

CHAPTER ONE

WORKING ON MY ANGER

REASONS FOR WANTING TO CHANGE

There are many reasons to participate in a treatment program or to actively work on helping yourself when professional help is not available. You are reading this book because you are making a decision to change your life. Maybe someone has recommended that you read this book because the person believes you have a problem that needs to be addressed. Whether you have a minor anger problem that you would like to resolve before it gets worse, or a serious anger problem that has begun to have a negative impact on your life and the lives of others you care about, you have a reason for reading this book.

Some people you know may support your being in treatment and getting help with your anger; others who don't have faith in you may tell you that there is nothing that will help you. Regardless of what anyone else thinks, the bottom line is that you must want to help yourself. Once you have made that decision, sticking to your treatment program will be easier if you hang out or socialize with people who support your treatment and your choice to change.

You are probably reading this book because you have noticed that you have one or two key problems or because others have noticed and identified them for you. Perhaps you have psychologically or physically hurt someone close to you, or are in danger of losing your job. Or maybe you have gone so far as to commit a criminal offense out of anger (such as assault or destroying someone else's property), resulting in your being involved with the legal and/or correctional system. Your out-of-control anger harms others. Committing an offense and harming others with out-of-control anger are two good reasons for wanting to change.

One of the most important reasons for wanting to work on managing your anger is to prevent yourself from hurting others in the future. If you have assaulted someone, you have hurt your victim(s) in ways that may never be obvious to you. If you have had a problem with your anger, over the years your words and/or actions have caused pain or hurt to many other people in your life. If you have been carrying around a lot of anger for a long time, you may not recognize *how* you have hurt others, *how many* people you have hurt, or even that you have hurt *anyone* at all. We hope that one reason you are motivated to get help with your anger problems is to stop hurting others.

Another good reason for wanting to work on your anger is to spare your immediate family (spouse and children) or other family (including your parents,



brothers, and/or sisters) any further embarrassment, shame, or bad feelings they experienced because of your behavior. Your children may be called names in school; your extended family or uncles and aunts may feel shame and guilt they don't deserve because of your public displays of anger.

A third good reason for wanting to change is so you can feel better. By carrying around your anger you are probably hurting yourself through constant stress, ulcers, chronic muscle tension, high blood pressure, and headaches. Anger also creates mental pain in terms of frustration, hurt, resentment, etc. Ultimately, angry people push family and friends away. Anger can lead to your feeling bad about yourself.

You may have your own reasons for wanting to learn how to manage your anger. Although you cannot change the past, you can make positive changes for the present and for the future. Many angry people who become offenders go through treatment, return to the community, and make significant, positive, changes in their lives. Some have become involved with service groups and donate their time for charitable causes. Others talk to local groups, identifying themselves as offenders and explaining how treatment has helped them change and make restitution to their victims. These opportunities for community and individual restitution are additional reasons for wanting to change.

Keep your reasons for wanting help in mind while you read and work through this workbook and your treatment. You will find your treatment difficult at times. Making changes in your behavior, thoughts, and emotions is not easy. Below, men in a treatment program who also have anger problems have listed some of their reasons for wanting help with their anger:

- * To learn self control*
- * To understand myself*
- * To address my problem areas*
- * To decrease my anger*
- * To feel better about myself*
- * To stop my lying*
- * To develop trust with others*
- * To correct my wrong thinking patterns*
- * To learn to manage my stress*
- * To develop empathy and compassion for others*
- * To learn to be assertive with others*
- * To overcome my major fears*
- * To work out my problems*
- * To stop undesirable behaviors*
- * To learn how to understand others*
- * To help lower my defenses and receive the help I need*
- * To think about how I affect others around me*
- * To accept my limitations and weak spots*
- * To learn to communicate better with others*

And the list goes on. What is your most important reason or motive for wanting help with managing your anger in non-hurtful ways?

Change works best when a person wants to change. Forcing or pushing someone who does not want to change is usually a waste of time for the client and for the person trying to help him. *Help is available for you if you want help* and will continue to work on your anger.

WHY SHOULD I WORK ON MY ANGER?

Anger can work for you and against you. As you will learn in Chapter Three, anger is neither good or bad— it's what you do with it that makes it either positive or negative, healthy or destructive. If your anger had worked for you in healthy ways, you would probably not be reading this book. Since your anger has worked against you in unhealthy ways, then you need to work at changing it before it continues to affect your life in ways that are harmful.

