

CHAPTER 10. Building a Control Panel

In the last two chapters, we explored the metaphor of inflammatory and extinguishing thoughts in looking at anger, suggesting that certain thoughts inflame anger, and that if we adopt other thoughts we can smother the flames. This metaphor is useful as a beginning. We often start by seeing anger as a dangerous, destructive force like fire that needs to be eliminated through diligent, cooling work. However, the metaphor implies that the work we do with anger is one of deprivation: it leaves us with less, not more. In my judgment, anger work leads the opposite direction. What we called “extinguishing thoughts” are not end-points. They are actually the beginnings of different ways of thinking about the situation that had led to anger. These “extinguishing thoughts” might be better imagined as doorways leading to a more abundant life. Anger work can lead to a life of emotional integrity, to a greater range of choice, a more resilient character, and a richer sense of value.

To remedy the deficiencies of the metaphor of the fire extinguisher, I will discuss anger work in this chapter in terms of two other metaphors: 1) standing in a hallway with a choice of different rooms to enter, and 2) building a control panel with a variety of choices. Both metaphors will help make the point that the purpose of anger work is not to eliminate anger as an option, but rather to present a wider range of options for consideration.

Sam. Sam came to me with a story that repeated itself again and again in his life. It was so predictable, it resembled a Rube Goldberg contraption, with a complex but inevitable causal chain. He had lived with his girl friend Joanne for seven years, and both of them worked full-time in the post office. After work, they generally came home exhausted, ate take-out food, watched TV, and played video games. They were both sloppy housekeepers, which led to huge accumulations of laundry in the bedroom, and

large piles of unopened mail in the study. In general, neither of them minded living this way. However, when Sam's family came for a visit, he would suddenly become embarrassed about the mess, and would become very motivated to get the apartment clean and organized. Overwhelmed by the cleaning task before him, Sam would ask Joanne to help straighten up. Joanne would generally agree to help. Her offer was half-hearted, however. She had been raised in a family where the physical environment didn't matter, and she was almost entirely free of guilt or shame when people visited them. They would start to clean together, but Joanne often lost interest, or sat down to watch television or play a video game. Sam would begin to ruminate about this. He thought to himself, "I always do all the cleaning," "I'll never be able to clean up this mess before they get here," "My family will think we're total slob," "At least half of this mess is hers. She should be helping me clean it up," "She obviously doesn't care about me, or she would be cleaning." Sam felt shame about the impending visit, envy about her relaxing in front of the television, and injustice. He also felt abandoned by Joanne. Finally, he would start to criticize her negligence of the housework. Joanne was quite afraid of his temper, and instead of defending herself or turning off the TV, she would often freeze when his criticism began. Her immobility only made Sam angrier—he would turn up the volume of his voice and start shouting profanity. Joanne found this even scarier, and would typically become even more paralyzed. At this point, Sam would "snap," shout and begin to throw things. He reported that his anger would not last long, and after the outburst he would start to calm down. Joanne, unfortunately, would not forget about his explosion, and would think for days about what Sam had said and done. Long after he had fixed whatever physical objects had broken during his tirade, he would need to work to repair the emotional damage in his relationship. He would apologize, try to explain why he got so angry, and make promises that it would never happen again. But

when a similar situation arose, Sam would often break the promises and repeat the angering process. Because his behavior was not changing, his apologies were no longer effective. Joanne was skeptical of the apologies, and for good reason. Sam's relationship began to show signs of significant strain.

This pattern of escalation was so typical for Sam that we began to call this Door A. The two Vicious Circles that Sam saw in this escalation process were the Shame Game and the Unfair Game—anger triggered by feelings of shame (“My family will think I’m a slob”) and envy (“Why am I the one who always needs to do this work while she watches TV?”). Sam knew very well what happened after Door A was opened. The emotions would seem like a powerful avalanche, a force of nature that was virtually impossible to reverse once it began. I suggested to Sam, “Imagine that you are in a hallway with several doors—not just the usual Door A that you know so well. There are also Doors B, C and D. These doors are not “what comes naturally.” You will need to build the doors, and also build the rooms, board by board, which lie behind those doors. But they represent other things you could do in that situation. What would you like to be able to do when this situation arises, when your family is coming over and you judge that Joanne is not really invested in cleaning to prepare for their arrival?” This led to several weeks of careful discussion about alternatives. The discussion was very similar to planning an addition to the house—brainstorming different possible uses of space, deciding on what was realistic, and so on. We eventually decided on three additional “doors”:

