you may think, “If my co-worker respected me, he would have asked for my opinion. Since he doesn’t, I will ignore his input too.”) Clearly, we don’t have the power to read someone else’s mind. Often, these presumptions become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Here are some **coping thoughts** that you can use:

- Ñ “How do I know that this is true?”
- Ñ “What assumptions am I making?”

Conclusion

Most of what we’ve been doing is looking at your behavior over the long term and making you aware of what has been going on in your own mind. This includes the thoughts that trigger your anger, the distorted thoughts that can fuel your anger, and the thoughts we can use in place of these.

If you can get a handle on the type of self-talk or inner dialogue that goes on in your head all day, and have some different coping strategies, you will have made a big start toward getting your anger under control.

Understanding Behavior Types

Sometimes, understanding why someone is behaving in a particular way is enough to ease your anger a little. Let’s talk a bit about passive, manipulative, assertive, and aggressive behaviors.

Aggressive Behavior

Definition

- Ñ Needs and wants are taken care of in a forceful and self-serving way.

Characteristics

- Ñ Self-serving
- Ñ Demanding
- Ñ Dogmatic

- Ñ Competitive
- Ñ Pushy
- Ñ Uses intimidation, power, and status
- Ñ Insensitive
- Ñ Strong need to control and dominate others
- Ñ Fears rejection
- Ñ Impatient
- Ñ Temperamental

Major Consequences

- Ñ May accomplish personal desire and goals.
- Ñ Tends to alienate people, create distrust and tension, and undermine the ability to establish lasting and healthy relationships.

Manipulative or Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Definition

- Ñ Needs and wants are taken care of in an indirect, cunning, deceptive, and crafty way with ulterior motives in mind.

Characteristics

- Ñ Game player (using pouting, looking hurt, silence, dropping hints, flirting, giving or withholding attention or caring, and other indirect methods to manipulate people)
- Ñ Uses double messages (say one thing and mean another)
- Ñ Hides real feelings and intentions
- Ñ Inward feelings and outward expressions often incongruent
- Ñ Rebellious
- Ñ Gets defensive and angry when caught manipulating
- Ñ Strong need for approval and attention
- Ñ Insecure but wears façade
- Ñ Distrusts others

Major Consequences

- Ñ May be successful in manipulating others in indirect ways.
- Ñ Undermines credibility and trust.
- Ñ Causes them to lose touch with real self and real feelings.

Passive Behavior

Definition

- Ñ Needs and wants are taken care of by suppressing them or maneuvering others to take care of them.
- Ñ Also use manipulative behaviors to get others to take care of them.

Characteristics

- Ñ Denies needs, subordinates them to others, or manipulates others to take care of them
- Ñ Often plays martyr role
- Ñ Creates conditions in which others will take the lead or make decisions
- Ñ Follower
- Ñ Tries to do what they think others expect of them
- Ñ Lacks self-confidence
- Ñ Easily intimidated and controlled by others
- Ñ Indecisive
- Ñ Moody
- Ñ Occasionally cashes in on stored-up anger and feelings
- Ñ Uncertain about who they are

Major Consequences

- Ñ May result in some needs getting met.
- Ñ Often results in sacrificing needs, getting them met in inappropriate ways, and the loss of identity and ability to take care of self.

Assertive Behavior

Definition

- Ñ Needs and wants are taken care of by knowing, accepting, and acting on them in constructive, straightforward, and authentic ways.

Characteristics

- Ñ Caring
- Ñ Genuine
- Ñ Sensitive to the needs and feelings of others
- Ñ Selfless
- Ñ Expresses needs and feelings in constructive and straightforward ways
- Ñ Persistent without being offensive
- Ñ Levels and confronts from caring and reasonable position
- Ñ Good sense of timing and judgment about when to assert themselves
- Ñ Self-confident
- Ñ Calm in a crisis

Major Consequences

- Ñ Able to know and take care of needs in a constructive way without doing so at the expense of others.
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Managing Anger

Managing Anger

Coping

Strategies Test

Your

Knowledge

What coping strategies can you think of?

