

# Anger Management Basic Techniques

By John DeMarco M.Ed., LPC

Let these words thunder in your brain:

“The way to control anger is to desensitize it.”

## *Introduction*

Anger is a misunderstood emotion by 99.9% of all mental health professionals, as well as the general public. And very little research has been done to understand what causes dysfunctional anger as well as effective strategies for helping people control it.

Consequently, anger management programs only provide limited temporary help. To illustrate the problem consider the situation of two people with dysfunctional anger habits. One is William and the other is Tom.

William is 43 years old and works as a consultant with an advertising agency. He is married and is the father of two girls, one aged nine and the other seven years old. He and his wife are having marital problems, and they fight about how to discipline their children. William finds his work stressful, and too frequently, when he's home with his family he demonstrates excessive anger. Most often his anger is directed towards his wife.

William enrolled himself in an anger management program. He learned that it is important to pay attention to when his anger is aroused, and that as he feels his anger soaring upwards, to begin using various techniques. Some of those techniques are: think before you speak; once you are calm, then express your anger; take a timeout; count to 60; and take deep breaths. In the beginning these techniques helped, but not long after William resorted back to his old anger habits again. He had learned techniques, but he himself didn't change. If he weren't paying attention to his anger arousal, he was still at risk for behaving with excessive anger.

Tom is 29 years old and works as a heavy crane operator. He has been married three years, and although he and his wife are interested in starting a family, his wife is hesitant to start because she is troubled by Tom's outbursts of anger. Their relationship is conflicted because of his anger, and his wife is seriously considering a divorce.

In order to save his marriage, Tom started an anger management therapy program with John DeMarco M.Ed., LPC. In that therapy Tom learned that his anger shoots up instantly, in one 18<sup>th</sup> of a second. He now knows that his anger doesn't usually boil up slowly, but kind of snaps into place instantly. He learned that there are four types of distortions in his automatic thought processes that cause his anger response. Then he learned the skills that corrected those distortions. By practicing mental rehearsals using those skills he literally desensitized his anger. Now things that used to make him hyper angry no longer have that effect. Tom isn't just controlling his anger, he has changed himself. He now feels empowered and his relationship with his wife is healthy.

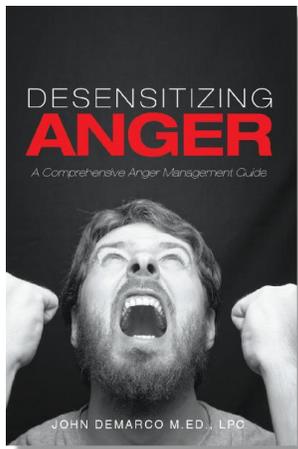
I wrote the book: *Desensitizing Anger: A Comprehensive Anger Management Guide*. I wrote it because in my research as an anger therapist, working with hundreds of anger clients, I learned to articulate the absolute and factual cause of anger and developed a new and innovative approach to correcting anger when it is a problem. That approach focuses on permanently desensitizing a dysfunctional anger response.

On the following pages is the handout I give my anger management clients when they begin anger therapy. It is the first of nine modules that they receive in order to successfully desensitize their anger habit. This is a very powerful module, and by itself it can constitute a complete anger management program. It presents four very powerful emotional self-regulating skills. It also presents a very powerful technique that will lead to desensitization of anger. That technique is mental rehearsal. The following quote from my book explains it.

“Mental rehearsal is a performance enhancing technique used in sports psychology with athletes. The athletic performance of athletes is greatly enhanced using this method. Athletes imagine the athletic situation they want to perform in and mentally visualize using the skills needed to achieve their desired goals. Repeated practice with this technique results in enhanced performance. I have adapted this technique using skills focused on changing your anger response in situations that typically prompt you to react with problem anger. It is a powerful technique and if you are motivated to do the exercises using this technique you will change your life for the better.

A mental rehearsal is simple to do and does not require a lot of time. You do it by visualizing in your mind an anger incident you experienced and along with it you think about applying new skills. These are self-correcting skills, and most of them are focused on changing your automatic thoughts and others deal with actual behavior. One comment my anger clients hear from me over and over again is that “the secret to anger control is doing mental rehearsals.” That is because mental rehearsals desensitize anger.