Door B. The Time-Out Door. For Sam, this was crucial—a necessary hallway to enter before any of the other doors could be opened. He found that this could even be brief—walking into the kitchen to catch his breath, getting his thoughts a little clearer. He felt a strong desire to clean the house before his family came over, but to resolve the emotional difficulties

with Joanne, it was even more important that he clean his mind. This cleared emotional space for him, allowed him to be more conscious in everything that followed. I will discuss in detail developing time-out below,

Door C. The “Leading-With-Discomfort” Door. Because of his long history of anger, as soon as Sam began to show anger towards Joanne, she would shut down. For example, if he began by saying “I’m pissed off. Why aren’t you helping me clean the house?” Joanne would usually clam up. She was acting like a turtle, pulling herself into a diving bell as a defense. And while this worked as protection, she was no longer open to any sort of communication. Sam learned that if he led with a report of his discomfort, the conversation would take a very different direction. For instance, he learned to say, “When my family is coming over, I start getting really anxious about what they will think of me if they see a messy house.” He noticed that she was far more likely to take this in without withdrawing into her diving bell. She was also more likely to respond empathically rather than defensively.

Door D. The “This is the Love of My Life” Door. Sam found that it helped to remind himself that “I’d rather be a loving slob than neat and single.” When he went through Door A, he was risking his relationship with Joanne because of the emotional damage he caused. During our sessions, he spent time picturing himself embracing Joanne lovingly, and being embraced in return, in a room filled with laundry and junk mail. This image was very difficult for him at first, because he felt surges of shame and injustice. With some work, he learned to focus on the feelings of love and tune out the chaos. I encouraged him to experiment. I suggested that he invite his family over without cleaning at all, relaxing more with the thought that they might think he was a loving

and lovable slob. He did this, and began to relax more in the midst of the clutter.

Sam and I were trying to develop a hallway with many doors. When we began, he had only a single door that he would use when faced with stress—which resulted in his blowing up, swearing, and throwing things. Gradually, as he began the painstaking work of developing other options, he began to imagine several doors, leading to several different rooms. Each room would represent a different way of looking at things, a different way of acting, a different type of conversation with his wife. This does not mean that he would never shout and swear under any circumstances—that old room would still remain a possibility. It is conceivable that blowing up might even be an advantageous choice in certain situations. But if Sam saw this as only one option among several, the blowing-up door was no longer automatic. It was more clearly one choice alongside others. He had cleared space for decision in his life, where he could take the time to ask himself, “What do I really want? What course of action is most likely to get me what I want?” This allowed him to live his life more consciously, and to make decisions with greater sophistication.

Jordan. Jordan’s mother, Barbara, brought him to a family session. “Tell him,” she intoned. First he pretended he didn’t know what she was talking about. Eventually, he remembered. On Sunday, he had been hanging out with friends after church. Jordan had begun going out with Natasha. She told Jordan that her ex-boyfriend, Felipe, wanted to fight him. Jordan passed the indifferent message: “He knows where I am.” His aunt heard that there was something brewing, so she invited Jordan to get together with Felipe “just to talk it out.” While Jordan was telling me this part of the story, Barbara remarked, “I wish I had been there. Jordan’s a hothead. I knew that wasn’t going to work.” His mother was right. The “talk” lasted just a few seconds before Felipe ran up to Jordan, yelling in his face. Jordan told me he was

sure Felipe was going to sucker-punch him, so he quickly punched Felipe first. Family members intervened and pulled the two apart. When Felipe left, he filled the air with threats to get Jordan back for punching him.

