

CHAPTER 9. Extinguishing Thoughts

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This is an important discovery—that you already have something which works like a thermostat, keeping your emotions in check. But it is not enough to simply leave this to chance. That would be like a primitive human noticing that rainstorms put out forest fires. At first, when a fire begins he might wish for a rainstorm, pray for rain, or even perform rain dances so that the storm would come and put the fire out. He might notice that sometimes the rain comes, and sometimes it doesn't. Eventually, the person might decide to try master the technology of extinguishing fires by starting to carry water and use it to put the fire out himself, no longer leaving this to chance. Similarly, with anger we need to learn to master the technology of anger reduction, and this means constructing extinguishing thoughts.

In constructing extinguishing thoughts, keep these tips in mind:

1. **Keep it simple.** If we need a fire extinguisher, we want something we can begin to use quickly. We don't want to read several chapters of instructions (press Button A four times while simultaneously holding down Lever B, and it will scroll through a menu of options. . .). We want instructions we can implement quickly. In the same way, we need thoughts that are short and to the point.
2. **Keep it positive.** It is better to say to oneself "Think positive thoughts about others" than to say, "Don't dwell on thoughts like 'He is an impossible jerk who doesn't deserve to live on this planet because he makes absolutely no contribution to the quality of life here.'" Even though the two thoughts seem to have the same goal, the second one already starts us in the process of negative thinking and anger.
3. **Keep it relevant.** There are many different types of fire extinguishers, based on the type of fire one wishes to put out: extinguishers for chemical fires, wood fires, grease fires, etc. In the same way, there are many types of extinguishing thoughts, and they need to be designed for the particular type of inflammatory thought that is accelerating the anger. Look over the inflammatory thoughts in the anger record and think of extinguishing thoughts that would address these.
4. **Keep it handy.** Fire extinguishers are useless if we keep them in the carton and don't read the instructions until an emergency. We need to rehearse the use of these simple extinguishing thoughts in order to make them psychologically accessible. This can be done by first thinking the inflammatory thought, feeling how this increases anger, then shifting gears to the extinguishing thought, feeling how the anger disperses.

***Assignment:** Look over your anger record and notice the particular kinds of thought which recur. Create an extinguishing thought that might address that particular type of thought. You may choose one from the examples below, or create your own:*

Examples:

1. If I get angry, she wins.
2. I'm seeing his worst side, and he's seeing my worst.
3. Don't try to settle this when you're upset.
4. I don't know why she did that. Perhaps she was having a bad day.
5. Assume the best, and the best may come to be.
6. Happiness is the best revenge.
7. This is my chance to prove I can endure this with class.
8. If he treats me that way, he's not worth getting angry about.
9. Let's wait and settle this when we're calm.
10. Character is like a pearl. It's built from layers of patience.
11. Who said life is fair?
12. I can't change her, I can only change myself.
13. I earn respect by acting respectably, not by making people afraid.
14. Speak your mind slowly and firmly.
15. Will I care about this a month from now?
16. Take a deep breath and relax.
17. Let's try to settle this gradually, one step at a time.

Exercise: *Rehearsing Extinguishing Thoughts.* Sit in a comfortable place. Think of a situation where you got angry, and visualize who or what you were with. See it as clearly as you can. Hear the person's voice, and feel the anger rise within you. Feel the muscular tension in your back, neck, shoulders, arms, and eyes. Now begin to use the extinguishing thought you wish to try out, and while you are repeating the thought, notice the effect it has on your muscles in your back, neck, shoulders, and eyes. As you feel this thought calming you, assure yourself that this thought will be available for you in the future to cool things down and help you relax.