

# SESSION 6

## ANGER

### Session Goals

In this session, group members will:

- Review the functions and utility of anger
- Understand the different levels of anger and how they experience them
- Learn strategies for channeling their anger effectively

### Session Content

#### Setting the Agenda

- A. Normalize that anger is a common reaction to MST.** Anger signals when something has gone wrong or shouldn't have happened. MST is a military experience that is wrong and should never happen. It violates core military values of honor, integrity, and loyalty. This leaves survivors feeling deeply hurt and betrayed – which may include those with whom they entrusted their lives, safety, and career. Survivors, therefore, have a right to feel angry. It is what we do with anger that can create problems. Turning it inward can lead to self-blame and depression. Directing it toward others who are not the offender(s) can result in aggression. These are examples of when anger becomes a problem.
- B. Review session objectives. The goals of this session are to recognize when anger is destructive and learn ways to effectively manage it.**

#### Opening Exercise (optional) – “Draw Your Anger”

- A. Set up.** You will need blank sheets of paper and crayons, color pencils or markers.
- B. Review instructions.** Ask group members to take a piece of paper, and then draw a picture of their anger. It can be anything they want it to be; it just needs to represent their anger. Encourage them to draw it in any way they can. Try not to give too much guidance. Allow 5-10 minutes for group members to complete drawing.
- C. Invite group members to share their pictures,** describing how they represent their anger.
- D. Briefly review the function of anger.** Anger has gotten a bad reputation, but it is not a “bad” emotion. It helps us know when something is wrong or not right. Or it signals when something valuable has been taken from us. For instance, physical and emotional safety may be compromised after experiencing MST, leading to feelings of anger or

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vengefulness. These feelings of anger are justified. Without anger, we might not have the “fire” we need to change or defend ourselves.

- E. Explain how anger can be a secondary emotion.** Primary emotions are “fast-acting” (i.e., emotions that are a direct outcome following an event). Secondary emotions come after primary emotions and are based on our interpretation of the event. Anger can be both a primary and secondary emotion. For example, someone might feel angry about getting cut off in traffic (*i.e., anger as a primary emotion*). Anger would be secondary if it is a response to an interpretation of the situation rather than a direct response to the situation. That is, the person is reacting to a belief that the other driver was being rude or driving while distracted. As a secondary emotion, anger may “cover up” other strong emotions like fear, sadness, shame, or grief. Toward this end, it is a good practice to explore how we really feel when we notice feelings of anger. We may be feeling other emotions that need to be dealt with first.

### The Price of Anger

- A. Contrast the helpful and less helpful aspects of anger.** Anger is a powerful healing tool that feels effective when it is felt toward the offender(s) or those who failed to protect victims. Survivors of sexual trauma, however, may turn their anger inward and blame themselves for actions they did or didn’t take. Or they may lash out or act aggressively toward others in their life now. This is when anger becomes destructive and can hurt those closest to them. Because anger is such a powerful emotion, it is important for survivors to understand how it impacts their lives.
- B. Elicit examples of times when anger was helpful and when it was hurtful.** This point of this activity is to recognize the positive qualities of anger in contrast to its downsides.

### The Experience of Anger

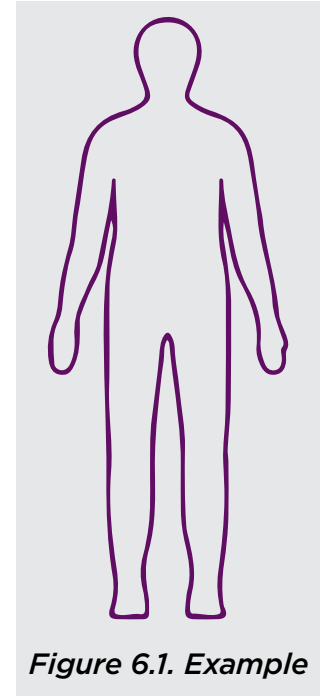
- A. Identify physical indicators of anger.** We all have an internal signals or warnings that tell us when we feel angry. Anger is a stress reaction to feeling threatened or wronged. When we feel angry, our brain coordinates rapid, automatic bodily changes that prepare us to fight, flight, or freeze. These rapid bodily changes include flushed skin, tense muscles, clenched jaw or fists, and a surge of energy and focus. **Note that these changes are adaptive and ensure survival.**
- B. Set up.** You will need page 35 of patient workbook and crayons or markers.
- C. Review instructions.** Ask group members to think about the last time they were angry. If they can’t think of a recent event, then ask them to think of a time in the past or a time

