


Testing Angry Thoughts

How we respond to angry thoughts depends on the role these thoughts play in our lives. If we rarely experience anger, and angry thoughts arise from a clear injustice, our response will be to find out how to use our anger to respond constructively to the situation. When we are frequently angry, especially if our anger creates problems for us and our relationships, then we want to learn to examine our angry thoughts and see if there might be another way of thinking about things. A Thought Record is a good tool for learning to think in alternative ways.

| 1. Situation Who? What? When? Where? | 2. Moods a. What did you feel? b. Rate each mood (0–100%). c. Circle or mark the mood you want to examine. | 3. Automatic Thoughts (Images) a. What was going through your mind just before you started to feel this way? Any other thoughts? Images? b. Circle or mark the hot thought. |
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| Thursday, 8:30 P.M. Judy gives me an odd look when I tell her I'm going to AA on Saturday. | Anger 90%  Circle the mood you most want to examine | She's upset that I'm going to AA on Saturday. She doesn't see my recovery program as important. She doesn't care about me. She doesn't understand how hard it is not to drink. I can't stand being so angry. A drink will make me feel better. |

When we are angry, we tend to interpret or misinterpret other people's intentions in a personal and negative way. We may think that they are intentionally mistreating us or taking advantage of us, even when this is not the case. For example, suppose you are standing a few feet from the counter in a store, waiting for a clerk to finish with another customer because you need help. As soon as the clerk finishes with that customer, someone else walks up to the counter and begins to talk to the clerk. If you think that this person saw you and deliberately stepped in front of you, you might feel angry. If, on the other hand, you thought that this was an honest mistake and the person did not see you standing there, then you are less likely to feel angry. The difference between these two reactions is whether we personalize the other person's actions. Do we think they did this "to us," or was the other person unaware that we were standing there?

When we get angry, we tend to personalize other people's actions. One of the advantages of Thought Records is that they help you think through these types of situations. You can learn to ask yourself questions that help you consider other people's intentions. Thought Records can help you consider alternative explanations for other people's behaviour. Can

you remember a time when you stepped in front of someone else who was waiting in line because you didn't see that person standing there? You did not intend to take advantage of the person. Instead, it was a simple mistake that everyone makes from time to time. Learning to interpret other people's actions less personally, to consider the intentions of other people in a kinder way, and to look at situations from different perspectives are helpful ways of responding to anger.

Angry thoughts often put people in boxes, so to speak. For example Rick became very angry with John when John washed Rick's shirt and it shrank. Rick called John "careless" and "thoughtless." We often label other people like Rick did when we get angry. If these labels are used often enough, they become boxes that block our flexible view of the other person's intentions. If Rick continued to think of John as "thoughtless," then he might start to misinterpret many behaviours as proof of this label. For example, if John walked into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee, Rick might think, "Oh, he's so thoughtless. He didn't offer me a cup." Rick did not consider that John knew that Rick never drank more than one cup of coffee and he'd already had one cup that morning. John was not being thoughtless, but was demonstrating his attentiveness to Rick's habits. In fact, John thought of himself as attentive and caring, and his behaviour generally backed this up. Putting a person in a box with a single label on it usually results in lots of misinterpretations and unnecessary upset.

If you find yourself labelling and judging someone in your life in a consistent way, this is often a sign that you have put this person in a box. When you become aware of this, there are several things you can do to reduce your anger and open up the box. First, you can be aware of your "hot button" issues that get pushed. Rick realized he was very sensitive to signs that his feelings and needs are being ignored. When your hot buttons get pushed, instead of reacting in an angry way, you can try to be a non-judgmental observer and get more information, so you can test your assumptions about other people's intentions.

Rick wanted to improve his relationship with John. So rather than get silently angry about John's getting a cup of coffee for himself, Rick asked John, "Why didn't you get me a cup of coffee?" This gave Rick a chance to test his assumption that John was being thoughtless. John replied, "I saw you already had a cup of coffee this morning, and I know you never drink more than one cup. But if you want another, I'm happy to get you one. I'll make a fresh pot." John's reply gave Rick additional information and helped him realize that John's behaviour was not "thoughtless" at all. The advantage of gathering more information when we start to think negatively about others is that it often helps us understand other people's actions in new ways.

Other methods that may help you control your anger include:

- Anticipating and preparing for events that place you at high risk for experiencing anger
- Recognizing the early warning signs of anger
- Timeouts
- Assertion training