



## **ANGER MANAGEMENT 101:**

By Dr. Gregory Moore

Anger is a universal emotion we all experience at times. It is only a problem under the following circumstances:

A. It's too frequent. Research tells us that the normal person gets angry about three times a week. This doesn't mean flying into a rage but may simply be an annoyance or an irritable moment.

B. It's too intense. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being a slight annoyance and 10 being a full blown rage, having angry bouts above about a 5 (somewhat angry but in control) is not only unproductive, it's unhealthy. In fact, research tells us that anger is a better predictor of heart disease than smoking, obesity, diet, or family history.

C. It's of too long a duration. A former client of mine described having "rage carnivals" that lasted for years. While he wasn't always in a full-blown state of anger, his underlying irritability left him at the mercy of any mild trigger for frustration, sending him into yet another angry spell.

D. It's expressed inappropriately. Having a teenager yell "You're unfair!" or mumbling "jerk" under his breath are pretty normal occurrences. Screaming at someone or hitting them is not only not appropriate, it's hurtful and can lead to legal or sometimes life-threatening consequences. Conversely, "stuffing" your anger is also unhealthy and is a contributing factor to heart disease and cancer.

Anger is what we call a secondary emotion: one first feels frustrated, hurt, scared, or a combination of the three. The problem with children (or adults) who get angry is that they have no way of processing the chain of events that occur during an anger incident. Any anger incident involves a "trigger" (something that happened), a feeling of frustration, hurt, or fear, self-talk (for example: "He can't get away with that!") and a subsequent behavior.

Anger problems can stem from a number of problems. These problems are listed below:

1. temperament: some children are simply inflexible and very reactive and blow at the sign of a slight frustration. While sometimes labeled as “Bipolar Disorder” (occasionally accurate), it is far more often a case of a sensitive temperament that needs to be treated through a type of behavior therapy known as skills deficiency training. These are children who can’t regulate their emotions because their thinking skills (often referred to as executive functioning skills) are not able to override the intense emotional experience of the frustration as presented.

2. Family dysfunction: children who are “triangulated”, or placed in the middle between conflicted parents will tend to become angry (or depressed) due to overwhelming feelings of frustration and powerlessness. No child wants to have to choose between mom and dad’s points of view and certainly doesn’t want to hear about the other’s “shortcomings”. And I’m not just talking about divorce and separation. Many parents who otherwise have a solid relationship don’t always insulate their children from their disagreements. Sometimes subtle, this can have a significant effect on the amount of anger seen in a household and is especially evident in teenagers who are going through their own changes and struggles with their identity. Sometimes what is needed is short-term family counseling to assist parents in working together as a team, thus lowering conflict or disagreement and thereby “quieting” the system down so that their kids are not picking up on familial tensions.

3. Frustration with school pressures. The school environment today is much more competitive than it was even 20 years ago. Worldwide competition, the information explosion (fueled by the internet), and children who are often overscheduled, make for a daily grind that is anxiety filled. I’m not the least bit surprised that so many kids who come from good households in solid communities and who have plenty of resources are using a variety of drugs. Parents need to learn how to bring balance into their homes which, in the central New Jersey area where I live, is sorely lacking. With high-powered schools such as Princeton High School and others, there is much achievement but precious little time to just “be” and to have downtime for processing. I see all too many

teenagers (and even youngsters) who have days filled with hours of homework (far too much in my opinion) and extracurricular activities to the point where they are going from sun-up to sun-down. In a book entitled *The Power of Full Engagement* authors Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz point out the need for periodic breaks after about 90 minutes of work. I cannot tell you how many angry children I have seen in my practice who are stressed beyond belief, much of it their own doing but, unfortunately, fostered by well-meaning parents who don't really understand the value of downtime.

4. Similar to #3 above, many children have undiagnosed learning problems which fuel frustration. If you believe this to be the case, then you should consult with your school district and a certified school psychologist to ask for assistance in determining if your child needs services. We provide school consultation services at this website for parents who are unsure of what questions to ask and how to effectively approach school systems for potential help.

In order to assist parents, I have included a downloadable "Conflict Log" that allows someone to monitor triggers for anger, feelings and thoughts that accompany those triggers, and effective and brief exercises for anyone who is willing to use them. I will again emphasize that it is practice that changes behavior, not necessarily some major insight. We offer ways of using these tools, consulting over the phone or in person, and ways of finding a helpful practitioner in your area.