

CHAPTER 4

RELAXATION SKILLS I

Learning to relax is an essential element in achieving anger management. Remember, getting angry is a two-step process. First, physical tension or stress has to exist in the body, then it requires anger-triggering thoughts to complete the picture. Half the anger battle can be won by simply learning to relax the physical tension that develops in provocative situations. It's a proven fact that if you can relax your body, and keep it relaxed, it's almost impossible to get angry. Combating stress using the skills you're about to learn can help you calm down, think clearly, and handle any situation in an effective, positive way. The eventual goal is to become so good at relaxing that you can let go of tension any time, anywhere, in thirty seconds or less.

The first step to effective relaxation is a technique called *progressive relaxation training*. It's been around since the 1920s in one form or another, and is generally regarded as the keystone to successful stress release. Keep in mind the technique described below is not as easy as it sounds. It requires practice and a commitment to follow through. But the results are well worth the effort, paying off big dividends in anger management.

Progressive Relaxation Training:

The basic principle is to first increase the tension in your muscles, hold it for five to seven seconds, and then *relax*. Remember to focus on one set of muscles at a time. Repeat each procedure as many times as necessary to achieve the desired effect. (*Caveat*: Do not tense areas of physical pain, injury, or recent surgery. And remove contact lenses.)

1. Get into a comfortable seated position and give your body a chance to relax. Allow yourself to experience a comfortable feeling of heaviness. Now, start at the bottom and, stretching your legs out, point your toes (like a *ballerina*) away from your body, noting the tension in your ankles. Now point your *toes to head*, creating tension in your calves. Let your feet fall to the floor, take a deep breath, and relax.

2. Now tighten your buttocks (remember *tight bottom*), and then your thighs by pressing down on your heels as hard as you can. Hold the tension (five to seven seconds), then let go, take a deep breath, and relax.
3. Take a deep breath, filling up your lungs completely, and flex your chest muscles. Now tighten your stomach muscles, creating, in effect, a *coat of armor*. Hold, then exhale, and relax.
4. Now arch your back, as though it were a bow (remember *bow and arrow*). Avoid straining and keep the rest of your body as relaxed as possible. Notice the tension beginning down at your coccyx (tailbone), and moving all the way up your spine to your neck. Hold as long as possible, then slump forward, take a deep breath, and relax.
5. Bend your elbows and tense your forearms and biceps in the classic *Charles Atlas* pose. Clench your fists at the same time. Tense these muscles until they feel taut. Then, straighten out your arms, shake out your hands, take a deep breath, and relax.
6. Now hunch your shoulders and pull your head in like a *turtle*. Press your chin against your chest, tightening your throat. Experience this uncomfortable sensation, then drop your shoulders and allow your head to fall forward. Now, slowly and carefully, roll your head to the side and back of your neck. Reverse direction and roll your head the other way. Take a deep breath, and allow your neck and shoulders to relax.
7. Continue to move your attention upwards toward your head and face. First, make a frown by wrinkling up your forehead (like a *walnut*) as tightly as you can. Next, scrunch up your eyes, flare your nostrils, clench your jaw (not so hard that you'll crack a tooth). Finally, compress your lips into a tight O. Pull your lips as tight as a *miser's purse strings*. In short, make an *ugly face*. Hold it, tighter and tighter. Then relax and let go. Now, take a deep breath, relax your lips, and blow out forcefully.
8. Now go back mentally over the entire procedure, and feel the relaxation in your feet, ankles, calves, back, and chest. As you let go, more and more, the relaxation deepens in your neck, shoulders, arms, and hands. Go deeper and deeper into being relaxed. Finally, feel the relaxation extend to your head and face, your jaw hanging loose and your lips slightly parted.

9. If some tension persists in a specific part of your body, simply return your focus to that spot. Increase the tension, hold it, take a deep breath, and then relax. And let go.

In order to achieve deep muscle relaxation quickly, remember *key words* in the list below. Tense muscle groups for five to seven seconds, then relax for fifteen seconds.

Key Words

- Toes like a ballerina
- Toes to head
- Tight bottom
- Coat of armor
- Bow and arrow
- Charles Atlas
- Turtle
- Walnut
- Miser's purse
- Ugly face

What Does Relaxation Feel Like?

A feeling of deep relaxation can be experienced in lots of different ways. Most people describe tingling sensations, heat, or a pleasant warmth moving through their body. Others focus on feelings of heaviness or general lassitude. For some, their muscles feel like a stick of butter slowly melting in a skillet, or maple syrup spreading over a pile of pancakes. Everyone experiences relaxation in a unique way.