Sanctuary

Another coping strategy is to think of some place where you always feel calm and secure and confident. Picture it in your mind. Be able to describe this place.

Test Your Knowledge

What does it look like?

Do you associate any sounds with your sanctuary?

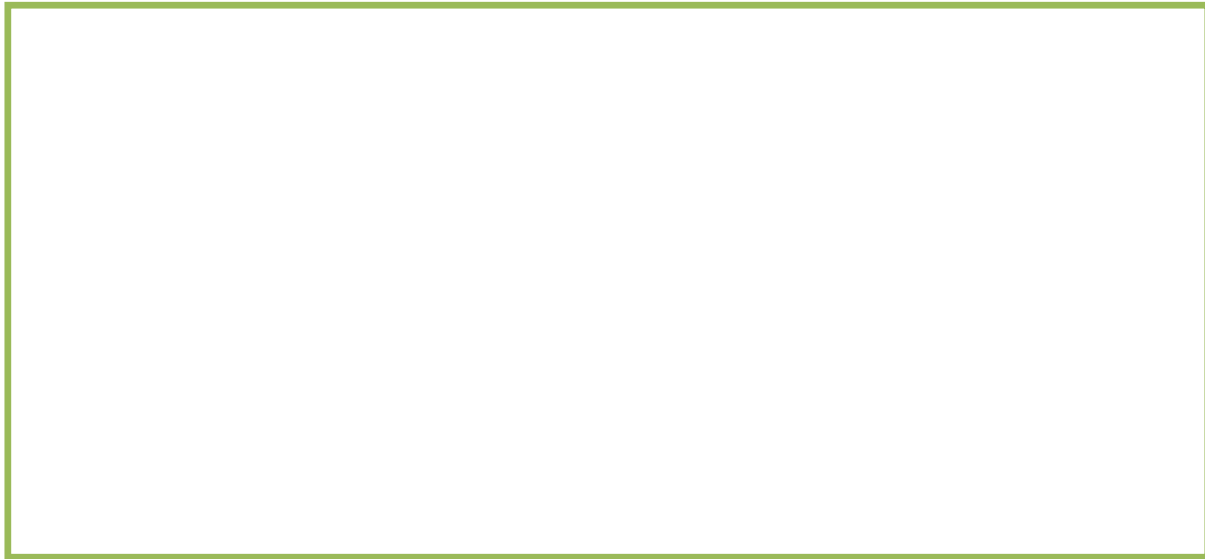


What does your sanctuary feel like?

What does your sanctuary smell like?

What are its emotional components? (Safety, calmness...)

Use this space to draw a picture if you would like.



Taking Care of Yourself

Give yourself permission to take a break when you sense that things are getting tough, or plan a break in your day when you need it most. For example, if things are hectic when you get home from work and you need time to detach from work, incorporate some down time before you get there. Take a 15 minute walk before you get home (perhaps get off the bus a few stops early) or head to the gym. That way when you get home, your mind is cleared and focused on the people there instead of things hanging over your head from work.

Here's another example. If you have kids and their rooms are a mess, instead of getting angry, shut the door. Don't say, "Your messy room makes me angry." The point is to keep yourself from getting angry, not to vent to your children. Then, establish rules and consequences so that your children clean up their own rooms.

Relaxation Techniques

It's essential that you learn to relax if you want to reduce your anger levels. If stress seems to be wearing you down and you are having trouble bouncing back, you may need to consult your doctor. However, for the usual day to day stressors that we encounter, here are some quick, easy ways that you can lower your stress levels quickly.

Deep Breathing

Loosen your clothes, close your eyes, mentally relax your body, and take ten or more deep breaths. Your goal is to breathe into the bottom of your lungs (where the oxygen is readily absorbed), not the usual upper lung breathing we do. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it move as you inhale to make sure

you are getting the air in good and deep. We call this **diaphragmatic breathing** because you are using your diaphragm muscle to breathe. When people are experiencing anxiety, they are most often breathing into the upper area of their lungs rather than the bottom.