One-on-one, I explored this event with Jordan. I asked, “Did you feel that hitting Felipe was a calculated choice, or did you do it because you were out of control?” Jordan hesitated. I had presented him with a double-bind. He needed to consider which is more shameful—to admit that he was intentionally violent, or to admit that he was out of control of his emotions? Whenever I use this type of question, I am prepared for either answer. If he answers that he was out of control, our discussion would be primarily psychological: How can he gain control of his powerful emotions? How can he wake up? What small things might he do to begin to manage his emotions? We may then move directly to the anger management approach that we outlined in part I, which would begin with the anger record.

But what if Jordan responded that he was in control of his actions, but simply judged the option of hitting Felipe to be the best choice? It is fairly common for a person to claim that he was in conscious control of his actions, because there is some shame associated with being out of control. If he says that he was in control, our discussion would be about ethics, in the broadest sense of that term. In other words, we would need to discuss in detail what Jordan’s values are, what choices he thought were available in the situation with Felipe, and which choice lines up most closely with his values. I would explore carefully the options he had before him, to determine whether the choice was a good one. Was the choice congruent with his values? Did he get what he really wanted?

In this situation, Jordan did indeed respond to my question by saying that he had been in control. He had made a decision to hit

Felipe, and he would make the same decision again, if the situation were similar. Clearly, it was more shameful to Jordan to admit that he was out of control than it was to admit that he was intentionally aggressive. “Sometimes,” I suggested, “It is possible to be half in control and half out of control.” No, he assured me, he was entirely in control of himself when he had hit Felipe. I then suggested that we explore his decision with some care. “What were the options that you considered in that situation?” He responded that he didn’t have any options. He had no choice and did what he had to do. I reminded him that he had told me he had been in control. That means that he had options in front of him, and that he had chosen the option that seemed best at the time. If he was imagining himself at a control panel with only a single button, there was really no choice. He got my point. Eventually, we came up with four possible options he had when Felipe ran up to him and yelled at him: 1) Punch Felipe first, 2) Walk away, 3) Let Felipe punch first, then respond physically, if possible, and 4) Let Felipe punch first, and respond by calling the police.

I told Jordan I wanted to look at these four choices carefully, in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, so that we could understand them better. I suggested that we look at each choice in terms of advantages and disadvantages. I told him that we would be wasting our time if he tried to BS me. I told him what he already knew—that I was much older than him, outside his world, and may not understand the reasons why certain choices would be so difficult. I told him I would need to rely on his honesty to make sure we were getting a realistic picture. I got his commitment to tell me the truth about advantages and disadvantages of these options. He agreed to be frank with me about his reasons, and frank about his evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages.

Using a white-board, we came up with the chart below, listing the advantages and disadvantages of the options he described.

After making the chart, I asked him to rate each of the consequences from -5 to +5, with +5 being very advantageous, and -5 being very disadvantageous. For purposes of comparing the options with one another, we subtracted the numbers in the negative box from the numbers in the positive box. We generated a number for each row—the higher the number, the better the option. These numbers are tabulated in the final column. The numbers are not intended for statistical analysis. By adding the negatives and subtracting the positives, we use math that is accessible at the sixth-grade level. We then have a starting-place for a discussion about the relative merits of these options. After reviewing the chart with Jordan, I observed that, based on the numbers he had provided, the option he chose at the time was not the best choice available. The best choice, according to the chart, was the last one—calling the police if Felipe attacked. I asked Jordan what he made of that, and he shrugged his shoulders and said that he had maybe given me the wrong numbers. I asked him whether he would like to revise his chart—either by changing the numbers or adding different positive or negative potentials, and he declined.

	Positive potential	Negative potential	N
I punch him first	<p>I stop him from punching me first, I don't get hurt. (+5)</p> <p>I scare him away, show him he can't mess with me. (+5)</p>	<p>He spreads the word that I sucker-punched him, hurting my reputation (-3)</p> <p>He comes back to get revenge later, alone or with others (friends or family). (-5)</p> <p>He calls the police, and</p>	-8