Exercise: How Relaxation Feels to You

Go back to the box (above) containing the key words for progressive relaxation training. As you go through the relaxation process again, notice

the specific relaxation sensations that you feel for each muscle group. Now write those down next to the key words. This will serve to reinforce, and deepen, the relaxation you already experience.

Relaxation Imagery

Another very valuable tool in combating stress is the ability to call up, at a moment's notice, a peaceful, relaxing scene. Eventually, with enough practice, you will be able to conjure this scene as an automatic reflex, and it will help you to achieve better control when faced with a stressful situation.

It's best to begin using *relaxation imagery* right after having practiced the progressive relaxation procedure. This allows you to capitalize on the good feelings that you have already created.

The idea is to think about, and visualize in detail, a time and place where you have felt especially safe, secure, and perfectly at peace. It sometimes helps to begin the process by imagining that you are walking down a path through the woods, with many trees on the left and right. Eventually you see a light at the end of the path, and come to a meadow. Here is a peaceful clearing, where the sun is always shining, warming your skin, and the grass smells lush. You can hear the tinkling of a brook nearby.

Perhaps it's just this meadow that you were looking for, or maybe you'll want to follow the road leading to the beach, where the waves come and go, caressing the white sand. The salty smell in the air clears your mind, and the sound of the waves lulls you into a peaceful, almost hypnotic state.

Or, you can see in the distance a cottage tucked into the side of a hill, with smoke lazily rising from the chimney. It's cozy in front of the fireplace. The smell of your favorite soup wafts from the kitchen and permeates the air, bringing back warm, nurturing memories.

Now it's time to create your own personal relaxation image. Perhaps one of the scenarios above triggered a memory for you. Or maybe a childhood scene, a time of innocence, will work for you.

Begin creating your scene slowly, with your eyes closed, sketching it in broad strokes like an artist preparing a major canvas. Visualize the scene and then anchor it to a specific time and place (e.g., 3 P.M. on a lazy

afternoon on August 20th, 1985, in the Catskills mountains). Now start to fill in the details. Shapes and colors, the quality of light and shadow.

Next, add the dimension of sound: blackbirds cawing as they fly overhead, or waves washing up on shore. Perhaps you can hear a faint melody, a long-forgotten tune.

Now, explore the tactile qualities of this place. Become aware of the temperature, whether it's warmth on your skin or a pleasant cool breeze. If you're lying on the grass, notice the tickling sensation as the blades brush your ear when you turn your head. And remember the unique smells associated with this time and place. Fresh mown grass, bread just out of the oven, or honeysuckle on the vine.

Finally, pay attention to the emotional "feel" of this place. Become aware of ripples of calmness, the reassuring feeling of safety and security. A sense of peace and tranquility pervades the entire scene.

When you have finished creating this peaceful scene, stop for a minute and savor the experience. Just drink it in, memorizing all the components. Let all the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings sink into your awareness. Now anchor the scene with a *key word* like "Catskills" or "Mariposa."

Open your eyes and look around. Notice where you are in the real world. Now go back to the relaxation image. Use your key word. Allow yourself to become fully immersed in the scene. See it, hear it, smell it, feel it. Notice the accompanying sense of security, peace, and relaxation. Now come back to the room again.

Use the form on the next page to record your relaxation scene. Put in as much detail as possible.

In order to help you achieve the transition from the here and now to your relaxation scene as quickly as possible, it's sometimes useful to imagine a *Magic Door*. Science fiction fans will be familiar with this concept as "teleportation," in which you are literally transported from one place to another, instantaneously. Face the nearest blank wall and picture a door with a brass knob and a brass plaque. The plaque has your key word inscribed on it. When you turn the knob and open the door, you will find, to your surprise, that your relaxation scene is already fully prepared on the other side. All you have to do is cross the threshold and there you are, safe and secure.

With a little bit of practice, you are now ready to use this relaxation scene any time there is tension, or when a situation arises that is potentially disturbing or distressing.

Summary

The two relaxation skills that you've learned in this chapter, combined with what you will learn in the next chapter, can have a major impact on your experience of anger. Progressive relaxation training, if practiced daily, can reduce overall tension. And the relaxation imagery you've created can help you face specific situations that threaten your sense of calm.

Homework

1. Using the Anger Log, continue your daily monitoring of situations that elicit anger, and be sure to note trigger thoughts. As before, all angry reactions greater than 40 (on a 100-point scale of anger arousal) are to be recorded.
2. You may photocopy the progressive relaxation training procedure and your relaxation scene in order to facilitate daily practice. Be sure to practice the relaxation training and the relaxation scene at least five times during the next week. Record all practice in the Relaxation Log.

