



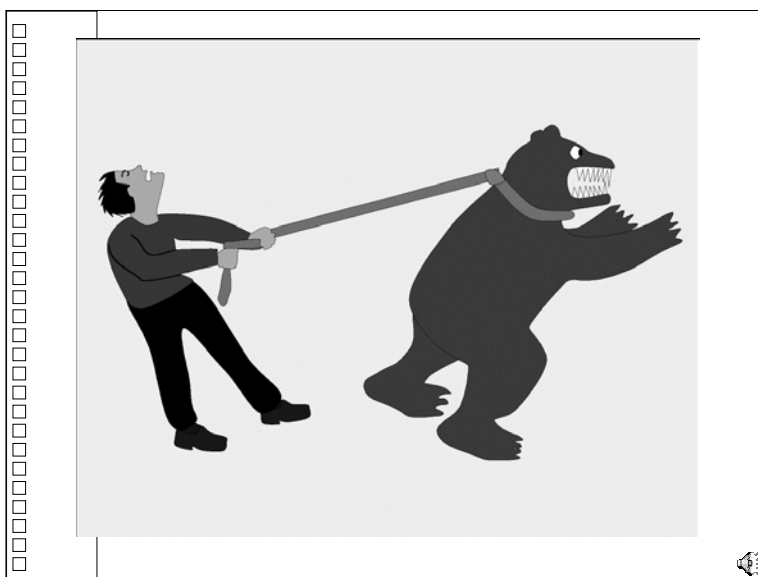
REACH Program: Session One

Introduction

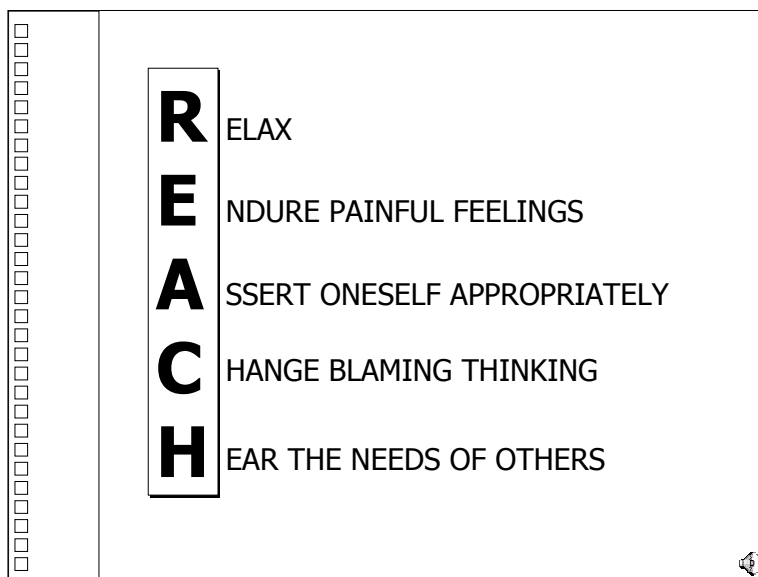
Stephen C. Simmer, LICSW, PhD



Welcome to the Reach group. We are going to be working together over the next several weeks on the issue of anger. But first let's talk about the group in general, and then we'll get to know a little about each other.

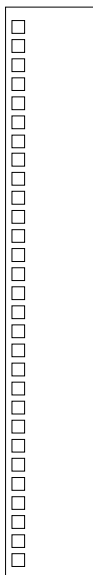


The struggle against anger is almost universal. The Greek philosopher Aristotle once said, “Anyone can get angry--that’s easy. But to get mad at the right person, at the right time, to the right degree, for the right reasons, and in the right way--that is very difficult.” Most everyone has fallen short of this “perfect” anger, has done something or said something that they felt sorry for later. The purpose of this group will be to move closer as a group to the noble, well-managed anger which to which Aristotle refers.

