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Anger Management Using a Structured Thought Journal to Identify Anger Triggers

Ever run into a situation where all of a sudden you're in a full-blown crisis—angry, perhaps yelling or doing or saying things that later you wished you hadn't? And then later find yourself in another situation, seemingly completely different, but with the same damaging outcome?



The structured thought journal is a tool for identifying the triggers and patterns that get you into these situations. Even if you have a general idea of what your triggers are, the structured thought journal can help you refine your knowledge and point the way to solutions.

When someone says "journaling," we usually think of writing as catharsis—to get our thoughts and feelings out so they don't trouble us so much anymore. When journaling like this the idea is to just write whatever comes to mind, whatever troubles you the most. A structured thought journal is different. The purpose is to identify triggers. The process is to write down situations where you lost your cool, using a structured format

that consists of event, thought, feeling, behavior and consequence.

Event. This is the thing that triggered you to lose your cool. Someone cuts you off in traffic. Your boss dumps a bunch of extra work on your desk. Your significant other says the wrong thing. Your child backtalks.

Thought. Your instantaneous evaluation of the event. For example, if the event was someone cutting you off in traffic, the thought might be "How rude! They disrespected me!" If the event was your boss dumping extra work on your desk, the thought might be "Doesn't he know I have enough to do already? He's taking advantage of me!" Generally, anger stems from a thought that others are deliberately harming you in some way and perhaps not behaving the way they "should" be.

Feeling. How you felt after completing your evaluation. Sometimes the evaluation takes a long time, a "slow burn," but often the evaluation and feeling happen so



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fast that it feels like the feeling happens first. But that's not how it works. The feeling wouldn't occur if there wasn't some sort of evaluation happening first, however automatic and fleeting. Of course, since we're talking about anger, that emotion will often be involved, but there may be other emotions—hurt, resentful, betrayed, disappointed, helpless, jealous, sick, scared, shocked, trapped, panicked, frustrated, aggressive, even rage. Anger is the protection emotion, so generally you will feel some sense of hurt before you feel angry. There may be a whole sequence of emotions leading up to anger or rage.

Behavior. What you do. Speed up and try to cut the other driver off in return. Yell at your boss, spouse, child, coworker, clerk. Sulk. Put your fist through the wall.

Consequences. What happens as a result of your behavior, both internally and externally. Your fist hurts. Your relationship with the person you raged at is damaged. You get in a car accident. You get arrested. Those are external consequences. Internal consequences include your blood pressure goes up, your immune system suffers, you don't sleep well.

So there you have it—event, thought, feeling, behavior and consequence. Generally, the further towards the start of the sequence you can intervene the better. Trying to control the consequences after the fact is the least effective. The damage has been done and all you can do is try to mitigate the problems. Often, attempts at damage control just make the problem worse. Trying to control the behavior directly is better but often ineffective. If that was all it took then anger management would be easy! And it's hard to control your feelings, once they get started. You can try, but the feelings will tend to come out somehow—as passive-aggressive behavior, as ulcers. The feelings are like smoke—you can block off the chimney but the smoke will just find another outlet.

The best bet is to control the thoughts or the events. Did that driver really disrespect you, or were they just in a hurry? Maybe they just heard their child was in the hospital. It happens. Or perhaps they are just jerks. What does that have to do with you? Their being a jerk has nothing to do with your worth. You got in your car to drive somewhere, not to retrain all the crazy drivers out there. You change



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the thought and you will experience different feelings, behave differently and have different consequences. This is the core of cognitive behavioral therapy.

You can also, sometimes, control the event. Don't get on the freeway at rush hour. Don't have an important discussion with your significant other or child when you are tired. Don't watch the TV program that always gets you angry at the world. Avoiding the trigger event isn't always possible. Your standby is to restructure your thoughts.

So now you can see why the structured thought journal is so useful. By keeping the journal over

the course of weeks, writing in it every day, you can begin to see patterns. You can see events that you want to avoid or at least be prepared to cope with in a better way. Events won't catch you off guard. You can identify the thoughts that are getting you in trouble. It may be helpful to share the contents of the structured thought journal with a counselor, anger management group or trusted, unbiased friend. It helps if others can help you brainstorm tricks to avoid, escape or cope with difficult situations. The structured thought journal gives you knowledge, and knowledge is power—the power to change your life for the better.

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The original of this article can be found online at
<http://deerval.com/Articles/StructuredThoughtJournal.htm>.

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