

Image of the Beast

THE IMAGE OF THE BEAST – A workbook on anger and stress management by Dr. Chuck Baynard, Pastor of Clover Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Clover, SC 29710. For additional copies or assistance with this or other life problems contact the church.

Every healthy human being at times will be angry. Anger is a beast that lives within all mankind. It is a beast that left uncontrolled will destroy its host. Managing anger is almost a discipline of itself in psychology. There are many different approaches, however one sure thing is that left alone and without proper management it will get worse with the passage of time.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with at least a minimum understanding of the physiology involved in becoming angry. Every healthy human being has two little glands in the lower back that during times of hurt, frustration, or fear begin to pump adrenaline and noradrenaline into the blood stream at a very high rate. These hormones in the blood stream will cause the body to shut down most of the blood supply to the digestive tract and begin to pump extra blood and energy into the muscles. The heart and respiration rate will increase dramatically. The body has prepared itself to fend off all attacks and protect itself from harm. It doesn't matter whether the threat is perceived or real, the physical reaction of the body will be the same. This is a state of preparedness that is neither good nor evil.

Anger in and of itself does not have to be a bad thing. It is what a person does with the anger that leads into sin. The state of preparedness is neutral, that is it is not good nor evil. The Bible says we are to be angry, but not sin. It is also clear from the Bible that as Christians we have the ability to control our actions and reactions so as not to sin when angry. Nonetheless anger continues to be a problem for many people, Christians included. How to take control and not sin seems to be an elusive goal.

For the vast majority anger is expressed in an aggressive action. If asked to visualize the word anger, almost all will paint a picture of some person doing damage to another person or thing. The very first step we need to understand in controlling anger rather than the emotion controlling us is that the popular image of anger is wrong. We need to see another picture that does not include aggression. Jesus Christ provides just this image for us as He died on the cross. Wrongly accused and sentenced to death, He had every right to be angry. Nonetheless rather than calling for fire from heaven to destroy his attackers, Jesus prays for forgiveness for those gathered to watch Him die for a crime He was not guilty of.

Anger is easy to diagnose when it is manifested in open rage and aggression. It is also easier to treat since the victim cannot deny he is angry and has acted in a certain way in response to this anger. The person who always reacts this way knows he has a problem and that he needs help. If the outbursts are intermittent this may not be true as each

random episode is rationalized and a good reason for feeling angry can be pointed out and to a certain extent the acting out excused. Even our courts recognize such behavior and allow "crimes of passion" some leniency in the sentencing phase of the trial. Some therapists argue that when the stimuli that caused the anger is of such a nature that the anger is a normal response, that such a person under the control of the emotion is not of a sound mind and should not be punished at all. The implication is that there are some circumstances that being out of control is a normal auto response of the body and the person is not responsible for their actions in these circumstances. This isn't true in general and definitely is not true for a believer. Christians are commanded to not sin when they are angry. Believers are admonished to bring anger to a quick resolution and not to let the sun set on their anger. Cain was told that he had the power to control sin. The fruit of the Holy Spirit which is given to every believer includes self-control.

Open aggression and angry outbursts are not the only responses to this state of preparedness. Some try and hold the anger within because its open manifestation isn't seen as a normal thing in their circle within society. To try and suppress anger isn't healthy. Secular therapists have long recognized this and use aggressive role playing (pillow fights etc.) To release the energy of being angry without causing real harm to anyone. There is an old adage that you should count to ten before saying anything when you are angry. Good advice, but for the wrong reason. While it may allow a person to gain control of self and not do something in anger they will regret later, it doesn't touch the real reason for the anger and effect a cure.

The person who never seems to get angry is simply good at hiding their outward expression of the inward emotions. They are bringing real harm upon themselves. Remember I said that during this state of preparedness that the blood supply to the digestive tract is cut to a bare minimum? Long periods, or several rapid sequences of this preparedness will cause problems medically as this person will have ulcers, constipation, diarrhea, spastic colon, or other problems in the digestive tract. The constant preparation and tension within the muscles will cause them to have frequent if not constant headaches. The increased heart and respiration rate can lead to serious heart problems. They aren't controlling anger, they are turning the energy inward at their own expense. This person will usually also become a very negative person and begin to use secret ways to punish the one causing them the hurt or frustration. For example they become consistently late for everything. They may not control anything else, but they will show everyone who is in control in their life, they will not be in bondage to a clock. Passive aggression!

