

CHAPTER 8

CREATING COPING THOUGHTS

Congratulations, you've gotten this far in the workbook, so you've already achieved a lot. First of all, you've learned to monitor and pay attention to your anger. By itself, this is a major step in anger control. You've developed the ability to identify anger-triggering thoughts and connect them to important anger distortions. Another major achievement is learning and practicing your relaxation skills. You've rehearsed the relaxation techniques critical to anger control, and by now may be trying them out in real-life situations.

Learning to Cope with Arousal

Nearly thirty years ago, a psychologist named Donald Meichenbaum made an important observation while working with children. He noticed that while children are engaged in learning a new and challenging task, they coach themselves out loud through each step of the process. For example, a boy building an erector set structure might be heard whispering, "First I put the screw in . . . washer . . . hold the nut . . . keep it still . . . screw it tight," and so on. Meichenbaum called this kind of monologue *self-instruction*.

Self-instruction really works, but for some reason adults stop doing it. Kids learn new tasks more easily when they can talk themselves through it, and Meichenbaum wondered if adults might get the same benefit. In a series of experiments, he taught adults who suffered anxiety problems to "talk themselves through" periods of high stress. These techniques—called stress inoculation—have been very successful and are now widely used. Stress inoculation was primarily used for anxiety problems. Then a researcher named Raymond Novaco discovered that it works just as well with anger difficulties. We now call it anger inoculation, and later in this workbook you'll be using it yourself.

Just because children self-instruct out loud, you don't have to do that. You can use "coping thoughts" to remind yourself how to navigate provocative situations. When someone upsets you and you're starting to get steamed, you need to be able to remind yourself to calm down, relax,

and manage your anger. What follows is a list of general coping thoughts that you can use as self-instructions whenever you find your anger escalating.

General Coping Thoughts List

- Take a deep breath and relax.
- Getting upset won't help.
- Just as long as I keep my cool, I'm in control.
- Easy does it—there's nothing to be gained in getting mad.
- I'm not going to let him/her get to me.
- I can't change him/her with anger; I'll just upset myself.
- I can find a way to say what I want to without anger.
- Stay calm—no sarcasm, no attacks.
- I can stay calm and relaxed.
- Relax and let go. There's no need to get my knickers in a twist.
- No one is right, no one is wrong. We just have different needs.
- Stay cool, make no judgments.
- No matter what is said, I know I'm a good person.
- I'll stay rational—anger won't solve anything.
- Let them look all foolish and upset. I can stay cool and calm.
- His/her opinion isn't important. I won't be pushed into losing my cool.
- Bottom line, I'm in control. I'm out of here rather than say or do something dumb.
- Take a time-out. Cool off, then come back and deal with it.
- Some situations don't have good solutions. Looks like this is one of them. No use getting all bent out of shape about it.
- It's just a hassle. Nothing more, nothing less. I can cope with hassles.
- Break it down. Anger often comes from lumping things together.
- Good. I'm getting better at this anger management stuff.
- I got angry, but kept the lid on saying dumb things. That's progress.
- It's just not worth it to get so angry.
- Anger means it's time to relax and cope.
- I can manage this; I'm in control.
- If they want me to get angry, I'm going to disappoint them.
- I can't expect people to act the way I want them to.
- I don't have to take this so seriously.

- I have a plan to relax and cope.
- This is funny if you look at it that way.

Most of the coping thoughts are focused on staying calm and relaxed. However, there's also a group of thoughts that center on keeping control and distancing yourself from the behavior of the provoking person. Right now, in the space provided, write down the three general coping thoughts that most appeal to you and seem likely to be helpful.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now take a moment to memorize the three coping thoughts you've selected. Stop. This is really important. Make a commitment that you'll use one or more of these thoughts whenever you begin to get angry during the next week. Research shows that this tool is extremely effective for maintaining control of anger and aggression.

