MODULE 3

How to Manage Our Anger Well and Prevent Situations from Getting Out of Control

Materials Needed:

- Handout 9: Anger Management — Time-Out Process
- Handout 10: Hot Thoughts and Cool Thoughts
- Handout 11: Referrals for Domestic Violence
- Brochures on local treatment options for people with anger management difficulties

Provider Note: Today’s class focuses on strategies for effectively managing anger. Affect regulation difficulties and problems with anger in interpersonal relationships are an important theme for many OEF/OIF service members/veterans and their families. As a provider, be sure to emphasize that skills for managing anger can be learned and that there is no excuse for violence or abuse in relationships.

Check-In from Previous Week & Introduction:

- Ask any new group members to introduce themselves and review the group guidelines and confidentiality with them.
- Ask if any group members have questions from the previous week.
- Check-in regarding how the communication skills homework went.
- Explain to group that today’s session will focus on anger, its impact on interpersonal relationships, and strategies for managing anger effectively.

I. Anger Is a Normal Human Emotion

Provider Note: Use whichever questions are relevant / appropriate for your group in order to engage participants in session (i.e., to elicit their goals / what they want to learn in session) and to be able to use their examples in the rest of the session.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the situations/issues that cause the most conflict in your relationship?
- What situations set the stage for conflict in your house (e.g., your family member refusing to participate in family activities, drinking too much alcohol, sarcasm, withdrawing/refusing to communicate, being told what to do, overwhelming situations, feeling out of control)?
• Describe a typical argument. What happens? Are things resolved to your satisfaction? (If so, how?) Are there attempts to resolve the conflict or “make peace”? (If so, who usually initiates? How? What is the outcome?)

• Are children involved in the conflicts? How does this impact them?

• Rate yourself on a 1-10 scale (1 being having very poor skills and 10 being having excellent skills) on how you feel you handle anger.

Facts about anger:

Just like other feelings (e.g., sadness, joy), humans experience anger at different times and express the emotion in different ways.

Although many people think that being angry is wrong or bad, anger (in the mid-level range) itself is not a problem. Extreme behaviors that stem from this emotion can become problematic.

II. Important Issues to Consider about Anger and Violent Behavior

A. Intense emotions may be part of PTSD or other responses to trauma. Having a lot of anger and aggressive feelings can be a major element of PTSD. However, even if someone has the worst case of PTSD, he/she can learn to control and be accountable for his/her behavior.

B. Anger and its expression may be strongly affected by substance use.

C. Sometimes people become angry even when we have done nothing to provoke the anger. Regardless of the cause, you are never responsible for your family member’s acting-out behavior (even if your behavior upsets him/her). Your family member may try very hard to blame you for his/her behavior in anger.

D. Although it is very difficult to predict violent behavior, the best predictor of future violence is past violent behavior. Reflecting on the situations that surrounded previous acts of violence can provide clues as to potentially difficult situations in the future. This information may also guide efforts to prevent future violence. Stressors such as returning from a deployment, job changes, or pregnancy can make violent behavior more likely but are never an excuse for violence.

E. Anger may be the emotion that is expressed directly, but the individual may be experiencing a great deal of fear underneath the anger.

Discussion Questions:

• Do you see this combination of anger and fear in your relationship? If so, how?

• How might it change things if you understood the feelings behind the anger that you see?
III. **Irritability / Low-Grade Chronic Anger**

**Provider Note:** Lead the group in learning how to differentiate between chronic irritability/anger and isolated angry outbursts. Discuss how many people experience both. Explain to the group that some trauma survivors don’t have many distinct angry outbursts – but, rather, experience chronic irritability. They’re easily “set off,” and become angry easily – even over little things.

**Discussion Questions:**
- Can you relate to this type of chronic anger or irritability in your relationship?
- How does chronic anger affect people? How does it affect relationships?

**Provider Note:** Write down the answers the group mentions on the board. Some of the effects of chronic anger to make sure the group covers are:

A. Irritability strains interpersonal relationships.

B. Chronic anger may lead to feelings of guilt, regret, and shame.

C. It can have adverse effects on communication. For example, family members may not feel safe to express their feelings honestly for fear of consequences, and significant emotional distance may result.

D. Family members may feel like they are “walking on eggshells.”

E. Chronic anger may manifest as somatic/physical effects in family members (e.g., migraines, stomach problems, difficulty sleeping, tension, and jaw/TMJ pain).