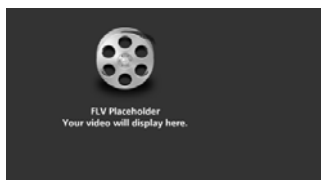


The group is called the REACH Program, and the letters spell out the basic skills we'll be working on in the group, not necessarily in this order. We will discuss

- Relaxation--bringing the stress-level down by concentrating on bodily tension*
- Enduring painful feelings--one of the keys to anger management*
- Asserting oneself appropriately--assertiveness skills, "high-test anger"*
- Changing the blaming and extreme sorts of thinking which are the accelerants to anger*
- Hearing others when they express their needs and upset--listening skills. This crucial for stopping the contagion of anger.*



Manning Anger



- The word man and the word manage come from the same root
- Manage is the verb for what it means to be a man. A man manages.



The word man and the word manage come from the same root. I believe that manage is the verb for what it means to be a man. A man manages. This is like manning a boat. If we don't man a boat, it blows in circles, doesn't get anywhere. It may even sink. If we man a boat, the wind is a respected companion. We can use the wind to get somewhere.

In the same way, if I don't manage my anger, my life blows in circles. But if I manage it, anger can be like the wind to a sailor, can be a driving force in my life, like ambition or passion. This program will be about learning the technology of sailing with anger.



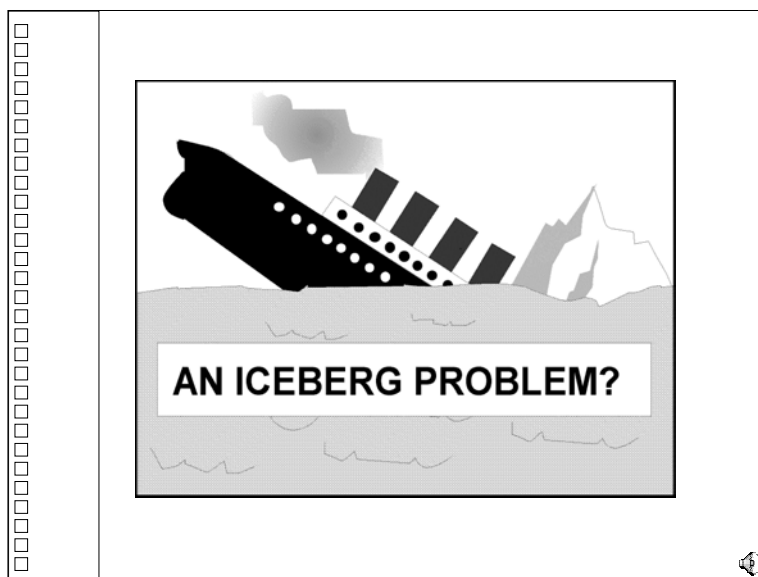
The REACH program is basically a training program. How many have participated in a sport at some point? How many participated in an organized sport with a coach and conditioning program? How many have lifted weights or worked out in some other way? How many went through basic training for the military? Why are these conditioning programs important?

Anger management is a conditioning program aimed at developing emotional strength. Emotional strength is developed in exactly the same way as physical strength: repetitive work against resistance. The only difference is that we are not working against the resistance of weights. We are working against resistance in ourselves.

For some group members, this group may seem a lot like a class. One temptation is to see this as a spectator sport, where you can just sit back and listen from the back, tune out, press the mute, switch channels.

So, a NEWS FLASH: This is a participation sport. You will be asked to try out the approaches we are discussing, not just listen to them as if this were Psychology 101. We are training partners, preparing not for some game, but for our lives. To make progress with anger management, it will be necessary to do the boring, repetitive work against resistance which can make that happen.

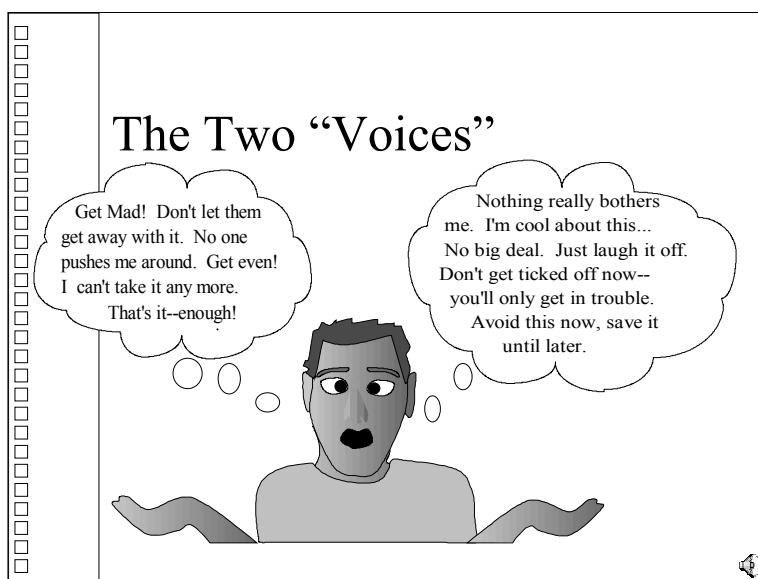
Lifting weights is not exciting--we do it because it produces results. The anger record and other homework may not be exciting, either, but they make a difference in terms of emotional conditioning.