Each time you exhale, count silently: “one,” after the first breath, “two,” after the second breath, etc., up to at least ten. If you lose count, or find yourself working on thoughts as they pass through your mind, start your count over again. When you are finished, you should feel more calm and relaxed. (Your blood pressure will go down temporarily too.) If you’re in a meeting, on the phone, or dealing with a customer, count in your head.

Visualize

Use positive imagery to boost your mood. In your mind, picture a place that you love. Feel the sunshine on your face, or the breeze on your skin. See the things that you love to see in great detail. If you are getting ready for a presentation or an interview, visualize yourself performing it perfectly. This way, when you get to the event your mind thinks you’ve done it before, so it will be even easier than the last time you did it. (This is a technique used by athletes and performance coaches.)

Music

Music has the power to soothe, or to give us energy. It actually has healing power. Find a type of music that relaxes you and play it when you need to calm down. When you feel tired and listless, play some rousing music (rather than relying on caffeine or other stimulants) to give you a pick-up.

Acupressure and Massage

Holding a fingertip to the point of most pain or tension and pressing very hard into the offending muscle for up to a minute can avert a headache or relieve tension. Have a friend or spouse learn how to do massage therapy and/or acupressure on tense muscles, since daily treatment is better than once or twice a month.

Laughter

Laughter is the best medicine of all. A good belly laugh can lower blood pressure, slow your adrenaline, and reverse the stomach acid that comes with negative responses. Be on the lookout for jokes and cartoons you can share with family and friends. For a smaller dose, find a cartoon or picture that always makes you smile and post it near your desk. (Just make sure it’s appropriate for all audiences!)

Replace Worry with Problem Solving

Focus on what you can do, and then go ahead and do it. Chronic worriers tend to focus on what they cannot do, what should be happening, or how things are going wrong. Replace worry with problem solving so that you identify where you can step in. Then, stop waiting for the perfect time and do it.

Resilience

Each stressful experience that you have prepares you to deal with one in the future. The more resilient you become, the less of an impact each of these events has on your mind and body. Lots of us go to great lengths to avoid stress, and although avoidance initially feels like you are doing alright, the reality is that stressful things come up in our life all the time. The better we are at handling them, the more resilient we become, and the healthier we can be.

Each stressful experience leads us into a cycle of confusion and anguish. If we stay with those feelings in an attempt to minimize the impact the stress will have on our life, things actually get worse. But if we make a decision to deal with those circumstances by problem solving and adapting, we develop resilience and can enjoy life more and be more successful.

As you encounter more stressors in life (and we all do), we can rely on the experience we've had in dealing with negative circumstances in order to cope. We get more effective at managing that cycle of confusion, anguish, problem solving, adapting, and moving on.

Communication Tips and Tricks

Asking Good Questions

Communicating well can help you minimize angry situations and manage your own anger. If you can express yourself well and listen well to others, you will reduce miscommunications, which are a common source of conflict. If you understand how to communicate with others, you can express your anger in an assertive, healthy way.

Two of the most basic elements of good communication are asking questions and listening to others. Some of us naturally ask a lot of questions, while for others this is a learned skill.

There are two kinds of questions: open and closed.

Closed questions are those that can be answered by either "yes" or "no," or with a specific bit of data, such as your name, date of birth, or occupation. These questions restrict our responses and give us little opportunity to develop our thoughts before answering. As a result, these questions require very little effort on either person's part. They can be used (intentionally or unintentionally) as a way to close down a conversation.

Closed questions tend to get over-used, in part because they are so easy to work with. They are easy to phrase and we get quick answers. This type of questioning can cause us to make assumptions as we create fuller answers in our minds, and assumptions can be big barriers to good communication.

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage people to talk. These questions are phrased so they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions often begin with a variation of the five W's

(who, what, when, where, why), or can ask how.