F. Anger may lead to physical violence, which is never acceptable, regardless of the cause.

IV. **Angry Outbursts / Violence:**

**Provider Note:** Discuss how some OEF/OIF service members/veterans may feel OK most of the time, but then have angry outbursts. Sometimes, the trigger for the outburst is easy to identify, whereas other times it is unclear. However, the patterns leading up to the outburst are often predictable. More specifically, episodes of violence have a predictable beginning, middle, and end. One of the first steps in dealing with anger is recognizing that people do not go from “0 to 60” instantly. The better people become at recognizing the stages of anger and warning signs they are becoming angry, the better able they will be to manage their anger. Write the following stages on the board (material adapted from Woolis, 1992):

- **PHASE ONE** Activation Stress occurs
- **PHASE TWO** Escalation Intervene now if possible
PHASE THREE  
**Crisis**  
Violence may occur

PHASE FOUR  
**Recovery**  
Less agitation

PHASE FIVE  
**Stabilization**  
Guilt and remorse

**Discussion Questions:**

- In what phase do you generally become aware that you are feeling angry?
- In which phase do you tend to intervene? How does that work? What are the consequences?
- In what phase do you think intervention is most effective when the other person is angry?

**Provider Note:** *Listen and respond to group members’ questions and comments about angry outbursts. Make sure to emphasize:*

A. Family members often try to step in during the most heated moments (in crisis or recovery phases). During these phases, people are not ready or able to take in information and discuss issues calmly.

B. Intervening in the escalation stage has the highest likelihood of preventing an angry outburst.

C. Most effective communication can occur (and efforts made to prevent future violence) in phase five (stabilization).

D. If you ever feel in danger, immediately remove yourself and your children from the situation and/or call 911. You should never stay in a frightening or dangerous situation.

V. **Angry Interactions and Children**

**Provider Note:** *During this session, you should emphasize to the group that it’s very important for parents to minimize the amount of parental conflict that children witness. Research has documented numerous adverse effects on kids when they see / overhear parents engaged in yelling and screaming or violence, so it’s really important to keep heated arguments away from the kids. On the other hand, children can benefit from seeing parents calmly and appropriately resolve conflict. Lead the group members who have children in their homes through the following discussion questions:*
Discussion Questions:

- What have you noticed about your kids’ reactions to the anger in your household? What do your kids do or say when you fight?
- How have you tried to keep the kids out of your conflicts? How has this worked?

A. Even if parents THINK they’re keeping the arguments “behind closed doors,” kids are often perceptive and know when parents are fighting. They may hear the angry words or actual hitting from the other room—or they may hear / see the aftermath of the fights (crying, bruises, flowers, etc.).

B. It can be useful to talk to your children after the angry interaction. During these discussions, it’s helpful to emphasize to the children that:
   1. They didn’t do anything wrong! Because kids often blame themselves for parental conflict, it’s really important for parents to reassure kids and make sure they know that it’s not their fault.
   2. We, your parents, are trying to work things out—and want to get along better. (And we are getting help in order to do so!)
   3. Your parents are sorry that you heard / saw their argument.

You may also expect that your kids may be especially crabby or needy / clingy after a parental argument. It may be helpful for you to try to spend extra “quality time” with them during these times.

Teach and role-model family rules for anger in front of your children. These rules should include:
   1. It’s OK to be mad.
   2. It’s NOT OK to hurt yourself, other people, or things.
   3. It’s always OK to talk about your feelings.

E. If your child appears depressed, withdrawn, or is becoming chronically aggressive or angry, seek professional help.

VI. Coping Strategies for (Adult) Family Members in Dealing with Another Individual’s Anger

A. Be prepared.
   1. Decide in advance what the limits are regarding your family member’s expression of anger. These limits need to be consistently enforced to be effective.
      - Example: I will tolerate my family member raising his/her voice, but I will not put up with swearing or name-calling.
2. Decide in advance the consequences of such a behavior.
   - Example: I will walk away from the discussion if name-calling or swearing begins.

3. Discuss these limits with your family member during a calm time. Clearly and concisely explain the limit without getting into a debate or justifying your rationale.

4. Follow through on the consequence every time. Otherwise, your family member will learn that he/she doesn’t have to abide by this limit and will push you the next time.

B. Stay calm and nonjudgmental.

C. Attempt to understand and acknowledge the person’s angry feelings. Often, individuals increase their expression of anger when feeling misunderstood. The amount of anger usually decreases when the person feels that the listener is genuinely trying to understand.