PERSONAL RELAXATION SCENE—Worksheet

Describe time and place (where and when):

Visual components (everything that you can see):

Auditory components (everything that you hear):

Tactile components (things that you touch or feel on your skin):

Olfactory components (what you smell):

Emotional components (feelings like safety or calmness):

CHAPTER 5

ADVANCED RELAXATION SKILLS

Before we move on to the next set of relaxation techniques, it's useful to review the progress that you've made so far. By now you should be able to reliably relax, using the key words to follow the memorized sequence of the progressive relaxation technique. You should also be able to produce your relaxation image quickly, and in substantial detail, using all your senses. If you don't feel completely sure of yourself, practice a few more times. Then you can begin using this chapter with a sense of confidence and mastery.

At this point you may have questions about just how useful relaxation really is, especially when you find yourself in the middle of a fight with your spouse. The answer is that if you do the relaxation exercises every day, as part of your daily routine, you will notice a marked reduction in your overall tension. You'll also be less irritable. That's because relaxation has become an automatic part of your life. But this isn't enough. You need some more tools to help you relax during a period of actual upset, and that's just what this chapter is all about.

Breathing

A proper breathing technique is the next step on the relaxation agenda. Even though we've been breathing all our lives, most of us have forgotten how to breathe properly. For a quick refresher course, go find the nearest baby. Notice her little tummy rise and fall with each breath. This is called diaphragmatic, or "deep," breathing.

You can start by putting one hand on your chest and the other over your abdomen, just above the belt line. Now take a deep breath and push it all the way down into your belly. It helps to imagine filling a canteen with water. The canteen fills from the bottom up, just like the air in your belly. As you breathe in, the hand over your abdomen will rise, while the hand on your chest hardly moves at all. Focus all your attention on your belly, and send your breath down, down, down to fill your belly. Allow your breath to slightly stretch and relax your abdomen. As you take each breath, noticing your belly rise and fall, you experience a sense of calm. By doing this

exercise, you are automatically sending a message to your brain that all is well. Just like a peacefully sleeping baby.

If you're having trouble pushing the air into your belly, it might be helpful to press down on your abdomen with both hands or place a moderately heavy telephone book on your abdomen. Both of these methods will not only increase your awareness, but will also force you to use your abdominal muscles.

Exercise: Deep Breathing during Stress

In order to practice *deep breathing* during stressful situations, use the outline provided on the next page. For this practice exercise, you'll need to prepare two scenes where stress can lead to a moderate anger response (but not a nuclear meltdown). Create one scene using your work environment and one scene using your home environment. Break down each situation into at least three segments. At the end of each segment is a cue to remind you to take a "deep breath." Now practice your deep breathing technique by visualizing the scenes, one segment at a time, taking a deep diaphragmatic breath at the end of each segment. Notice how the deep breath affects your tension level while you're imagining the scene.

Practice your first moderate stress scene two or three times. When you move on to the second scene, visualize it once without taking your deep breaths. Really get into it; try to make it as real as possible. Notice your stress level when you're finished. Visualize the scene at least two more times, but now taking a deep breath as you finish each segment. Chances are, you'll see that your stress level goes down when you include deep breaths during the scene.

To give you an idea of how to structure your stressful scenes on the worksheet, we've included an example worksheet with two scenes created by a forty-three-year-old insurance adjuster.

When she did this exercise, she experimented with different strategies. First she went through each scene and just thought about how it made her feel. Then she went through each scene again and did some deep breathing, as recommended. She was amazed to find how much her tension level actually went down at the end of the exercise.

Exercise: Relaxation without Tension

Up to now you've practiced the progressive relaxation technique (PRT) by increasing tension, but now it's time to eliminate that tension as well, using a technique called *relaxation without tension*. Once again, go through the PRT sequence. But this time, as you scan each muscle group, simply *notice* any tension in that part of your body, take a deep breath, and as you exhale, *relax away* and let go of all that tension.

- Start at the bottom just as before, and point your toes, then gently reverse, toes to head. Notice any tension, take a deep breath, and on the exhale, relax away the tension.
- Now focus on your buttocks. Again, just notice tension (if you find any), then take a deep breath, and on the exhale, relax.
- Next, your chest and stomach muscles. Notice, breathe, exhale, relax.
- Arch your back, and, without straining, notice any tension. Then, take a deep breath, and relax away the stress.
- Focusing on your arms and biceps, simply notice any tension you may feel there. Now, take a deep breath, and on the exhale, relax the tension. Just let it go.
- Check out your neck and shoulders. Notice, breathe, exhale, relax away the tension.

