Dealing with Anger - GRACE under Pressure

Take a minute to think about the last time that you were angry. Did you feel “out of control” or as if you were you on “auto-pilot”? Were you thinking clearly and choosing your actions, or were you reacting in ways you had in a previous anger provoking situation(s)? Everyone feels strong emotions such as anger from time to time, but sometimes when we have very intense feelings, we act without thinking. At times this may set a cycle in motion. This cycle may begin with a situation that triggers feelings in us (e.g., anxiety or frustration). We then automatically act on that feeling. Unfortunately, there are some cases when these “knee-jerk”, emotional reactions may not help the original situation, and may even make it worse. This module offers some suggestions on how to slow down this cycle so that we have the time to make decisions about how we want to act in emotionally charged situations. Did you feel like you were losing control or as if you were on autopilot?

The challenge is to stop this emotional cycle long enough for us to do some problem solving. We can begin to regain control of our actions by examining the Activating events, our Beliefs about these events, and the emotional or behavioral Consequences that come from these beliefs – the ABCs. We have very little control over some of the Activating events in our lives (such as the things other people do, or “the hand life deals us”). But, we have a lot of control over our Beliefs about these events and the emotional and behavioral Consequences (e.g., angry outburst).

This is a method to help you deal with frustration and angry feelings. It takes practice, but you can change the way you think, act, and feel.

Let’s start at the end (the Consequence – anger) and work backwards, changing your Beliefs about Activating events. Ultimately, you will be better prepared to slow down or even stop the process before you say or do things that don’t improve the situation. In other words, you’ll be better able to maintain GRACE under pressure.

- **G** -- When you’re angry - try to Get away. It’s too late to avoid making yourself angry, but it’s not too late to avoid getting into more difficulty. Pick a spot where you can get away from the upsetting situation. If you’re at home, go to your bedroom and close the door. You may not be able to physically leave in every situation. Sometimes the best you can do may be to take a brief ‘mental holiday’, such as repeating a saying or a prayer that calms you, thinking about the details of place where you are always at peace, or singing an uplifting song to yourself. The point is to put as much emotional distance between your emotions and the problem as possible.
• **R** -- Now, once you’re able to take a mental break or are able to be alone try taking some time to **RELAX**. This is very important. It helps you clear your mind and think about alternate solutions to the problem at hand. Try this exercise to help you relax: Take 10 deep, slow breaths. Count to 4 while breathing in and to 6 while breathing out. If you can’t do this for the first few breaths, just continue to relax and focus on slowing your breathing. As you breathe in feel your lower abdomen expand and relax. Don’t think about the problem, just count and breathe. If you can’t stop thinking about what has just happened, you may want to repeat the word “relax” to yourself to help block the upsetting thoughts.

• **AC** -- Next, **A**lso **C**onsider why you became frustrated or feeling angry. Were you making unrealistic demands on yourself, someone else, or the world in general? Unrealistic beliefs lead to unrealistic conclusions. One good clue to let you know whether a demand is unrealistic is if the words “should”, “must”, or “ought” appear in the statement. This means you believe that there are no alternatives to your way of thinking. So, if things don’t go a particular way, you’re sunk. For example, you think to yourself “I should not ever becoming short, or irritated, with my care recipient who has dementia.” Eliminating “should”, “ought”, and “must” statements may go a long way in helping you accept the natural challenges of caregiving.

If you think things “must” go a particular way, and they don’t, you might begin “awfulizing”. Awfulizing is one of many different forms of ineffective thinking (see attached list of ineffective thinking patterns) in which you believe that something is the absolute worst thing possible and it will never get better.

• **E** -- Finally, **E**xchange your unrealistic conclusions for more realistic, and positive, ones. If you are prone Awfulizing, consider that something may be bad, but it probably is not as terrible as you fear and certainly it is not the worst imaginable. If you really accept these new beliefs, you’ll find that although some things will still annoy you, you’ll be less likely to make yourself angry.

Once you’ve gotten a better understanding of this cycle of frustration, you’ve cleared the path to begin problem solving. You will find that the energy you once spent on fighting and feeling guilty can now be used more creatively for setting and accomplishing your goals.