In our society there is perhaps more of this passive aggression than we might think at first. For example, I believe that for every child who is truly an underachiever, we find a child with many issues in their home life that leave them frustrated, hurt, or both. Grades never mean as much to the child as their parents and this may be the only way they can find to exert control over anything in their lives.

Anger can be seen then as an act that is designed to gain control in a person's life and get out of another person what they desire. The sad thing is that especially among so-called

polite adults wishing to avoid a scene or a personal confrontation is that it works and the person gets what they want. This reinforcement of anger as a means of control guarantees it will become a more frequent response to hurt and frustration in that person's coping skills.

Anger can be manifested in some by undercutting the person whom the anger is directed toward. A wife or husband may deliberately allow a child to do something they know the other has forbidden. One parent showing disrespect for the other will eventually cause the children to show the same disrespect undercutting the authority of that parent and causing them frustration and hurt.

All anger can be traced to unmet expectations. Expectations for self or another that cause hurt or frustration causing the body to prepare itself for action. Once prepared, this excess energy must be used or the time spent in this high state of preparedness will take its toll on the physical health of that person. Stress kills quite literally. The heart is not designed to pump blood at this volume nor beat at this increased rate and will literally burn itself out if this is not controlled. This is exactly what tranquilizers do, relax the body so it doesn't react to the things that would normally trigger the body to go into this state of preparedness. While such medicines may be needed in extreme circumstances, this is not the cure. The medicines unnaturally reduce the reaction of the body to the stimuli and a person under the influence of these medicines doesn't have the normal range of emotions, either high or low. The symptom is being treated, not the underlying cause, nor the teaching of a better method of coping with life.

The answer lies in understanding first what is happening physically in the body, and why the driving force seems so strong and hard to control. Second is not the suppression of the state of preparedness, but channeling that preparedness and energy into a constructive channel that provides both for the use of the extra burst of energy and reaches a satisfactory result for the person experiencing the anger.

The old adage about counting to ten is going in the right direction, but doesn't carry through to the final goal of reaching a satisfactory result for the person caught in the process of anger. The answer is indeed to slow down and think, but not to stop with the goal of reaching a certain magic number and letting the "emotion" of the moment pass. The desired ending can only come when the insertion of time is used to constructively channel the energy of the moment. Rather than counting to any number, pause and evaluate the situation, minus any idea of guilt or accusation indicating a need for justification for the emotion. During this pause, engage the brain and ask three questions: 1) Why am I angry? 2) What do I want to come out of this encounter? 3) How do I achieve my desired result. Then work the plan! The examples used here will have short and decisive endings. However often in life the problem may be much more complex and the attainment of the desired goal may take more time and involve other people.

Example number one: Tim is driving down the interstate when another driver cuts in front of him making the application of brakes necessary to avoid a collision result in all loose objects in the car being tossed forward violently and the cup of coffee in his hand to

end up in his lap. Tim is livid instantly. Visions of this "idiot" lying on the side of the road bleeding cloud his mind. As Tim watches the same driver cut across lanes ahead of him almost causing another accident, he begins to use this technique to gain control of himself and the situation.

1. Tim asks himself, why am I angry? I felt threatened and frustrated by what this other driver did. It is rude and improper behavior by another person, and I am the one who was put in peril and now have to go home and change clothes before I can go to work, where I will now clock in late and lose money because of his actions. There can be a complex issue from as far back as childhood about suffering unjustly at the hands of others, of feeling bullied by others, but these are not on the table as such here. Why am I angry deals with this very second. In this example Tim has a reason to be angry.

2. The next question Tim asks himself is, what do I want to come out of this situation? Though the temptation is extremely high, Tim like any sensible person doesn't want a confrontation with a stranger on the highway. American highways have the best armed populace in the world and more angry stressed out people per capita than any where else in the civilized world to go with the armament. What Tim wants is dry and clean clothes and to get to work with as little delay as possible. Tim wants the present hurt taken care of and long term to avoid such situations in the future.

