ANGER - SESSION ONE
Understanding Anger & Its Origins in Our Lives

INTRODUCTION
Anger is a normal emotion that occurs on a scale from mild annoyance to rage or fury. It surfaces when we believe our rights have been violated or we feel powerless or threatened. It can be caused by external and/or internal events. In this session we will explore and examine where we learned our reactions to anger.

✓ OBJECTIVES
- To understand anger and its good and bad effects.
- To explore the ghosts of anger’s origins and masks.
- To identify which of them apply to us.

MATERIALS
Paper, pencils, markers/chalk, dry erase/chalk board and exercise forms.

NOTES TO FACILITATOR
This session is an introduction to anger and its origins in our lives. The goal here is to introduce the topic of anger for a generalized understanding. A fuller picture will emerge in the following sessions. Respect all members who respond to questions by acknowledging them in some way. Allow the discussion to evolve but bring it back to the outline if it goes too far astray.

ACTIVITY:
Begin with this statement: “People with anger problems seldom realize the root causes of their anger. They simply live with it.”

Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
What is so bad about simply living with it?

UNDERSTANDING ANGER
A. ANGER
“If your house is on fire, the most urgent thing to do is to go back and try to put out the fire, not to run after the person you believe to be the arsonist. If you run after the person you suspect has burned your house, your house will burn down while you are chasing him or her. That is not wise. You must go back and put out the fire. So when you are angry, if you continue to interact with or argue with the other person, if you try to punish her, you are acting exactly like someone who runs after the arsonist while everything goes up in flames.” – Tich Nhat Hanh
1. **What are some synonyms for anger?**

*How about: spiteful, mad, upset, irritated, infuriated, or enraged?*

One definition: Anger is a range of feelings from mild to extreme displeasure, hostility, indignation or exasperation toward someone or something.

Rage and fury are intense, uncontained, explosive emotions. Wrath applies to anger that seeks vengeance or punishment on a grand scale.

2. **Anger is an emotion** we experience on a scale from mild to extreme.

Anger can also be described as a feeling of great annoyance or antagonism as the result of some real or supposed grievance. It may be a caused by a serious threat to our well-being or it could simply be an annoyance or a mild interruption. What often triggers anger is our belief that we **must** deal with the situation in some way.

*Can you think of a serious threat that might cause you to get angry?*

*Name an “annoyance” that might cause you to become angry.*

We can be thankful for our anger when we choose to use it properly. When we decide to use anger the wrong way, it can cause problems.

3. **Childhood experiences** often influence the way we experience and react to anger.

*Do you agree with the following statements?*

a. If you grew up in an environment where your parents discussed situations that angered them, you learned to talk about situations and find non-violent ways to resolve them.

b. If you saw your parents yell, curse or hit the wall when they were angry, you learned to respond the same way.

c. If you saw your parents hit each other and call each other names when they were angry, you will be inclined to do the same to your partner or spouse.

d. If you saw your parents abusing drugs and alcohol as a means to feel less pain when angry, you are susceptible to abusing drugs and alcohol to self-medicate when you get angry.

e. Now that you are grown, you are what you are. There is little you can do to change your angry reactions.

f. You can learn to short circuit your anger before it becomes explosive, but once you have tasted the power of angry violence you probably will always have to guard against its attraction.
Human behavior is far too complex to apply flat rules to everyone, but in general, only (e) is a false statement.

B. GROUP EXERCISE
Most of our angry and aggressive reactions were learned during childhood. Unconsciously, the people around us taught us through the unspoken messages of their actions. Ask each member to answer the following on a piece of paper. Discuss the answers.

What messages did I receive about anger and aggression as a child from the following people:

Father or father figure?
Mother or mother figure?
Brothers and sisters?
Friends?
Gang Members?
Television?
Teachers, school?

Does this affect the way I act today?

C. BEHIND THE MASK OF ANGER.
1. Everyone gets angry. It’s normal and natural. Developing a healthy, controlled response to anger is helpful and good. It calls our attention to problems in need of solutions. It helps us protect ourselves and set boundaries. It gives us energy and focus.

What are some examples of the positive uses of anger?

Uncontrolled or misdirected anger doesn’t solve problems. Most often, it creates them. Some people use aggressive anger as a defense mechanism to mask feelings of fear, shame, ignorance, worthlessness. Some use it to avoid responsibility. Others become addicted to the feeling of power it gives them. They use it to get high.

Do you agree with the above statements about using anger to hide feelings?

Have you experienced the addictive qualities of anger?

The following are some examples from Claudia Black’s “Anger Strategies:”

a. Shame is the internalized belief that you are defective, insufficient, unworthy. 
Rage is one defense against it. It pushes people away so they don’t get close enough
to see what you believe is so ugly about yourself. Anger often is used to verbally
attack someone before they attack you.

Do you use anger as a form of self-protection against those attempting to humiliate
you?

b. Anger allows you to achieve moments of intensity in an otherwise dull life. You
get high with the excitement of feeling suddenly alive instead of dull and apathetic.
But the rush you get from anger keeps you angry.

Have you used anger as a way to get high?

2. Discuss these penetrating questions posed by Claudia Black:
   • Is your anger a buffer against feelings you would rather not experience? Against
     what is your anger defending or protecting?
   • Do you use anger as a buffer against sadness or disappointment or when you feel
     helpless or hopeless or guilty?
   • Do you use anger when you do not want others to see your hurt, loneliness or
     neediness?

3. Hot Buttons, Hot Thoughts
   Anger triggers are the hot buttons that set off your anger. They can be provoking
   events, people, places or situations. Examples: Someone breaks into line ahead of
   you; a family member does not fulfill a promise; untrue rumors are spread about
   you; you are wrongly accused; someone is taking advantage of you.

   These are triggers. At this point you have not yet decided how to react to them, how
to use your anger.

4. The Cue of Clenched Fists
   Anger cues are warning signs that you are becoming angry in response to a hot-
   button trigger. They include clenched fists; increased heart rate; tightness in the
   chest; raised voice; talking to yourself in a hostile way; and thoughts of aggression
   and revenge.

   These are cues alerting you to your anger. At this point you still have not yet
decided how you will react to the situation.

   Is it possible to simply stop getting angry without addressing the underlying
   causes and triggers?

   What are YOUR hot buttons? What pulls your trigger, or makes you see
   red?

   What cues have you noticed when you get angry? Are these productive?

This book cannot answer those questions. The answers can only be found within
each of us. The search for those answers never really ends. But the Blue Book is a
tool with specific questions and some general truths that can help steer you in the
right direction.

“He who conquers his anger has conquered an enemy.”
- German Proverb
SOURCES
Anger Chapter in original Blue Book written by Greg Musselman, Lisa Dunn and inmates at Lansing Correctional Facility, Kansas.

Anger Chapter written in 2009 by Damone Cox and Ronald Rhodes, members of ROFW at Lansing Correctional Facility, Kansas.

The Anger Messages group activity was created by Deborah Douglas-Keough, a member of the Topeka Correctional Facility Med/Max ROFW group.

Anger Strategies by Claudia Black, Ph.D., 2006

Men & Anger, by Mary C. Cullen and Robert E. Freeman-Longo

The Anger Control Workbook used in anger management groups at LCF

Bodily cues and anger trigger information courtesy of Marla Baldwin, LSCSW and Linda Stiles, LMSW, therapists from The Family Conservancy in Wyandotte County, where Anger Management and Domestic Violence Offender groups are conducted.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?
Thich Nhat Hanh: Anger - Putting Out the Fire of Anger:

Controlling Anger Before Its Controls You, American Psychological Association:
http://www.apa.org/topics/controlanger.html