DEEP BREATHING DURING STRESS—Worksheet

Instructions: In the spaces provided below, create two scenes that are stressful and would lead to a moderate anger response. Break each scene down into at least three segments. Fill in enough detail to allow you to fully imagine each scene. Be sure to take a deep breath at the end of each segment.

Scene 1:
(work)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

Scene 2:
(home)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

(deep breath)

DEEP BREATHING DURING STRESS—Worksheet Example

Instructions: In the spaces provided below, create two scenes that are stressful and would lead to a moderate anger response. Break each scene down into at least three segments. Fill in enough detail to allow you to fully imagine each scene. Be sure to take a deep breath at the end of each segment.

Scene 1:
(work) *I'm in the car on my way to work and it's hot. The traffic is slowing down to a crawl.*

(deep breath)

Now I'm literally stopped. All the windows are open, but not the hint of a breeze. A car pushes into my lane.

(deep breath)

It's a souped-up station wagon with flames painted on the side. The kid is practically hitting my fender.

(deep breath)

Heavy metal blares from his window. Now he's honking and gesturing to let him in. I won't. He keeps inching his bumper closer to my car.

(deep breath)

Scene 2:
(home) *My mother calls. High creaky voice. Complains bitterly about life in the same house with my aunt. Suddenly she says she wants to visit.*

(deep breath)

She has the tickets already—arriving June 4. Right in the middle of finals. I tell her no way. She starts sounding irritated. Talking fast.

(deep breath)

She says the tickets aren't refundable. Accuses me of not wanting to see her, and not answering the phone when she calls. I feel hot/perspiring.

(deep breath)

She's talking really fast. I interrupt, I say my grades will suffer if she comes. She says I ought to loosen up and enjoy life; and stop bringing everyone down.

(deep breath)

- Now turn your attention to your forehead and notice any tension you may find. Move your focus to the rest of your face, and mouth. Notice any tension there, take a deep breath, and relax on the exhale.

Practice this at least five times before going on to the next section, and be sure to keep track by using the Relaxation Log at the end of this chapter.

Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Now it's time to choose your personal *cue word*, a two-syllable word or phrase. This will enable you to enter into a state of deep, *cue-controlled relaxation* each time you repeat it. You don't have to say it out loud. Just saying it under your breath, or even thinking it, will work just fine. Choose something like "relax," "let go," "release," or "okay." You might prefer a color, such as "deep blue," or a feeling, such as "true love." A phrase that evokes a personal memory of peace and contentment often works best.

Keeping your cue word (phrase) in mind, return your attention once again to your deep, diaphragmatic breathing. Now, each time you exhale, say your cue word (phrase) out loud or to yourself. Try to relax your entire body as you exhale, and think (or say) your cue word. Make your whole body feel as relaxed as it was when you had just finished the relaxation without tension exercise. Do this ten times in a row, to set up an automatic response pattern. Write your cue word (phrase) in the space below as a reminder:

Exercise: Cue-Controlled Relaxation during Stress

In order to practice this new skill, go back to the scenes you developed earlier for the deep breathing exercise. You can use the same worksheet as before—just replace the deep breathing prompt with your cue word (phrase). This will help you learn to relax by triggering the cue-controlled relaxation response, using your cue word (phrase).

Be sure to practice relaxation without tension and cue-controlled relaxation daily for the next week to ten days. Note all practice times in the Relaxation Log provided at the end of the chapter.

Combined Relaxation Skills

Once you have learned all of the essential elements of relaxation, it's time to practice them by quickly switching them on and off. For practice, do the following combinations: First, do the relaxation imagery for two minutes, followed by relaxation without tension for five minutes, and finally, cue-

controlled relaxation (using deep, diaphragmatic breathing) for two minutes. Next, do the relaxation imagery again, cue-controlled relaxation, relaxation without tension, and a final round of relaxation imagery. All in all, this combined relaxation exercise will probably take no more than fifteen minutes. Practice this combined relaxation exercise at least three times in the next week (in addition to the separate relaxation without tension and cue-controlled relaxation described above). Be sure to note all practice times in the Relaxation Log. You can photocopy the sample provided to make as many sheets as you need.

Coping When You're Stressed

Everything that you've done so far is to prepare you for the "real thing." Inevitably, you'll be faced with a provocative situation in real life that challenges your resolve and threatens to blow your composure. That's why it's so important to be really comfortable with brief stress reduction strategies for anger management. This next exercise will allow you to find out for yourself exactly which strategy is most comfortable and effective for you.