Sometimes people find it difficult to remember to use their coping thoughts because provocations seem to erase all their good intentions. If this is likely to be a problem for you, there are some things you can do in advance to help you remember your coping thoughts. First, transfer your three coping thoughts to a piece of paper that you mount on your vanity or shaving mirror. Seeing them prominently displayed will keep them in your mind. Second, promise yourself a reward for using your coping thoughts. Especially for the first few times, you might reinforce using coping thoughts with a meal in your favorite restaurant, a new CD, a movie or video. Give yourself a treat when you succeed in remembering, regardless of whether you fully control your anger. Right now, remembering and making an effort are enough. Third, tell a friend about your effort to use coping thoughts, and ask him or her to check in with you to see if you're remembering them. Fourth, use a physical cue. It might help this week to wear a new or unusual piece of jewelry that's associated with your plan to use coping thoughts. Another option is to wear your watch on the wrong wrist or unusual shoes or a sweater you don't particularly like—anything that will remind you of your new effort to cope.

Perhaps the best strategy to help you remember your coping thoughts is to plan in advance for provoking situations. For example, if your kids dawdle most mornings getting ready for school, plan out exactly when and how you'll use your coping thoughts. First, you'll want to plan for a cue or reminder in the situation. In the case of slow-moving kids, you might want to place one or more of your coping thoughts on a sign near the kitchen table. Or you might put something strange and inappropriate on the table (your daughter's wire sculpture of a horsefly), so you're cued to cope. A second step in planning involves identifying a clear behavioral indicator that tells you to start managing your anger. It might be when you raise your voice, or start pushing the kids down in their chairs, or make particular attacking comments. A third stage in planning is to identify exactly *how* you will cope. For example, you might decide to take a deep breath and use your cue word, then tell yourself, "Easy does it—there's nothing to be gained in getting mad." The *how* of coping might also include walking out of the room for a minute so you can breathe and use your coping thoughts away from the children.

Exercise: Making a Coping Plan

This exercise will help you plan a coping response for one anger-provoking situation that's likely to occur in the next week. Start by identifying the situation, including enough details so you're clear about the exact set of circumstances that you're planning for. Then identify one or more cues to

remind you of your coping thoughts and plan. Make sure that the cues will be present and prominent in the situation where your anger is likely to be triggered. Next, under When to Cope, write down the behavioral red flags that tell you it's time to deal with your anger. Whether it's criticizing or pointing your finger or laughing sarcastically, the red flag should be specific to the situation you're planning for. Finally, under How to Cope, note the specific coping thoughts you plan to use and any actions you want to take to keep your anger from escalating. Always include one of the relaxation strategies that's quick and easy to use as part of your How to Cope plan.

Coping Plan

1. Situation

2. Cues to Cope

3. When to Cope

4. How to Cope

Coping Thoughts for Prolonged Anger or Anger Distortions

Sometimes general coping thoughts aren't enough. You're too angry, or the situation is triggering anger distortions that inflame your feelings. Controlling anger in these cases requires more careful planning and the development of coping thoughts that are tailored to particular anger triggers and distortions.

You can use what you've learned about anger distortions in the previous chapter to dramatically change your thinking when provoked. The key is to identify which anger distortion a particular trigger thought derives from, then use the countermeasures appropriate for that distortion to generate more realistic thinking. Here's a quick refresher of the countermeasures you might use to rewrite trigger thoughts sparked by the following distortions.

Magnifying/Catastrophizing. (1) Be realistically negative (e.g., it's disappointing or frustrating, not terrible or awful). Ask, "How bad is it really?" then answer honestly. (2) Use very accurate language. (3) Look at the whole picture. Try to find evidence that the opposite is also true.

Overgeneralization. (1) Avoid general terms like "always," "all," and "every." (2) Use specific and accurate descriptions. (3) Look for exceptions to the rule. Recall how people sometimes act contrary to their tendencies.

Demanding/commanding. (1) People rarely do what they should do, only what they need or want to do. (2) Stay with your wants, desires, and preferences—not shoulds. Think, "I prefer," not "You ought to."

Inflammatory/global Labeling. (1) Be specific: focus on behavior, not the person as a whole.