You can develop as much control over your emotions as you would like. The key to how much you achieve is how much you do the mental rehearsals. The more you do the more control you will have, and with that control the quality of your life will improve.”



**Desensitizing Anger: A Comprehensive Anger Management Guide, by John DeMarco M.Ed., LPC**

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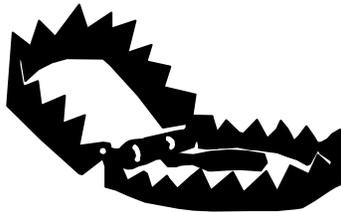
## **Module 1: Emotional Self Regulation Skills**

“**Problem Anger**” is a behavioral habit with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Angering too easily
- Angering too intensely
- Angering too often
- Holding onto anger

### **4 Attitudes Needed for Success:**

- Accept the truth that your brain makes you angry
- Resent your anger
- Understand that anger occurs on a continuum from mild to severe
- Accept that it is your responsibility to make progress



Think of your anger as a bear trap. Just because you go a week or more without an anger episode doesn't mean your anger is getting better. It means people have been walking around in your field and haven't stepped on your trap. You know you are getting better when your anger isn't a bear trap anymore.

**Automatic Response**—Problem anger is an automatic conditioned response, meaning it happens in an instant and seems like you don't have control over it. You have been practicing your anger response for a long time and consequently your brain has become conditioned to reacting that way as an automatic response. It is going to take some work to break that habit and gain control over your anger response.

### **The Two Powerful Techniques for Desensitizing Problem Anger:**

- ★ *Do lots of mental rehearsals*
- ★ *Read and reread the anger management modules (or my book)*

<b>The secret to developing anger control is to do mental rehearsals</b>
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**What is a mental rehearsal?**—It is a process of mentally running through your mind an anger event (episode) and then applying behavioral skills. It takes about 5 minutes to do a mental rehearsal.

## **ESR—Emotional Self-Regulation Skill Set**

- **Step 1—*Inhale deeply and relax your muscles (2x)***  
Inhale deeply and as you exhale induce your muscles to relax (do this twice).
- **Step 2—*Talk soothingly to yourself***  
“I don’t have to get so angry.”  
“Don’t get aggressive.”  
“Don’t over react.”  
“Calm down, I can handle this.”
- **Step 3—*Questions***—ask yourself these questions:  
“Am I having a devalued self-thought?”\*  
“How angry do I want to get?” (0 – 10)  
“How will that much anger help me?”
- **Step 4—*My Rewards***— remind yourself that you benefit from responding non-hurtfully.

This is explained further in the appendix on the last page

\* If you recognize that the anger episode causes you to experience a D-thought, tell yourself to “Stop it!” Then say the healing self-directive to yourself and reflect on what it means