Exercise: What Works for You

For this last exercise, write out another provocative scene on the worksheet provided on the next page. Be generous in your attention to detail. This will allow you to fully visualize and experience the scene so that you can *notice* where tension is concentrated in your body. Be sure to insert breathing and relaxation cues. In this exercise, relaxation without tension should focus only on the most tense part of your body. First, do a run-through of each scene without any relaxation, to determine where in your body most of the tension accumulates. Then, during relaxation without tension, you can focus only on those specific muscle groups. Alternate cue-controlled relaxation and relaxation without tension exercises. See which works best for you.

That's it. You have now learned all the key relaxation skills necessary to help control your anger and make your life less stressful. Progressive relaxation and relaxation imagery should become part of your daily routine,

because they lower your overall stress and arousal level. Deep breathing, relaxation without tension, and cue-controlled relaxation can be used any time that you are faced with a provocative situation.

The key to success (How do you get to Carnegie Hall?) is practice, practice, practice. Over time these skills will become automatic, just like riding a bicycle or driving a car.

Homework

1. Continue using your Anger Log to record anger situations greater than 40 on the scale.
2. Use Relaxation Log II to note dates you practiced relaxation imagery, cue-controlled relaxation, and relaxation without tension. Plan to practice all three relaxation skills at least five out of seven days in the next week.

CHAPTER 6

TRIGGER THOUGHTS

Imagine that you're in an office where several coworkers like to listen to radio talk shows at their desks. The sound isn't terribly loud, but you find yourself distracted by the constant prattle. It continues all day long. Just visualize the scene for a moment. Now imagine that you're saying to yourself, "How inconsiderate they are, how selfish, how unaware of the needs of others." Imagine yourself getting a bit worked up, thinking that they're doing this to you deliberately because they simply don't give a damn about anybody but themselves. Take a moment to notice what you are feeling.

Now imagine the scene with a little twist. Your coworkers are listening to the same distracting talk shows. This time you say to yourself, "I can't think, I can't concentrate, I'm never going to get my work done. I'm never going to get this in on time. I'm not going to be able to function here. How can I keep my job if I can't do a simple task like this when there's a little noise?" Pause a moment to notice what you're feeling.

Now imagine one last version of this scenario. Same office, same coworkers, same radio noise. On this occasion you think to yourself, "I never fit in anywhere. Things always bother me. They'll be resentful if I ask them to turn off the radio. This is the story of my life—I'm the weird one. I'm so rattle-brained that I can't even think with a little background jabber. I can't handle the slightest stress or problem." Now pause and notice what you feel with the situation framed in this way.

In the first scenario, there's a good chance that you felt a little angry. Thoughts that label others as selfish or inconsiderate, blaming them for your discomfort, tend to trigger angry feelings. The second scenario had very different thoughts. When you perceive the situation as dangerous ("I'm not going to be able to function...how can I keep my job?"), your emotional reaction is likely to be anxiety. In the last scene, thoughts focus on self-criticism; the problems are all your fault. Your emotional response is likely to be sadness.

As you learned in [chapter 2](#), trigger thoughts have a major impact on your anger. But anger isn't the only emotion that your thoughts influence. The

above visualization suggests that thoughts can create anxiety and sadness as well. In fact, how you frame and interpret your experience has far more influence on your feelings than actual events. Your assumptions and beliefs about reality are more powerful than reality itself.

The suggestion that our own thinking might be responsible for some of our most painful emotions runs contrary to conventional wisdom. Normally, we tend to see events as the cause of our feelings, and this conception is embedded in our language. “You made me angry.” “This makes me sad.” “The situation scares me.” But in between the event and the emotion lies your prefrontal cortex—the place in your brain where you interpret experience. It’s not what actually happens that you react to, but the conclusions you draw and the assumptions you make.

Sensory Input Versus Assumptions

One way to understand the role of trigger thoughts in our emotions is to look at the distinction between sensory input (what eyes, ears, and touch tell us) and the *meanings* we create out of sensory information. In truth, we are entirely cut off from direct experience of reality. What we “see” is an internal computer screen created by our conclusions and evaluations, not a picture of the actual event.

Consider this example. Sensory input tells you a friend is frowning, her eyes are narrowing, and her voice is getting higher. She is saying something about having to rush. Because you are late for a lunch appointment, your evaluation is that she must be angry at you. That’s the conclusion on your internal screen, so you begin to react defensively, perhaps even picking a fight. Only later do you learn that she was late too, had rushed to meet you, and was relieved that she hadn’t kept you waiting. Here’s what’s important: The assumptions on your screen had almost nothing to do with reality. You’d taken a frown, narrow eyes, and an ambiguous comment and created a completely distorted picture out of them. We do this all the time. We make assumptions about the motives and feelings of others—often very wrong—and get enraged by them.