A person might say, "I don't have an anger problem. I've only gotten really angry once, in spite of the fact that I've been in the marriage from hell for 20 years. I shouldn't be here."

The frequency of anger is not the point. The Titanic only hit one iceberg, and sank only once. Does this mean that the Titanic didn't have an iceberg problem? Obviously not. In the same way, if a person only gets angry once in his life, he may still have an anger problem, because of the destruction the anger caused.

If we were suddenly pulled back in time and made crew members on the Titanic, knowing what we know about the accident, we would no doubt organize a careful iceberg watch, we would slow the ship down in the fog, we would be fully prepared with an evacuation plan in case of an accident. We would not be shrugging off the accident as a one-time fluke.



In general, there are two very different “messages” men get from society about how they should deal with their anger:

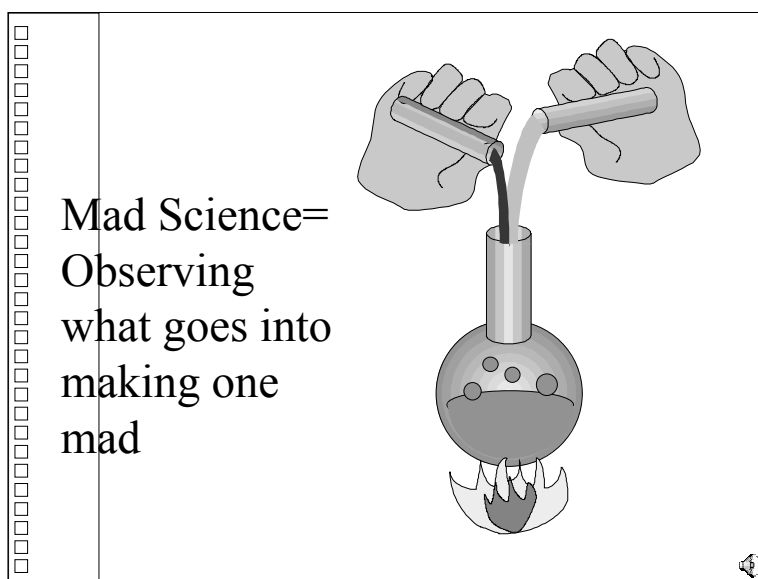
- *“Get mad.” Men often get the message “If you are a man, you should get angry--a moment of justified anger is the defining moment of a man’s life.” Men receive this message from sports, films, music.*
- *“Don’t get mad.” On the other hand, men often get an opposite message regarding anger: “Don’t get mad--stay cool and under emotional control at all costs.” Men get this message from some of the same sources--from sports, the military, music.*

As a result, men are frequently very confused regarding their anger. Do they stuff this powerful emotion down someone else’s throat, or stuff it down their own? Either option causes problems.

The purpose of this group is to help us see other options in how we work with our anger.