3. Tim then asks himself, how do I reach these goals? Then outlines a plan of action to reach the goals that might go something like this: First I get over to the right hand lane and take the first opportunity to return home where I can change clothes, or I can have someone bring me a set of clean clothes to the office. If I have someone bring me some clean clothes I can be at work on time and not get docked come pay day. First objective, call someone who can bring me clothes to the office. If I was more observant and had seen this car closing in from the right hand lane, I could have gotten over and allowed him to safely pass without all this frustration and danger being involved. Therefore if I make sure I allow plenty of time to get where I am going, being stuck in the "slow" lane once in awhile will not make me late and I will be less likely to have someone cut in front of me. If I drive more defensively and pay attention to the traffic around me in this less hurried mode, I can be reasonably assured I can avoid any peril from other drivers or self.

Tim has stopped to think before doing anything. The extra energy wasn't suppressed or turned inward, but used to work out the solution. Because a reachable goal is possible and Tim has a plan, the encounter ends as he desires and he feels more in control and not threatened. Because the prepared state was not allowed to linger as he attempted to get back at the other person and cause equal harm, little or no physical damage resulted medically speaking.

We can be proactive and work out plans to avoid situations that cause frustration and hurt before they arise. What gets your goat the quickest? What can you do to avoid situations where this trigger is present? People can learn to recognize the sensation of the body building toward anger, and using this method short-circuit the process before reaching a stage of anger. Most anger can be justified. However anger does not need to lead to

aggressive actions to release the energy and not harm self. Deliberately pausing to think things out is not frustrating and doesn't channel the energy inward. Pausing to count to ten may bring some control to the emotions of the moment. Pausing to form a plan of action, will take control of the moment, and the future.

The methodology presented here seems to be extremely simple, because it is. Nonetheless, putting these steps into practice prove to be all but impossible for most people. Learning these simple questions and to get between the triggering event and your reaction will bring control of emotions. This same process when applied preventively will remove many of the events that trigger frustration and hurt. This is the real key to exercising the peace promised by Christ to the believer. With very little self examination most can name the events that cause them hurt, frustration, or fear. Removing or avoiding these events removes most of the angry reactions. Anger no longer controls, but is a tool to provoke actions that will bring the desired result and control of events all men seek.

Some triggers are complex and involve family or other people. Write down everything that causes hurt, frustration or fear in your life as the heading on a blank sheet of paper. Next list other people who are involved in this problem area. Is there another person in this list you can discuss the problem and possible solutions with? Talk to them and accept their suggestions as to how to alleviate the problem. If the problem involves people outside the family or in positions where discussion isn't possible, can you bring in third party help such as a pastor or counselor? If there is an area that none of this can be put into effect, remove yourself from that situation. If this means changing jobs, moving or whatever, do it. Life is too short and will be shorter if you try to live with situations that continually frustrate or hurt over which you have no control and cannot avoid. Living in these conditions will cause a person to develop a very negative attitude toward life. They turn inward and begin to beat up on themselves. Severe depression or severe forms of acting out will follow. We see these type persons involved in road rage, work place shootings, or the latest victim of suicide statistics.

Being able to identify hurts, frustrations, and fears is as important then as being able to put to use any system of control over the event of the moment. Coping tools are for the treatment of the symptom and gaining control now. Self evaluation and longer term goals bring a more permanent cure, and improve the quality of life.

Learn from the past. The aforementioned state of preparedness can develop very rapidly and emotions reel out of control as with the example we began with. In these events there seem to be little if any time between the trigger and anger boiling forth. This isn't quite as true as it appears. There are signs that should cause extra precautions to be in place. Fatigue, illness, or approaching deadlines all cause some of the same emotions as anger, and the body begins a slower process whereby irritability and negative attitude precede the actual state and the following reaction to the stimulus. For example if you must be at work at 8:00 AM and know that though it is a thirty minute drive, traffic will be heavy (rush hour) and the drive time will be closer to forty-five minutes or more, don't leave home at 7:30 AM. The gain in peace and tranquility of life gained by leaving at 7:00 AM far out weigh the loss of a mere thirty minutes. Alternatively, can you leave at six and

have breakfast close to work and not have the last minute rush at all? Too costly for your budget? How about packing breakfast and taking it with you to be enjoyed leisurely before you clock in? Too much hassle? How much is your life worth?