Sometimes your anger has *felt* good, even when you were using it in destructive ways. Other times, feeling angry has felt bad. Some people get confused when they try to understand how somethings can feel both good and bad at the same time. Many people, for example, don't understand how they can love someone (feelings that feel good) and at the same time feel anger or hatred toward the same person (feelings that hurt or feel bad). If you were abused by a parent, you might feel love for that parent (feelings that feel good) as well as anger about what he or she did to you. You many even hate the things they did to you (feelings that feel bad or hurt you). Anger itself can often cover up deeper feelings that feel good or bad.

For some people, anger works for them and against them at the same time because they believe that their anger has served a purpose—protecting them (working them (working for them)—even though the end result of that protection has been to push others away (working against them). For example, think about being teased by someone and wanting him to stop. If you put the feeling of anger into behavior and beat the person up (acting out anger) it would stop the teasing behavior (anger working for you). But in addition, a person may never come around you again. If others saw you beat up the teaser, they might feel afraid that you would get angry and beat them up. They might also decide not to spend time with you any more (anger working against you).

Responding angrily to teasing is an example of how anger can work for you (stopping the teasing behavior) and against you (pushing other friends away) at the same time. The issue is how to prevent and/or deal with this confusing experience and make things work out right. One solution is to stop the teasing but not push others away who care about you. This requires an understanding of your anger and knowledge of how to intervene in and express angry feelings without acting out your anger in hurtful ways. This is called being assertive. When you don't understand your anger and you act it out, others are offended by it and do not want to be around you. Al's situation is a good example.



Al always wanted things to be his way. When things did not go his way he immediately became angry. For instance, Al thought no one else in the office should ever use the scissors, tape, stapler, paper clip holder, or correction fluid from the table near his desk. His friends at work knew they were for everyone in the area to share and use.

When one of Al's office mates borrowed a stapler, Al got angry. He stood in the middle of the office and yelled, "WHO STOLE MY STAPLER?!"

Trask answered quietly, "I borrowed it for a minute—I'll give it right back."

Al screamed, "You thief! You keep your grubby hands off my desk supplies!" He snatched the stapler out of Trask's hand and stalked over to his desk fuming with rage.

Eventually, Al's office mates—Trask, Jordan, and Bart—stopped inviting him to have lunch together or play basketball after work because there was no room for disagreement without having a screaming match. They began to spend less time around Al. Soon, Al found himself without any friends.

In the long run, your anger works against you when you act out your anger, using it for hurtful or *negative anger action*. When you manage your anger by taking *positive anger action*, your anger works for you. We will talk about *positive anger action* later in this book.

One way that you may be negatively acting out your anger is by sexually abusing another person, either by forcing sex on your wife or girlfriend (rape), or by sexually abusing a child. Sexual abuse is a result of many problems, and one of them is misplaced anger. Initially it seems to work **for** you by making you feel better (a very temporary good feeling). But then it works **against** you (causing harm to another person, prompting feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, fear of getting caught, etc.). Many sex offenders commit their offenses because they are angry. Sexual abuse becomes a way of expressing frustration and anger at a person or at a situation. In other words, the anger is expressed through the sexually abusive act. In either case, the anger works for you (release) and against you (fear, guilt, shame, being arrested) and is hurtful to others.

When your anger works against you as much or more than it works for you, you have good reason and need to work on your anger. When your anger results in hurting others, feeling bad, feeling shame, guilt, embarrassment, etc., it is time to make changes in your life.

CHAPTER ONE EXERCISES

EXERCISE #1-1: WHY TRY TO CHANGE?

In your notebook, write down all of the reasons you can think of why you want treatment. You may include some of the reasons listed on page 15 that apply to you, but make sure to add your own personal reason as well.

EXERCISE #1-2: WHAT I'VE DONE WHEN I WAS ANGRY

Make a list in your notebook of what you have done (behaviors) when you were angry. Go over the list and put a plus sign (+) next to any that you think were positive anger actions. Put a minus sign (-) next to any that you think were hurtful or negative anger actions.

EXERCISE #1-3: HOW ANGER HAS WORKED FOR ME AND AGAINST ME

List some examples of how your anger has worked for you and against you in your life. Example, anger working for you: firmly telling (not screaming at) the mechanic that he did not repair your car properly and you want the situation corrected; after being confronted, he corrects his mistake at no charge. Example, anger working against you: hitting your wife as a means of releasing frustration; you feel bad about your behavior because you have hurt and scared someone you love.