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when they were the angriest they have ever been. Pause to give group members sufficient time to think of a situation.

- D. Next, have group members mark on the figure using crayons or markers where they noticed changes in their body.** For example, they might color their cheeks red to represent feeling “flushed” or color their hands blue to represent “sweaty” (see **Figure 6.1**). The point of this activity is to increase group members’ awareness of physical changes that take place when they are angry. Knowing this information can help them use coping strategies to decrease their anger before it gets destructive. Be mindful that these bodily changes are not specific to anger and can occur with other strong emotions (e.g., sadness, joy).



*Figure 6.1. Example*

### The Dark Side of Anger

- A. Discuss the varying degrees of anger and the associated consequences.** Many people confuse the emotion of anger with aggressive behavior. Anger is a strong feeling of annoyance or discontent. Aggression is hostile or violent behavior or attitudes. Note that feeling angry is different from the resulting behaviors. It is possible to feel angry without being violent.
- B. Elicit examples of aggressive behaviors,** such as yelling, hitting, and throwing things.
- C. Explain the relationship between anger and rage.** Rage is the most destructive form of anger. It is an explosive, aggressive, and loud eruption of fury that peaks then subsides followed by a period of calm. Rage is like a hair trigger; the slightest annoyance can set it off. Once it starts, it is hard to shut down. When we experience rage, we may feel “out of control” or “misunderstood.” Many times, rage leads to regrettable behaviors like fighting or self-harm.
- D. Elicit examples of situations that may lead to someone to act in rage.**
- E. Summarize main points:** (1) Feeling anger is distinct from aggressive behavior or rage. It is possible to have the emotion of anger without hurting ourselves or others. This is important to understand because anger is a normal, healthy human response. Behaving aggressively or hurting others is not. (2) We can embrace anger while learning to control our behavior.

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### How to Manage Your Anger

- A. **Reiterate the importance of having anger.** We need anger. It is a normal human emotion that we all experience that warns us when something is wrong. So, we don't want to get rid of anger. Instead, we need to find effective ways to cope with anger or express it more appropriately.
- B. **Review instructions.** As a group, brainstorm ways to manage different levels of anger – frustration, anger, and fury.
- C. **Ask group members for strategies they have used in the past or have seen others use that seem to work.** Write responses on a white board.
- D. **Encourage group members to list strategies that they think will help them at the different levels of anger.** No group members' lists are expected to be exactly the same.

### Closing Exercise – Diaphragmatic Breathing Technique

- A. **Set up.** None.
- B. **Review instructions.**
  1. **Ask group members to sit comfortably in an upright position.** Encourage them to try and relax their shoulders, head, and neck as much as possible.
  2. **Next, have them place one hand on the upper chest and the other just below the rib cage.** This will allow them to feel their diaphragm move as they breathe.
  3. **Ask them to inhale slowly through their noses until they feel their stomach move out against their hands.** The hand on the chest should remain as still as possible.
  4. **Next, they will exhale through their mouths while tightening their stomach muscles.** Again, the hand on the upper chest should remain as still as possible. Repeat this a few minutes.
  5. **Encourage group members to let go of any thoughts or images that come to mind.** When this happens, they can gently turn their attention back to their breathing.

### Homework (Optional)

- Review the “How to Manage Your Anger” worksheet, and revise plan as needed.
- Practice diaphragmatic breathing two to three times a day (instructions found in Additional Resources section of patient workbook).