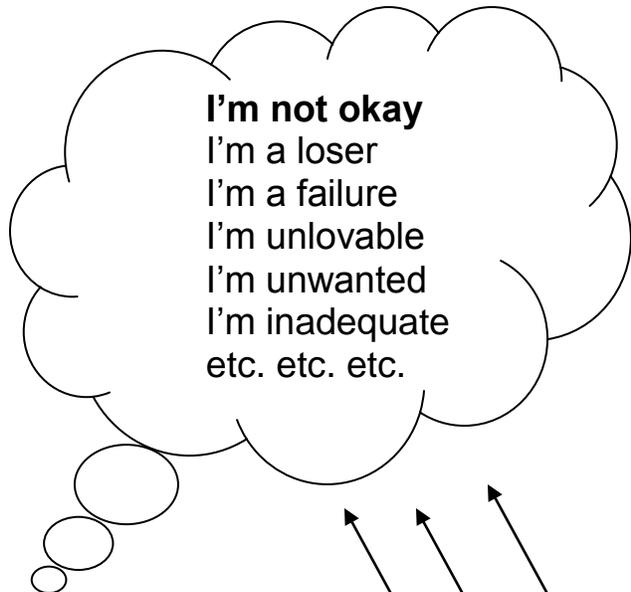
### **Mental Rehearsal Using ESR**

1. Plan 3 daily quiet times for when you can do rehearsals. Rehearsals require 5-10 minutes each time you do them. Be sure to do them three times a day.
2. Find a quiet place free from distractions and ensure that you are relaxed and comfortable.
3. Begin visualizing in your mind an anger episode from start to end. Do it by speaking to yourself what happened in the order that things unfolded. Do it as though you were directing a movie in your mind, and pretend that it is happening now. Keep your eyes closed if you prefer.
4. When you get to the point where you feel yourself getting angry (or the point where you would have felt angry), go through the **ESR** steps. And think about the anger episode as you do it.
5. Repeat the exercise two more times using the same anger episode so that you complete three sets. Three sets equals one rehearsal session.
6. Record your rehearsals on the *Rehearsal Log* sheet in this module.

ESR mental rehearsals should be done for 15 days or more. Try to use a variety of anger episodes over the course of 15 days. Complete 3 rehearsal sessions each day.

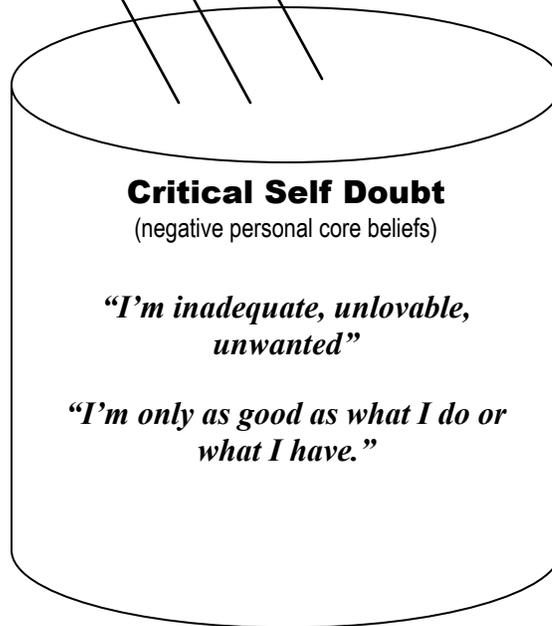
**Every mental rehearsal you do increases your anger control. Neglect doing them and you will not develop the control you want. The secret to developing anger control is to do mental rehearsals.**

# Devalued Self Thought



Someone says or does something suggesting or implying that you are inadequate or disliked. This spikes *you into making* a devalued self-thought. In other words: *you* conclude a negative idea about yourself.

Your D-thought re-awakens the **critical self doubt** you have about yourself. Critical self doubt is the sum of the negative personal core beliefs you have about yourself. These negative beliefs float around in your mind all the time, but you try to keep them out of your awareness because they are painful.



- Developed for the most part during childhood.
- You never really feel good enough.
- The need to protect yourself from your self doubt is a major cause of your anger.

Memorize this healing thought

You fear any suggestion that you are imperfect, or that something is wrong with you.

**Healing Self-directive:** "Stop thinking I have to be perfect, and without faults, and that my purpose in life is to impress others. I accept myself the way I am. Everyone has faults, me too."

## My Rewards

Rewards are the real benefits you gain from making rational responses to situations you don't like. In any problematic situation you can either respond emotionally or rationally. To be coolheaded means you respond rationally. If you haven't thought about it, a rational response yields benefits for you.

Hurtful responses are emotionally driven. If you think about it, all your past aggressive, harsh, hurtful reactions to the unwanted attitudes and bad behavior of other people, really didn't benefit you. Those demonstrations of hurtfulness, whether mild or harsh, didn't do much good in the long run. In fact, they set you back in so far as your relationship with others is concerned. You might say you actually suffered because of your hurtful reactions. The most important tool in relating to others, especially with those you love and who love you, is to *value non-hurtful responding*. Value the idea that any hurtful or aggressive response doesn't give you the best benefit. You move up on the happiness ladder when you practice non-hurtful responses. Make it a *law of life* for yourself and live by it. When you practice this law you gain rewards. You benefit from responding without hurting. You may not realize the benefits immediately, but in the long run you will always be better off. Call these rewards "my rewards."

Make a list of anger episodes. Identify each episode by giving it a name:

Doing this is part of preparing for doing mental rehearsals. When you sit down to do a rehearsal you will have a ready list of anger episodes to pick from.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

# Rehearsal Log

Record the date and the time you begin each rehearsal.