Exercise: What’s on Her Screen?

The following is a transcript of a woman describing, in a psychotherapy session, a recent anger episode with her invalid mother. Read it and underline every statement that is sensory input only; then put a wavy line under every statement that comes from her screen (assumptions, conclusions, beliefs, and meanings drawn from the situation). Here's the transcript:

“She was looking at me with wide open, ‘help me, help me’ eyes, like she didn’t care that I’d already been over there three times that week. So I said, ‘What is it, Mom?’ And she just sits there and doesn’t say anything. She’s really still. Like it’s beneath her to speak the obvious, that I was put on this earth to take care of her. And I’m screwing it up. I can tell she’s just disgusted with me. Finally she says, ‘How about some music,’ and puts on this hideous Lawrence Welk record. Which she knows I hate, and only plays when she’s annoyed with me. My mother lives in passive-aggressive-ville.

“And she lies. If she says A, assume she means B. While the record is on, she says, ‘All I really want is to get along with you, Carol.’ But I know that’s code for ‘What’s wrong with you, Carol, that you don’t get along with me?’ It’s disguised criticism. That’s the way she works. Then she kisses me and says all the hassling is wearing her out and she’s going to take a nap before dinner. And she sort of shuffles off like I’ve destroyed her or something.”

If you’ve finished doing the underlining, look ahead to see what in the transcript is sensory input, and what comes from Carol’s “screen.”

Sensory Input

She was looking at me with wide open eyes, so I said, “What is it, Mom?” And she just sits there and doesn’t say anything. She’s really still. Finally she says, “How about some music?” and puts on this Lawrence Welk record. While the record is on she says, “All I really want is to get along with you, Carol.” Then she kisses me and says all the hassling is wearing her out and she’s going to take a nap before dinner. She sort of shuffles off.

What’s on Carol’s Screen?

(She was looking at me with) “help me, help me” eyes. Like she didn’t care I’d already been over there three times that week...(She’s really still) like it’s beneath her to speak the obvious, that I was put on this earth to take care of her. And I’m screwing it up. I can tell she’s just disgusted with

me(she puts on) this hideous Lawrence Welk record. Which she knows I hate, and only plays when she's annoyed with me. My mother lives in passive-aggressive-ville.

And she lies. If she says A, assume she means B. I know it's code for "What's wrong with you, Carol, that you don't get along with me?" It's disguised criticism. That's the way she works...she shuffles) like I've destroyed her or something.

When you separate the sensory data from the conclusions on the screen, it seems like two almost totally different experiences. In particular, the assumption, "She's just disgusted with me," appears very disconnected from what was actually said and done. In our normal thinking, sensory input and screen conclusions get folded together. The belief, "She's disgusted with me," seems every bit as real as what we actually see and hear. The trouble is that distorted conclusions on our screen often trigger big anger reactions, and we have no idea how far the assumptions on our screen are from reality.

To help distinguish sensory input from screen conclusions, you'll use a slightly modified anger log during the next week. It can be found at the end of the chapter, and it's labeled Anger Log II. It's very important, as you work toward improved anger control, to separate your thoughts (the screen) from the objective facts of a situation. Exaggeration and negative labeling are major sources of anger, and using Anger Log II will ultimately help you do less of both.

Recognizing Trigger Thoughts

You can always tell an anger-triggering thought by how it frames reality. Here are the basic components of most trigger thoughts:

1. The perception that you've been harmed and victimized.
2. The belief that the provoking person harmed you deliberately.
3. The belief that the provoking person was wrong and bad to harm you, and should have behaved differently.

Let's examine some typical trigger thoughts and see how these three elements can be separated out:

1. “Why do I have to come home from work exhausted and shop and clean and cook and get zero help?”

Harm: Overwork, exhaustion

Done Deliberately: Implication that the provoking person chooses not to help, thus contributing to the exhaustion.

And Wrong: Implication that giving zero help is unjust and unfair.

2. “It’s a stupid way to operate a car, and I’ve said it a hundred times—you don’t keep riding the brakes because it wears them out.”

Harm: Cost of a brake job; not being listened to.

Done Deliberately: Implication that if the provoking person thought a little more, or made a reasonable effort, he or she could remember to use the brakes properly.

And Wrong: Implies that riding the brakes is poor driving technique; and not heeding appropriate warnings is either lazy or careless.