D. Choose your words wisely. Avoid generalizations (e.g., “you always…” or “you never…”), as these evoke retorts, counter-attacks, and further tension.

E. Avoid asking too many questions (which can spark defensiveness and further anger).

F. At a calm time, use “I” statements to report your own feelings.
   - Example: “When you yell at me, I feel hurt, and I would really like….”

VII. Time-Out Process

Provider Note: The following is a valuable skill that can make a significant difference in how people in any committed relationship (couples, parents and adult children, siblings, friends, etc.) resolve conflict. Explain that this skill takes practice, and that the people who are able to implement it in challenging moments are those who have practiced in advance.

A. Many parents use a time-out process in disciplining their children. Although the discipline strategy and this anger management tool share the common goal of giving each party some time to cool down, the techniques are quite different.

B. This time-out process is a mutually-agreed upon strategy between equals (rather than involving a power differential such as in a parent-child relationship). Further, this technique helps people stop a conflict early in the argument (to avoid further tension), rather than being used as a form of punishment.

C. This is an excellent process to negotiate in advance (during a calm time).

Provider Note: Distribute Handout 9: “Anger Management – Time-Out Process,” and review the process step by step. Have group members role play the time out process in session and encourage them to brainstorm possible obstacles in applying it in their relationships; then, problem-solve possible solutions.
VIII. Violence in Relationships

Threats of physical violence and/or actual violence are very important issues to address in families. Abuse should never be tolerated, as it is damaging to both of you and to your relationship.

Domestic violence is very common, as 25% of American couples experience at least one act of physical aggression in their marriages (Bogard, 1984). The FBI estimates that a woman is beaten every 15 seconds in the United States.

Most people with PTSD are not violent; in fact, many are quite socially withdrawn. However, research with Vietnam veterans who have PTSD has found that they are at increased risk for perpetrating acts of domestic violence (Jordan, 1992; Riggs, 1997).

Provider Note: Distribute list of local referrals for domestic violence (example shown in Handout 11: “Referrals for Domestic Violence”). Explain that this list includes 24-hour crisis hotlines and emergency shelters. Shelters provide a safe place to stay, without the guilt of imposing on friends or extended family. Contact numbers for low-cost legal aid and victim protective orders (VPOs) are also listed.

IX. Hot Thoughts Versus Cool Thoughts

Provider Note: Discuss that in addition to learning some tools for dealing with anger in others and/or violence in relationships, there is also a lot each of us can do to learn how to manage anger more effectively. One of the best ways of doing this is to monitor the thoughts we have about an event and the impact those thoughts have on our anger levels. Explain that the next portion of the class will focus on strategies for reducing anger by modifying thinking.

Explain the idea that while certain events may tend to provoke anger, it is really our beliefs about the event that lead to anger. For example, if someone cuts you off in traffic, you are likely to become angry. If you knew that person was racing to the hospital with an injured child, your feeling would probably change from anger to concern. In any situation, we can either reduce or escalate our anger by the way we think about an event. Distribute Handout 10 and work through the “Hot Thoughts and Cool Thoughts” exercise. The following are examples of situations you can use, or have the class provide their own scenarios:

A. What are some “Hot Thoughts” you could run through your mind that will increase your anger?
   1. “This is awful!”
   2. “She’s an idiot!”
   3. “We will never get out of debt!”

B. What are some “Cool Thoughts” you could run through your mind and reduce your anger?
   1. “This is not good, but it isn’t the end of the world.”
2. “She is not the only person who ever bounced a check…in fact, I’ve bounced a few myself.”
3. “We have to get a bounce-proof account set up today.”

X. **Provide Local Treatment Options for Individuals Dealing with Anger Management Issues**

Example: **Oklahoma City VA Medical Center**

A. Anger Management Class

- This 6-week class assists veterans in identifying the triggers for their anger and learning effective ways of expressing this emotion.

B. Couples or Family Therapy

C. Psychiatric Medications

XI. **Wrap-Up**

- Ask if group members have any questions about the communication or issues discussed in today’s class. Discuss questions.
- Ask participants to choose one of the anger management tools presented today and practice it regularly this week.
- Have group members complete the evaluation and knowledge forms (Handouts D & E)
- Remind the group of the next group date and time, and pass out reminder cards.
Handout 9

Time Out Process

Why? The goal of a Time Out is to prevent an argument from escalating/getting out of control to the point that either of you later regret your words/behavior. Use of the Time Out procedure is good for both partners, their relationship, and for children/others in the home.