Date	Rehearsal #1	Rehearsal # 2	Rehearsal # 3
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			

## Appendix

**Relaxing Breath**—to take a relaxing breath inhale through your nose deeply so that your stomach rises. This should be a deep breath and think of it as filling your belly with air. Slowly exhale through your mouth with your lips pursed like you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Let your exhale be smooth and twice as long as your inhale. Pause for the count of two before taking another relaxing breath. Also, when exhaling try to make your whole body feel limp. My book explains how you can learn to do that.

**Soothing Self-Talk**—soothing self-talk is a simple technique. You talk to yourself silently, not aloud, saying short sentences that help you calm down. You talk to yourself as though you were talking to a young child that is upset and needs to be comforted. When doing this use one or two short sentences and repeat saying them two or three times to yourself in a comforting way. You can make up the sentences yourself or use any of the ones I suggested.

And as you are saying these sentences to yourself you may also improvise. Be careful to keep the meaning of your words focused on reducing anger and stress. The following is an example of soothing self-talk: “Ok, don’t overreact. Calm down, I can handle this. I’m going to be ok, just don’t overreact, Calm down, I can handle this.”

**Questions**—this skill involves you asking yourself three questions.

- Am I having a devalued self-thought?
- How angry do I want to get?
- How will that much anger help me?

In my book I explain that there are five types of anger. Two of the five types involve devalued self-thoughts. Because devalued self-thoughts cause emotional pain they need to be extinguished. Asking yourself “Am I having a devalued self-thought?” is the most important question you should ask yourself when you recognize that you are having an anger episode, because you want to rule out whether or not you are having one. If you recognize that you are in fact having a devalued self-thought you should extinguish it by doing the following:

Sternly tell yourself to stop it. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

Say the healing self-directive to yourself and reflect on what it means.

*Healing Self-directive:* “Stop thinking I have to be perfect, and without faults, and that my purpose in life is to impress others. I accept myself the way I am. Everyone has faults, me too.”

If you believe your anger episode did not involve a devalued self-thought then skip this question and proceed to question number two.

Asking yourself, “How angry do I want to get?” focuses on the intensity of your anger. Once you have asked yourself this question respond to it by deciding how angry you want to get. Do that by picking a number from 0 to 10, with zero meaning not angry at all, and ten meaning going into a rage and being as angry as possible. Pick a number. Always pick a number. If you want to pick ten, then pick ten, but pick a number.

The last question, “How will that much anger help me?” influences you to be more rational, instead of emotional. Simply ask yourself the question and then think about it for a moment.

**My Rewards**—was explained in the module.

This module is only one of nine modules that I give to my anger clients. As they continue in therapy they learn about automatic thoughts and the four distortions in their automatic thoughts that cause anger. If you have read this document then you already know one of those distortions, which is a *devalued self-thought*. In my book I explain in great detail the problem of having devalued self-thoughts. The four other distortions in automatic thoughts are: *musturbating, awfulizing, and punishment thoughts*. I also explain the four self-correcting skills that correct these four maladaptive automatic thought habits.

The book is comprehensive, clear, and easy to read; and filled with real life examples illustrating each skill. Its contents have helped hundreds of individuals and marriages that struggle with anger problems to recover and live enriched and happy lives.

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

### Part One – Desensitizing Anger

1. Do you have an anger problem?
2. How It Works
3. Getting Ready to Start
4. Understanding Devalued Self Thoughts
5. Emotional Self-Regulation – Mental Rehearsal #1 15
6. MAD+P Thinking Style
7. The Nature of Anger
8. The Anger Process
9. Assertiveness Skills – Mental Rehearsal #2
10. Desensitizing Cognitive Triggers – Mental Rehearsal #3
11. Desensitizing Emotional Triggers – Mental Rehearsal #4
12. Important Extras

13. Maintenance and Relapse Prevention  
Part Two – Special Issues

14. Employers and Parents with Anger

15. Road Rage

16. Marriage and Anger

Appendix

- List of Anger Situations/Spikes
- Anger Assessment
- Anger Quotes
- Pocket Anger Management Index Card

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