3. “She’s doing this to upset me (child jumping on the sofa following an angry exchange regarding staying at the table until breakfast is eaten).”

Harm: Noise, dirt on sofa, not being listened to.

Done Deliberately: Implies the child is choosing obnoxious behavior out of a need for revenge.

And Wrong: Implies child is being manipulative and disobedient.

Now you try to identify the three elements of trigger thoughts for these next examples.

4. “How could he tell them about losing my job before I did? It’s like he’s trying to humiliate me.”

Harm:

Done Deliberately:

And Wrong:

5. “She doesn’t care if the toilet flushes, just as long as I pay the rent. She’s all about the money and doesn’t give a damn about fixing anything.”

Harm:

*Done Deliberately:
And Wrong:*

Answer Key for Examples 4 and 5

4. *Harm*: Humiliated; *Done Deliberately*: The provoking person chose to reveal confidential information; *And Wrong*: Implies that it's wrong to embarrass someone.
5. *Harm*: Toilet doesn't work; *Done Deliberately*: Landlord chooses to save money and ignore problem; *And Wrong*: Unfair to renters not to maintain property.

Exercise: Dissecting Your Trigger Thoughts

Take four trigger thoughts from last week's Anger Log and identify the key elements.

Trigger Thought 1

Harm:

Done Deliberately:

And Wrong:

Trigger Thought 2

Harm:

Done Deliberately:

And Wrong:

Trigger Thought 3

Harm:

Done Deliberately:

And Wrong:

Trigger Thought 4

Harm:

Done Deliberately:

And Wrong:

Trigger Thoughts Make You Feel Helpless

All trigger thoughts assert that you've been harmed, deliberately and wrongly. But there's one more implication: Not only did the provoking person cause your pain, but they ought to change so the pain can stop. They are both responsible for the harm *and* required to fix it.

The problem with this thinking is that it leaves you feeling very helpless. The pain you experience is out of your control. Someone did it to you, and you won't feel better until they see the light and change their behavior. But, as you already know, *people rarely change*. They keep behaving in habitual ways. They do what's rewarding to them, what makes them feel good. Your anger may distress them briefly, but usually they quickly return to their old patterns. The whole time you're angry, waiting for them to change, you remain stuck. You keep hurting, and the problem feels beyond your control.

This feeling of angry helplessness starts a vicious cycle: You're hurt, the provoking person should fix it but doesn't, and you feel stuck and unable to escape the pain. The feeling of helplessness makes you feel even worse, even more angry, even more frustrated that the provoking person won't change.

Breaking the cycle requires that you take responsibility for changing what's painful, and not wait for the other person to do it. For example, imagine that you have a friend who's chronically late for lunch dates. Over and over you find yourself fuming in a restaurant. Of course, you can lambaste your friend each time you find yourself stuck waiting; you can complain about the thoughtlessness and disregard for your time. However, if you take responsibility for your own pain, you might:

- always remember to bring a book and schedule extra time, or

- never meet in a restaurant, or
- always include others so you'll have someone to talk to while you wait, or
- pick your friend up at home.

Instead of being helpless and angry, you take charge of the situation. Here's another example. Your partner never cleans up after himself. Clothes are on the floor, dishes and cups are left on the coffee table, the bathroom sink always has toothpaste residue. You can stay caught in the anger-helplessness-anger cycle, or you can:

- hire a weekly house cleaner at his expense;
- if there are two bathrooms, give him exclusive use of one;
- put the stuff he drops around the house on top of his desk or in a box;
- leave the dishes on his side of the bed;
- delay putting on the video till he's finished his cleanup tasks for the night;
- move out.

Think back for a moment to the situation described at the beginning of the chapter—feeling distracted by radio talk shows that coworkers listen to all day in the office. If the protagonist in the scene took responsibility for his or her own discomfort, here's how the situation might be reframed. "This is no big deal. They're having a good time. They don't know they're bugging me. I'll find a diplomatic way to get them to turn the radios down, or I'll get some headphones and listen to relaxing music." When you take responsibility, both anger and helplessness melt away. You're suddenly free to solve the problem. Instead of always asking the question, "Who's responsible for my pain?," you ask instead, "What can I do about it?"

Here are three coping mantras that can help you stay focused on taking responsibility:

1. I am responsible for what happens between us.
2. No point in blaming. I'll try a new strategy for taking care of myself.
3. What can I do about this?