Who? Time outs are helpful to use in relationships that you want to maintain. You would not use them with people with whom you have not already discussed the use of the procedure.

When? Either partner can call a time out for themselves if a discussion/argument is starting to feel out of control. You would never tell someone else to “go take a time out!”

Remember: Most people cannot think clearly when angry, so postponing the discussion until a time when both people are calmer is often helpful. As opposed to the old saying, it really IS ok to go to bed angry if you will be able to talk about the issue more effectively the next day!

Very important: You need to discuss the Time Out process with the other person at a calm time.

Key points to discuss:

1. A mutually agreed-upon signal* for use of time-out
   * Best to have a verbal and nonverbal (hand signal) way of communicating need to take a time out

2. When a time out is called, the discussion ends immediately. It is not helpful to persist in trying to get in the last word.

3. The person who called the time out must physically remove him/herself from the room. The partner will not follow the person who is taking the time out.

4. Before leaving for your time out, you need to tell the other person:
   a. What you are going to do
   b. Where you are going (e.g., next room, for a drive, to friend's house, etc.)
   c. When you'll be back (certain number of minutes/hours)
While taking the time out:

It is not helpful to obsess about how angry you feel at the other person during this time…or to call someone else and vent about how “wronged” you have been.

Rather, each person has two tasks during the time out:

1. Do some activity that is calming.

2. Brainstorm possible solutions to the problem. Strive to consider the other’s perspective/feelings and what YOU can do to improve the situation.

Upon returning to discuss:

1. The person who called the time out approaches his or her partner (preferably within a few hours – but definitely within 24 hours) with KINDNESS. You may choose to apologize, express affection (hug/kiss), or express hopefulness (“let’s try this again”…“we can do better this time’). Remember Dr. Gottman’s “softened start-up” research that shows how you START a conversation has a big impact on how it goes.

2. Each person presents his/her solution to the problem, and the other person listens without interrupting.

3. Both people focus on what aspects of the solution will work, rather than focusing on what won’t work.

4. Together, the couple chooses parts of both solutions that will make both parties happy.

Note: If tempers rise and another argument is brewing, take another time out!

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Local Treatment Options for Veterans Dealing with Anger Management Issues

1. Anger Management Class

2. Couples or Family Therapy

3. Psychiatric Medications

Adapted from presentation by Dan Jones, Ph.D.
HANDOUT 10

Hot Thoughts and Cool Thoughts

EVENT: Traffic is thick on your way home and your spouse calls to tell you she bounced another check. This will cost you $35 you can’t afford.

What are some “Hot Thoughts” you could say to yourself that will increase your anger?

- “This is terrible!”
- “She is an idiot!”
- “We will never get out of debt!”

What are some “Cool Thoughts” you could say to yourself that will reduce your anger?

- “This is not good, but it isn’t the end of the world.”
- “She is not the only person who ever bounced a check…in fact I’ve bounced a few myself.”
- “We have to get a bounce proof account set up today.”

Think of another event that frequently causes you to become angry or upset:

EVENT: ________________________________________________________________

What are some “Hot Thoughts” you could say to yourself that will increase your anger?

- ______________________________________________________________
- ______________________________________________________________
- ______________________________________________________________

What are some “Cool Thoughts” you could run through your mind that will reduce your anger?

- ______________________________________________________________
- ______________________________________________________________
- ______________________________________________________________
Referrals for Domestic Violence

**Hotlines:**

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE (7233)
  - crisis intervention
  - information about shelters
  - legal referrals
  - treatment options

**YOUR LOCAL** Sexual Assault Hotline: (405) 943-RAPE

Domestic Violence Intervention Services of **YOUR AREA**: (918) 585-3163

**Shelters:**

**YOUR LOCAL** Emergency Shelter: (405) 949-1866
(405) 917-9922

**Counseling:**

**YOUR LOCAL** YWCA: (405) 948-1770
- Both individual (sliding scale) and group (free) services are available.

**Legal Aid:**

Low-Cost Legal Assistance:

- **YOUR LOCAL CITY**: (405) 521-1302
- **YOUR LOCAL COUNTY**: (405) 360-6631

**Victims Protective Order (VPO):**

Affiliated with both the police dept and YWCA:

- Local Contact: ________________ (405) 297-1139 (phone)