

Dealing with... ANGRY THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

When you think back to anger-producing situations, it is likely that you recall experiencing intense feelings of anger. You may recall feelings of hostility or rage that may have overwhelmed you and led you to act in ways that did not improve the situation. Maybe you remember trying to control your angry feelings while in the situation and struggling to contain them all day. In order to better understand these feelings and bring them under your control, it is necessary to look at another aspect of the anger-producing situation: ***your thoughts.***

Thoughts or beliefs influence how you feel about the situation. For example, if another person offers you help with a project, you may think: "This person is trying to be helpful to me." This thought may lead to positive feelings towards the person. On the other hand, the thought: "This person is trying to look good by volunteering" may lead to angry feelings.

The first step in managing angry feelings is to examine the thoughts you have before becoming angry.

Try to remember one or two situations when you became angry and trace each situation step by step. Can you remember what you were thinking right before you became angry? The next time you get angry at someone, stop yourself and make a note of your thoughts about the person and the situation.

The next step in effectively managing anger is to evaluate your anger-producing thoughts.

Sometimes the thoughts we have are accurate and sometimes they aren't. It is important to carefully examine your anger-producing thoughts to see if they are accurate or somewhat distorted. Distorted thoughts are inaccurate or less adaptive ways of thinking about a situation. Labeling a person based on one interaction is an example of a type of distorted thinking called overgeneralization.

Listed below are some other types of distorted thinking and examples.

Labeling:

You put a fixed, negative label on others without considering that the evidence might more reasonably lead to a different conclusion. **Example: "He's an idiot." "She's two-faced."**

Magnification:

When you evaluate another person, you unreasonably magnify the negative and minimize the positive.

Example: "My teacher gave me one low grade (and several high ones), she's so unfair!"

Personalization:

You believe others are behaving negatively as a reaction to you, without considering more plausible explanations for their behavior. **Example: "That guy is being cold to me because he thinks he's better than I am." (You are unaware that he just received some upsetting news from home.)**

"Should" or "Must" Statements:

You have a precise, fixed idea of how others should behave and you overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met. **Example: "She should have called me by now. She must not care about our friendship."**

Blaming:

You hold other people responsible for your feelings. **Example: "It's my roommate's fault I'm so angry."**

Being Right:

You are continually trying to prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness. **Example: "I was totally justified in yelling at my friend for what he did!"**

Tunnel vision:

You only see the negative aspects of a situation.

Example: "My professor can't do anything right. He's critical, insensitive, and a lousy lecturer."

All or Nothing Thinking:

You view a situation in only two categories instead of on a continuum. Things are either good or bad; you are either perfect or a failure. **Example: "My friend doesn't agree with me on this issue, so he's completely non-supportive." "I just know I'm going to get an "F" on that exam!" (when a "B" is most likely).**

Fallacy of Fairness:

You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair, but other people won't agree with you.

Example: "Why can't my professor see that I deserve an "A"?"

Fallacy of Change:

You expect others will change to suit you if you pressure them enough.

Example: "If you just hear me out one more time, I'm sure you'll agree with me."

When you are angry, it's likely that many of your thoughts will fall under one of these categories. In order to overcome some of these thoughts, it may be helpful to develop an Angry Thought Record. In the first column, write down the anger producing thought. In the next column, write down the type of distortion it represents. In the third column, write down a different, more accurate, adaptive way to think about the situation.

The next step is finding more accurate, adaptive ways of thinking about the situation.

For each distorted thought you have written down, try a different way of thinking about the situation-- one that is more accurate and does not make you feel as angry. This may involve exploring the positive aspects of a person or a situation, identifying other possible reasons for the person's behavior, or looking at "the big picture" rather than focusing on one relatively small incident.

The last step is to practice identifying anger-producing thoughts, finding the distortions, and developing more accurate ways of thinking every day!

This final technique to reduce anger must be practiced every day in order to be effective. It is necessary to write down angry thoughts regularly and to practice refuting them. As this becomes easier, you can better identify your thoughts when you are in a situation and begin to feel angry. By identifying distorted thoughts and replacing them with more adaptive ways of thinking, you can keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed by anger in difficult situations.