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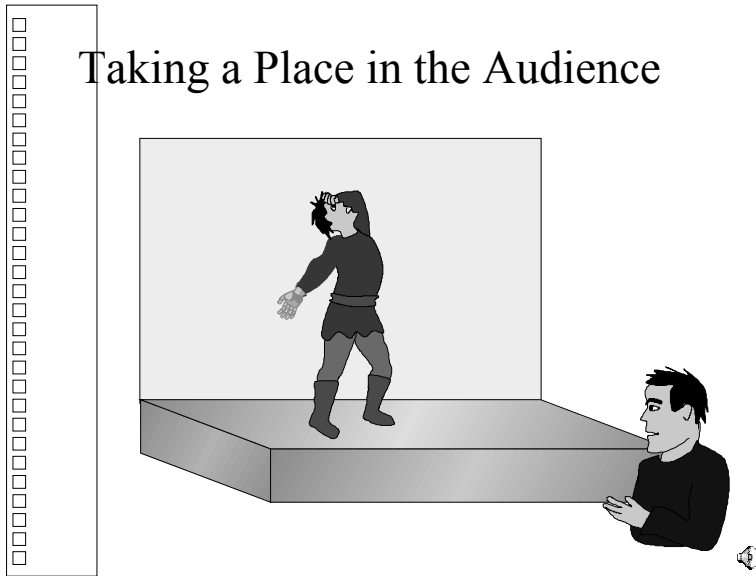
Mad Science is the science of what makes me mad. It begins with self-observation. No two individuals are the same, so anger management will be different for each person. An individual who is triggered by shame will need a different anger management approach from a person who gets angry when faced with abandonment, unfairness, or inhibition of freedom. For this reason, it is imperative that group members begin by watching their anger and recording several features of the angry incidents in an anger record.

This has two main purposes:

- A lot of information is gathered about one's anger. This information-gathering is similar to the military intelligence which precedes an attack, or to charting pitches in baseball.*
- At the same time, just watching the anger cools it down. When we watch, we are a little detached from the anger, and this is helpful in dealing with it..*

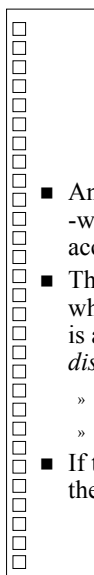
Mad science provides information that will be very useful in our work, but the observation itself is a crucial anger-reducer. It gets the neocortex--not just the amygdala-- involved in the action. By simply recording the events, I take a more detached stance towards the precipitating event and towards my own emotions. When I am angry, I might say, "That pisses me off!" or "My anger is about a nine on a scale of one to ten." Although both sentences discuss the same angry event, the syntax in the second sentence leads to significant emotional cooling, due to the more detached stance. The first way of talking heats the anger up—I am one with my anger, "I" = "pissed." In the second sentence, I am separate from my anger, able to observe and rate its intensity.

Taking a Place in the Audience



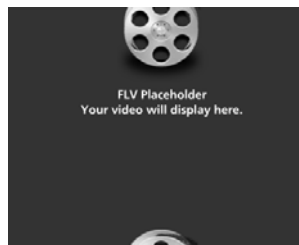
This means that we will be learning to talk about our anger a little differently. Often when we get mad we “strut and fret” on the stage, talk loudly about the unfairness and disrespect, vent frustration publicly. This doesn’t reduce the anger—it heats it up, pours gas on the fire.

The anger record will allow us to take a place in the audience and discuss our anger from a place of detachment. “Let’s see—how mad was I? I wonder what feelings of discomfort triggered it? What was I thinking that heated it up?”



SSSSSSSS...BANG!

- Anger is like an explosive--with a fuse and an accelerant
- The fuse--the small fire which starts the big one--is always a feeling of *discomfort*
 - » **physical**
 - » **emotional**
- If the small fire is not lit, the big fire is not lit



The emotion anger is built like an explosive charge, with a fuse and an accelerant. The fuse is a small fire, and the accelerant—gasoline in the case of a Molotov cocktail—turns it quickly into a large fire we call an explosion. With anger, the fuse is always a feeling of discomfort. Without discomfort of some sort, there can't be anger.

For anger, the accelerants are always certain types of thought which turn the small fires into big, angry ones. We will discuss these “inflammatory thoughts” later. For now, let's look at the fuses.

The discomfort which begins anger may be physical, like pain in my foot when someone steps on it. Or it may be emotional—shame, anxiety, envy, unfairness. When something happens which lights my fuse of anxiety, for instance, I might tend to quickly turn this into anger. Sometimes this transition to anger happens so fast I am not even aware of the anxiety. In these cases, my fuse is very short, leaving me very little opportunity to change things, and the anger grows quickly.

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