Open-ended questions can be used to:

- Ñ Get information
- Ñ Focus conversations
- Ñ Solicit opinions
- Ñ Gain consensus

The unintentional use of a closed question can often be overcome by simply following it with a short open question. For example:

- Ñ "Do you feel that was the right thing to do?"
- Ñ "Yes, I do."
- Ñ "Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"

Here is an example of a closed question:

- Ñ Do you like ice cream?

Replacing it with an open question provides us with more information:

- Ñ What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

The first question will only tell us whether the person likes ice cream or not. That's a closed situation. The second question will let us know a little bit about the person. It could also lead to follow up questions depending on their answer. Questions that are open ended will help us learn more about the people we speak with, establish things that we have in common, develop rapport, and make meaningful connections.

It is possible for you to ask someone an open question and for them to be evasive or try to shut the conversation down. Children are famous for this when a parent says, "What did you learn at school today?" and they reply, "Nothing." One of your team members may come see you after a meeting, and you say, "How'd the meeting go?" and they say, "Fine." If you want to engage them, you'll have to ask a follow up question. Some examples:

- Ñ What was the most interesting point raised in the meeting (or at school)?
- Ñ What were the challenges that we need to consider?
- Ñ What questions did the group ask?

There are several different types of open-ended questions. We can ask **leading questions** to influence how people think ("Don't you just love the way vanilla ice cream smells?"). **Rhetorical questions** are ones that we don't really want an answer to, such as "Do I look like I care?" Rhetorical questions can be used to engage your conversation partner and make them think about the obvious answer. (They may also be something that you blurt out because you are thinking out loud!) A rhetorical question can engage the listener in a persuasive manner as they process your ideas.

Active Listening Skills

Listening and hearing are not the same thing. Most of us were fortunate to be born with hearing, but listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced in order to use it successfully. When you **hear** something, sound enters your eardrum, passes through your ear canal, and registers in your brain. **Listening** is what you do with that sound and how you interpret it.

Here are some tips for successful listening:

- Ñ Listen intentionally for people's names.
- Ñ Listen with interest.
- Ñ Try to get rid of your assumptions.
- Ñ Listen for what isn't said.

Listening is hard work. When other people are listening to us, they have the same difficulties we do in trying to focus on a message. Our minds wander, noises or thoughts distract us, and we can be thinking about what to do next.

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad...or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension to listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- Ñ What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Ñ Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Ñ Are they stressing certain points?
- Ñ Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, provided you are genuine in using them.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and, “Then what?”

You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- Ñ “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- Ñ “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- Ñ **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- Ñ **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments until they have finished.
- Ñ Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Ñ Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ñ Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- Ñ When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

The Assertive Formula

I Messages

Speaking articulately can be hard when you’re upset or angry. It’s easier to communicate with others if we stick with our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and avoid direct or implied criticism of the other person. One way to do that is to stick with “I” messages, expressed in a matter-of-fact, non-judgmental tone of voice.

You Message	I Message
You talk too loudly.	I have sensitive hearing.
You should send out an agenda.	I'd like to know what we're going to discuss in the meeting tomorrow so I can bring the right information with me.

If you are trying to address a particular root cause of your anger (such as someone else's behavior), you can use this same type of message to give feedback.

The Assertive Formula

You can also use this formula to express your feelings assertively.

Step	Goal	Example
Step 1	Non-judgmentally describe a specific behavior of the other person.	When you...
Step 2	Describe, as specifically as possible, the effects this behavior is having, or the practical problems it is causing in your life.	The effects are...
Step 3	Describe how you feel as a result, without using the expression, "you make me..."	I feel...
Step 4	You describe what you want, preferably after you give the other person a chance to state what they think might be done.	I prefer/would like...

Example: "When you leave your papers all over my office, it causes it to be cluttered and I feel disorganized and upset. I would like it if you could pick your papers up when you are done."

Further Reading:

- ✓ B Graham Scott, Gini. *A Survival Guide for Working With Humans*. AMACOM, 2004.
- ✓ Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler. *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior*. McGraw-Hill, 2005.
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- ✓ Roosevelt, Eleanor. *You Learn By Living*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1983.