		<p>I am arrested for assault. (-5)</p> <p>I have to go to therapy (-5)</p>	
I walk away	<p>I don't get hurt. (+5)</p> <p>I don't get into trouble. (+4)</p>	<p>My reputation is hurt—other kids call me a punk or say I'm afraid. (-5)</p> <p>Felipe believes he can continue to talk trash about me, and nothing will happen. (-5)</p> <p>Other kids see this and believe they can talk trash about me, and nothing will happen. (-5)</p>	-6
I show up, but don't punch first. I retaliate physically after he hits me.	<p>He may not punch me at all (+3)</p> <p>If he punches me, I get a chance to punch him back (+5)</p> <p>I get into less trouble, because I was only defending myself. (+4)</p>	<p>I get hurt. (-5)</p> <p>Other people think I'm stupid for letting him punch me first. (-4)</p> <p>Others might stop the fight before I get a chance to get him back. (-4)</p> <p>I might be too hurt to get back at him (-4)</p>	-5
I show	He may not punch	I get the reputation of a	+5

<p>up, but don't punch first. If he punches me, I call the police and charge him with assault and battery.</p>	<p>me at all (+3)</p> <p>I don't get into legal trouble. (+5)</p> <p>He gets the message that I won't let things lie (+4)</p> <p>There are negative consequences to his threats and violence: He gets into trouble. (+3)</p>	<p>coward for not handling it myself. (-5)</p> <p>He might retaliate because I got him into trouble with the police. (-5)</p>	
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In Jordan's case, the numbers indicated that he believed another option was superior to hitting Felipe in the face. However, in many other situations, the numbers may bear out the individual's first judgment—that the violent option is best. Even in that case, however, this exercise would have changed the way the options were seen. After the discussion, we are no longer comparing an entirely perfect choice with others that are horrible. The situation is less black-and-white, and more gray. My intention in having this discussion with Jordan was to help him find other live options. A live option is an alternative that may be actively considered in the future. When we first met, Jordan had a control panel with a single button—attack the other person before he can get me. After our discussion, it is possible that Jordan may leave the room with several other alternatives, several other options that are more alive than before. Enlivening the other options is not magic, and does not happen all at once. It is a very gradual

process. But long before Jordan actually chooses a different behavioral direction, he must imagine it.

This painstaking work has the potential of helping Jordan shift from a robot-way of looking at anger to a human perspective. If he has multiple live options in front of him, and he is actively assessing which is his best course of action, angry violence is reduced to merely a single choice on his control panel.

Someone might object, “Isn’t it wrong and potentially dangerous to leave violence on the control panel as an option? If it remains an option, doesn’t this mean that it’s still possible that he could become violent if the conditions were right? Shouldn’t we be working to eliminate that from the control panel altogether?” In an ideal world, it might be preferable if no one had violence as an option. In my work with Jordan, however, it is important that I remain pragmatic. Everything that he has ever done should be listed as an option, even actions which I consider wrong, self-destructive, or morally repugnant. There are several reasons for this.

- 1) Violence may sometimes be best. It may indeed be possible that there are certain situations where angry violence is the best option available. Suppose I am confronted by a man with an ice pick in a dark alley on the way home from my assertiveness training class. As helpful as assertiveness might be in many life situations, I’m skeptical that it would help to say to the man, “When you point that ice pick at my chest, I feel fear and anger. I need you to stop.” The best option here might be to summon all my power to fight the man, to wrestle the ice pick from his hand.
- 2) Promoting honest evaluation. My purpose in encouraging Jordan to develop an emotional control

panel is to get him to think carefully about the advantages and disadvantages of his options. If I don't allow the angry violent option to be placed there due to my own ethical qualms, Jordan never considers the pluses and minuses of violence and never weighs this against other possibilities.

- 3) The only ethical basis that I can absolutely rely on is self-interest. Jordan may have other values, religious or otherwise, which stand against the use of violence. But I cannot assume that he does. I can assume primary narcissism, however. In other words, I can assume that he wishes to further his own self-interest. I start every discussion about the positives and minuses of an option by asking, "Does this help you or get in your way?"

In the end, it does not matter whether I consider violence an option or not. It matters only whether Jordan still regards it as an option that serves or sabotages his interests. If he remains convinced that violence will help him get respect, control, or safety, he will continue to use it on a regular basis. In discussing these issues in a therapy session, I am attempting to move the discussion from the amygdala to the neocortex—from the primitive, impulsive brain to the more sophisticated brain that carefully weighs options and values.