Misattribution/Single Explanations. (1) Check out your assumptions about other people's motives. (2) Find alternative explanations for the problem behavior.

Blaming. (1) Make a coping plan to solve the problem yourself. (2) Recognize that people are mostly doing the best they can—what they think will best meet their needs.

Each of the above countermeasures is a guideline to help you revise trigger thoughts. Here are some examples of how to use the suggested countermeasures to develop less angry thinking:

1. **Situation:** Your mother-in-law invites you to dinner, but cooks a dish you're allergic to.

Trigger thought: This is her typical crap—I'm total chopped liver to her, I never count. The only thing she cares about is her precious daughter.

Anger distortion: Overgeneralization (total chopped liver, I never count). Misattribution/single explanations (she cooked this because she doesn't care about me).

Counterresponse plan: For overgeneralization, look for exceptions. For misattributions, look for alternative explanations.

Revised trigger thought: She cooked eggplant today, but it's also true she paid for my watercolor workshop and came over and made soup when I had the flu. She's seventy-five, so it may just be that she forgets.
2. **Situation:** Your husband is yelling at your daughter over not bringing an assignment home from school.

Trigger thoughts: He's doing damage. This is going to ruin their relationship. He's crazy.

Anger distortions: Magnifying/catastrophizing (he's doing damage, this will ruin their relationship). Inflammatory/global labeling (he's crazy).

Counterresponse plan: For magnifying/catastrophizing, be accurate and look at the whole picture. For inflammatory/global labeling, focus on specific behavior, not the person as a whole.

Revised trigger thought: He raises his voice maybe once a week, but most times they get through the homework okay. They even laugh a little. He doesn't hit her, he doesn't call her names. It's not crazy, it's just a bit loud and unsettling.
3. **Situation:** A male work colleague, who has sometimes been critical in the past, tells you that, "Women are not as committed to their careers as men."

Trigger thoughts: Stupid jerk! He shouldn't open his mouth when he doesn't know what he's talking about. He says this kind of sh-- to annoy me.

Anger distortions: Inflammatory/global labeling (stupid jerk). Demanding/commanding (shouldn't open his mouth if he doesn't know what he's talking about). Misattribution/single explanations (says this to annoy me).

Counterresponse plan: For inflammatory/global labeling, focus on specific behavior, not the person as a whole. For demanding/commanding, remember that people do what they need to do, not what I want. For misattribution/single explanations, find an alternative explanation.

Revised trigger thought: He makes ignorant remarks about women at times. I suspect he needs to do it because he feels very insecure and copes by putting women down. These comments may be a way to manage his poor self-esteem.

The next two examples will require a little thought on your part. After you've read through the situation and trigger thoughts, try to identify the key anger distortions and a counterresponse plan for each of them. An answer key is provided at the end.
4. **Situation:** Your neighbor keeps blocking your driveway with his garbage can.

Trigger thoughts: That f---ing idiot is making me late for work. He always does that.

Anger distortions: (hint—there are three anger distortions)

Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thoughts: Okay, the blind old coot got the can in my way. This is only the fourth time in six months, and it takes me exactly two minutes to pull it out of the way. I'll check the driveway before I get in the car. That'll make it easier.

5. **Situation:** Your roommate hasn't fed her dog or bird; the bird is screeching and the dog is constantly jumping on you when you come in from work.

Trigger thoughts: I can't stand this ... this is too much, this is totally f—ed up. She's ruining my evening; she shouldn't have pets.

Anger distortions: (hint—there are four anger distortions)

Counterresponse Plan:

Revised trigger thought: She forgets a few times a week. This is a brief, unpleasant moment till I feed them, but it's nothing horrible. She's scattered and forgetful. I'd prefer she remembered, but she's doing her best.

Answer Key

Example 4:

Anger distortions: inflammatory/global labeling (f—ing idiot), blaming (making me late for work), overgeneralization (he always does that)

Counterresponse plan: For inflammatory/global labeling, make a funny label. For blaming, make a problem-solving plan. For overgeneralization, be accurate.