Remove aggression from your image of anger. Remove aggressive stimuli from your life style. I am convinced for example that there is no social redeeming value to so-called professional wrestling. The uncontrolled anger expressed, the violent actions, and language place this "entertainment" outside of the Christian experience. It is not a sport, the winner as well as the whole "show" is prearranged and organized to extract the most emotive response from the audience possible. While there are some contact sports that I disapprove of, they can at least be called sports. Football and auto-racing would be two in this category. It is difficult to find a movie that doesn't contain foul language, violence (graphic and wholesale), or sex if not all three. Over time these will have an affect on a person and influence their reactions to stimuli that cause a state of preparedness. Even children's cartoons, which have now been extended into full length feature films are loaded with graphic violence and overt aggression when the supposed territory or rights of another are infringed upon. These things are counter Christian conduct and bring undue influence into the lives of everyone, from childhood. No wonder the United States has so many major incidents of violence in the home and on the street.

The two major areas where these triggers are nourished are in the home and in the work place. In the home, definite steps can be taken to remove the seeds of aggression and frustration. Control may be less in the work place, but much of the work place frustrations disappear when the home life is satisfactory. When the home provides the place of peace and safety it should, the work place will not be the irritant it is when there is no place nor time of rest in the world. Viet Nam saw more men returned to civil life with severe mental problems than all other conflicts for this very reason. There were no front/rear line distinctions as such, and most lived twenty-four hours, seven days a week in constant fear for their life. Most can understand one severe traumatic event causing long term problems. Few appear to appreciate that a constant barrage of daily pressure (stress - frustration, hurt, or fear) can have the same affect on mental health and have significant impact on the over all physical health. Thus the reverse of this situation would also work, that is if the situation in the home cannot be changed because of severe medical difficulties as an example, the work place needs to be much less stressful.

While the use of the tools here presented will handle the immediate threat and bring peace, the concern is for the longer term and changing life styles so future events can be handled in stride and not cause this high state of preparedness for action to be a common happening, but reserved for true emergencies. Which in passing, require the same evaluation to be handled properly.

This introduces another concept all need to learn and apply, with minor modification of application the same tool can be used for several purposes. For many the illustration with Tim used in the beginning will make sense and the rules of engagement taught here can be applied. However many cannot seem to transfer the knowledge to a situation that has not been specifically pointed out to them. For example the Bible says love your neighbor.

While it is obvious I cannot love my neighbor and hate them at the same time, many will not think that the act of hating their neighbor is sin because the verse did not say do not hate your neighbor. This seems silly, especially with such an obvious point being used for the illustration, but it is rampant in our world. It is a hard and fast rule, especially with the Bible that a negative implies the positive opposite and vice-versa. Thus using the same example a command not to hate would just as forcefully mean to love and the command to love would mean not to hate.

In an emergency psychologists have long recognized what is labeled the fight or flight rule. The same response of the adrenaline glands that was described in the beginning as preparing the body for anger, do same thing in preparing the body to fight or flee a perceived threat. Thus we can use the same procedure to handle an emergency. Why or what is happening, what is the desired result, how do I accomplish that? The pause to evaluate would save many lives as people with broken backs wouldn't be yanked around in an attempt to help them if the helper had stopped to evaluate the situation and consider the back/neck may be broken and decide calmly if moving the person was as important as another action. One slight pause and no one would pour water on a grease fire, most kitchens having far better materials to smother the fire readily at hand.

God gave us reasoning minds and the ability to control our environment. This environment includes mental control of our thoughts and actions. So much so that in the Old Testament we are invited to come and reason with God and see our sins are removed far from us and in the New Testament we are told to reach the same conclusion in working out our own salvation, not that we can save ourselves, but that we can see what we need to do. God says He is not the author or God of fear unto bondage, but of freedom. God also said He is not the God of confusion but of a sound mind. The gift is given, it must however be unpacked and put to use to achieve the desired result. A key word that is displayed in many factories in huge capital letters is THINK. When a person learns to think, and to have some structure to the order of what to think about, not only anger, but most of life will be under control and anger will be a positive tool for change, not a call to aggression in sin against the command of God.

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