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Moving from **ANGER MANAGEMENT** to **ANGER PREVENTION**

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."
– Ben Franklin and my mother

By John W. Herdman, PhD, LADC

Have you ever thought about the above saying? I did not until I began thinking about how I approach anger. You and I hear about anger management on a nearly daily basis. There are books, classes, and groups focused on anger management. An underlying assumption of anger management is that anger is present and that managing anger is a good thing. I definitely have to agree with that assumption. There is a need to manage anger...when anger is present. Failure to manage anger often results in negative consequences. The ultimate consequence of anger is murder; less severe consequences are known as domestic violence, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Failure to manage anger leads to anger managing the person.

I am glad our society has firemen/women. They are skilled in fighting fires. They spend much of their day working for fire prevention. They do not want to go into burning buildings any more than a person wants to be angry and suffer the consequences that getting angry causes. Time and effort to prevent anger will reap great benefits.

A person does not have to like a situation or others' comments. By recognizing one's own anger and managing that anger, a person is in a better position to get favorable results without unwanted conflict or the other consequences of anger gaining control.

Preventing anger begins with knowing and then accepting that there are only three things that an individual can control in life. These three things are one's thoughts, feelings and behavior. I tell my clients that this is both good news and bad news. The good

news is that one only has to worry about three things and the bad news is that one only controls three things. You do not control "he – she – they – them – or it!"

Emotional Intelligence Contributes to Anger Prevention

Once this basic foundational concept is laid, the next level of awareness to work toward is understanding the importance of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Goleman presents five levels of emotional intelligence. The first level is recognition of one's own emotions. The second level is then to manage those emotions. This means recognizing anger and then managing that anger before it takes control. When one's emotions are under control, it will be easier to move forward. The third level of emotional intelligence is to recognize others' emotions, and the fourth level is to manage one's relationships with others. When those relationships are managed, then one can be confident about handling conflict without bursts of angry emotions. With significantly less drama and dysfunction in one's life, there is then freedom to work on level five which is to become motivated to achieve goals.

I very rarely make "always" or "never" statements. However, I do say that anger always comes from "Should-itis" or the irrational use of "should." Everything is exactly as it now *should* be, even if it is not what one may *want* it to be. Popular today is the statement, "It is what it is." Current reality exists, no matter good or bad. What really messes us up is the picture in our mind of the way it is supposed to be, which can lead to denial of current reality. All too often we make *ourselves* angry when we think or

believe he/she *should* or *should not* have said or did what they did. There is no known magic in the real world outside of the human mind. Everything is exactly as it now *should* be. All people act according to the way they think or believe. We do not have to like it... "It is what it is."

One question to consider in order to prevent getting angry is this: "Is my thinking based on fact?" In order to really get good at preventing anger, it is important to know the difference between truth and fact. Truth is an idea that someone believes. Believing the idea makes it true for the believer. But personal beliefs, and therefore truth, often have little or nothing to do with the facts of the situation. Obvious facts exist regardless of whether one believes or likes them. Facts just are. Thinking that he or she *should* not have said something is NOT based on fact. People are fallible. They make mistakes. When you have contradictory beliefs of "Everyone makes mistakes" and "He/she *should* not have made a mistake," your thinking is NOT based on facts.

Everything Is Exactly As It Now Should Be!

This fact does not mean that one has to like what is happening or what has happened, nor does one have to think it is best. The rational use of *should* means only that everything necessary to make current reality happen was done first. Consequently, every current reality had to happen the way it happened and therefore *should* have happened that way.

Take any event in history that you can recall.

- Brutus stabbing Caesar
- Washington crossing the Delaware
- The Japanese attacking Pearl Harbor
- The 9/11 terrorist attacks
- Your mother yelling at you

You are in control of you. You control your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. If you do not like current reality, you are free to do your best to change it, and to try and prevent it from happening again in the future. In addition, if you are thinking rationally, you will not make yourself undesirably angry, upset, or feel the need to use substances before you do what you are willing to do about the undesirable situation in your life.

Sometimes, a person may confuse rationally accepting reality with passive resignation to all the undesirable situations in life. Nothing could be further from the fact. Passive resignation to the situation or "rolling over and playing dead" isn't necessary. Passive resignation requires submission and implies surrender to some overpowering person or event. Dislike of the idea of passive resignation is understandable. Rational thinking will not allow passive resignation to people or events and that fact will become obvious after rational acceptance of current reality is understood.

Rationally accepting what now is means to recognize that the past events in life that created the present situation cannot be undone, no matter how undesirable the situation is now. However, a person can still do whatever he or she is willing and able to do to change the present situation. Nothing needs to be surrendered, except useless, unproductive feelings of anger,

guilt, and depression that irrational "*shoulds*" usually cause. Rather than powerlessness, a person has the power to change feelings of anger by changing his or her thinking and use of words. Although anger is a common emotion, it is not normal. It is better to prevent anger. Prevention eliminates the necessity of having to implement anger management techniques.

ACCEPTED TRUTH is an idea that someone believes. Believing an idea makes it true for the believer. But personal beliefs, and therefore truth, often have little or nothing to do with the facts of the situation, and a lot to do with a person's hopes, fears, likes, dislikes, and expectations.

OBVIOUS FACT exists in the real world independent of what people think or believe. *Obvious fact* exists whether or not people know about it, accept it, believe it, or like it. **It Simply Is!**

In the 1400's, sailors held on to a belief that the earth was flat. When a storm came up and they lost sight of land many were scared, not because of the storm but because of their belief that they would fall off the end of the earth. Were they really afraid? Yes! Was their thinking based on fact? Today we know that it was not. Accidents are often the result of human error. One person thinks that it is okay to pass another car when it is not okay if the action results in an accident. It's important to remember that injury can result when one's thinking is not based on fact.

The most important question a person can consider may be "Is my thinking based on fact?" I believe that the irrational use of *should* always (yes, always) causes the irrational emotion of anger or guilt. We have observed that clients can *not only* prevent anger, but they can reduce the length of time spent dealing with irrational anger if they avoid "shoulding" on themselves or others. Prevention! Just listen to the words that others use. "He shouldn't have done that!" "It shouldn't be that way!" and "She should listen to me!" Those reactions, whether thought or expressed aloud, reflect angry emotion.

Think about this. How would your day be different if you never got angry in the first place? Rather than anger management, what about anger prevention? An analogy for anger prevention is defensive driving, when one drives deliberately, anticipating circumstances or conditions that may cause an accident. Accident management occurs after the accident has already happened and can involve medical, insurance, physical therapy, car repair, and other services. What if the accident never happened in the first place? There would be no inconvenience whatsoever.

I invite you to think about moving from anger management to anger prevention. In this way you can stop the violence and stop the anger from happening in the first place. You can learn to prevent anger. You can learn to manage your anger appropriately when it is there. You can!

Dr. John W. Herdman is a licensed psychologist and a licensed alcohol and drug counselor in Lincoln, Nebraska. He is the owner of *Parallels*, a mental health and licensed outpatient drug and alcohol facility. Dr. Herdman can be contacted at either johnh@parallelslincoln.com or johnh@bytz.net.

Reference:

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.