Example 5:

Anger distortions: magnifying/catastrophizing (can't stand this; this is too much), inflammatory/global labeling (totally f—ed up), blaming (she's ruining my evening), demanding/commanding (she shouldn't have pets)

Counterresponse plan: For magnifying/catastrophizing, be realistically negative. For inflammatory/global labeling, focus on specific behavior. For blaming, recognize that she's doing the best she can. For demanding/commanding, stay with desires and preferences.

Creating Coping Thoughts

This is your chance to develop revised trigger thoughts for some of your own anger situations. Complete the Creating Coping Thoughts Worksheet for an anger situation recorded in your most recent Anger Log.

CREATING COPING THOUGHTS—Worksheet

Complete the following for each significant trigger thought in an anger situation from your most recent Anger Log:

1. Trigger thoughts that inflame my anger:

- a.
- b.
- c.

2. Anger distortions that underlie my trigger thoughts:

- a.
- b.
- c.

3. Counterresponse plan for each of my trigger thoughts (e.g., looking for exceptions, alternative explanations, preferences not shoulds, and so on). Revised trigger thought based on each counterresponse plan.

a. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

b. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

c. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

4. Helpful coping thoughts (see General Coping Thoughts List earlier in this chapter):

- a.
- b.
- c.

To give you an idea of how the worksheet can be used, an example follows from a forty-five-year-old customer service rep. She finds herself getting angry at customers who are themselves upset about delayed or mishandled orders.

1. Trigger thoughts that inflame my anger:
 - a. I can't stand this.
 - b. They use me as a punching bag because I can't fight back.
 - c. Just an endless string of crazy people.
2. Anger distortions that underlie my trigger thoughts:
 - a. Magnifying.
 - b. Misattributions/single explanations.
 - c. Overgeneralization and inflammatory/global labeling.
3. Counterresponse plan for each of my trigger thoughts:
 - a. Counterresponse plan: Be accurate, look at the whole picture.
Revised trigger thoughts: It's not that bad—usually only one customer in ten is really obnoxious.
 - b. Counterresponse plan: Alternative explanations
Revised trigger thoughts: They're frustrated and, I think, afraid they'll be screwed somehow.
 - c. Counterresponse plan: Be specific and accurate.
Revised trigger thought: It's 10 percent rude people and 90 percent nice ones.
4. Helpful coping thoughts:
 - a. Just as long as I keep my cool, I'm in control.
 - b. Take a deep breath and relax.
 - c. Let them get all upset, I can stay calm.

Homework

There are four specific things you'll need to do over the next seven to ten days to strengthen the anger management skills you've learned so far:

1. Use one of your three general coping thoughts whenever you find yourself responding with anger.
2. Practice cue-controlled relaxation whenever you feel stressed or the beginnings of anger. Also continue to practice all three key relaxation skills and record the dates in your Relaxation Log.
3. Continue to note in your Anger Log all significant anger situations.
4. Use your Creating Coping Thoughts Worksheet to develop revised trigger thoughts for any significant anger situation recorded in your log. There are four extra worksheets at the end of this chapter.

Anger Log II

Provocative Situation Sensory Input (Objective data from what you hear, see, and touch)	The Screen (Your conclusions, assumptions, interpretations, beliefs, and trigger thoughts)	Anger Rating 0-100	Behavior	Outcomes -10 to +10 Self Others

CREATING COPING THOUGHTS—Worksheet

Complete the following for each significant trigger thought in an anger situation.

1. Trigger thoughts that inflame my anger:

- a.
- b.
- c.

2. Anger distortions that underlie my trigger thoughts:

- a.
- b.
- c.

3. Counterresponse plan for each of my trigger thoughts (e.g., looking for exceptions, alternative explanations, preferences instead of shoulds, etc.). Revised trigger thought based on each counterresponse plan.

a. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

b. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

c. Counterresponse plan:

Revised trigger thought:

4. Helpful coping thoughts (see General Coping Thoughts List earlier in this chapter):

- a.
- b.
- c.