Exercise: Taking Control

Review your *Anger Log* for the past week and complete this exercise for each provocative situation:

Provocative Situation	What I Expect from the Other Person	How I Can Take Responsibility and Control
1. My mother calls and asks for help paying my sister's nursing school tuition.	She ought to understand my financial situation and not embarrass me by asking for money. My sister should get a loan.	Tell her I can't help but don't reveal how truly screwed my finances are. Suggest sister get a loan that the government forgives when you work for the VA.
2. Boss gives me a new programming assignment before I finish the one I'm working on.	He should know I'm working as fast as I can, and not load me down so I have to work all night.	Tell him I'm unable to start a new assignment till I've met my current deadline.
3. My mother arranges a birthday party for me and invites a bunch of relatives I hate.	It's crazy to make a birthday party for someone that they'll hate. She should do something I enjoy—not what she'd enjoy.	Tell her to have fun with her relatives, but that's not how I want to spend my birthday. Invite Bill and Carol and Roxanne out to dinner.
4. Roommate and her boyfriend lay all over the couch, leaving debris from a pizza, and then have a big, loud fight in the living room.	They should leave space for me to use my own living room, clean up their stuff, and fight where I can't hear it.	Tell her to clean up. Then turn up the radio in my room so I don't hear them fighting. Ask her to leave next month.

Trigger Thought Themes

It's time to once again review the trigger thoughts you've written in your Anger Log. Now the focus should be on identifying key themes and threads that run through your anger triggers. The following is a list of typical themes that occur in trigger thoughts. Put a check by the ones that underlie some of your angry thinking.

1. People ignore your needs. _____
2. People don't see or understand you. _____
3. People demand or expect too much. _____
4. People are inconsiderate or impolite. _____
5. People take advantage of or use you. _____
6. People control you. _____
7. People are selfish. _____
8. People are stupid and thoughtless. _____
9. People shame and/or criticize you. _____
10. People keep you waiting. _____

11. People are uncaring and/or ungenerous. _____
12. People are manipulative. _____
13. People are threatening and coercive. _____
14. People are mean or cruel. _____
15. People disrespect you. _____
16. People are unfair or unjust. _____
17. People are lazy or don't do their share. _____
18. You're helpless and stuck and have no choice. _____
19. People are incompetent. _____
20. People are irresponsible. _____
21. People don't help. _____
22. People don't do the right thing. _____

Add here any additional themes you discover:

After reviewing your Anger Log, you'll probably find that there are between two and six themes that show up with some frequency. At the root of all of the themes is the notion that people are behaving in ways they shouldn't be, and that you have a right to be angry at them for it.

But what if that weren't true? What if provoking people are doing the only thing they know how to do to take care of themselves and survive? What if they are doing the best they can, given their own needs, fears, pain, and personal history? What if people are behaving based on what they know and don't know, their skills, their physical and emotional limitations, their values, what they find most rewarding, and their available resources? The next exercise explores how most annoying and provoking behavior actually represents the other person's best coping solution, given all of the above.

Exercise: People Are Doing the Best They Can

There's a simple way to prove that this is true. Think back to something you did that really angered another person. Now write down how the following

influenced your behavior and choices:

1. Your needs at that moment:

2. Your fears at that moment:

3. Your pain or stress at that moment:

4. Any personal history or experiences that influenced your behavior or choices:

5. What you knew or didn't know at the time:

6. Your skills or lack of skills that influenced your choice at the time:

7. Any physical or emotional limitations that influenced you to act as you did:

8. Personal values or beliefs that influenced your behavior:

9. The prospects for rewards or pleasures that influenced your choice at that moment:

10. Resources that you did or didn't have at that moment that could have influenced your choice:

If you've really worked through this exercise, it should be clear that your behavior seemed the best available choice *at that moment*. You might, with hindsight, do something different. But it appeared to be the best response when you made it.

If you are still uncertain that you make the best choices available to you (even though they anger others), do the exercise with another situation or two. Or do it for a situation where *you* were angry, and try to identify the main influences on the other person's behavior.

A key understanding from this exercise can greatly reduce your anger response: *We are all doing the best we can to take care of ourselves.*

Homework

1. Record all anger experiences over 40 on the scale on Anger Log II. Pay careful attention to the distinction between sensory input (objective data) and the screen (your assumptions).
2. Implement at least one of the "How I can take responsibility and control" items from your Taking Control Worksheet.
3. Record practice dates for relaxation imagery, cue-controlled relaxation, and relaxation without tension on your Relaxation Log. Best results are achieved by practicing at least five out of seven days of the week.

Anger Log II

Provocative Situation Sensory Input (Objective data from what you hear, see, and touch)	The Screen (Your conclusions, assumptions, interpretations, beliefs, and trigger thoughts)	Anger Rating 0-100	Behavior	Outcomes -10 to +10 Self	Others

