Identifying and Responding to Anger Triggers

An “anger trigger” is something that consistently makes us angry. Often there are certain situations or specific people that generate feelings in us that we do not fully understand, so we just feel angry. Most of us do not reflect on the things that make us angry, so they trigger our anger time and again. Once we’ve identified an anger trigger, we can focus on how the situation can be changed. If we think a little harder, we might even identify why the particular anger trigger makes us so angry. Consider the following:

Example 1: A Situation is the Trigger
A common situational trigger for people is waiting in line. A sense of impatience and frustration can grow while waiting in long lines. You might lash out at your companion, a nearby stranger, or an employee. Could your anger in this situation be avoided or controlled? Yes. The most important first step is identifying the trigger, in this case waiting in line. Once this step is taken, you can attempt to cope with the situation more effectively. How can this situation be changed? One thing you can try is calming self-talk, a proven frustration reducer. You could talk to yourself in the following way: “Okay, I’m stuck in this line and I really HATE lines. I can get myself all worked up into a really bad mood or I can decide the wait is worth it. Can I come back at another time for this? No, I can’t. Well then, let’s see how long it actually takes. Seems like forever to me, but maybe it will be only 15 minutes. I’ll time it. I’ll try to remember it’s not this clerk’s fault—the store should handle staffing better. Or if it is this clerk’s fault, getting into it with her is not going to help me.” Believe it or not, a few moments of reflection like this can make a big difference, and people report feeling so much better that they do not misdirect their anger. Later, we might reflect on why waiting in line makes us so angry. Perhaps it makes us feel taken advantage of or perhaps we have other issues with waiting in line. Figuring out why is not always easy.

Example 2: A Person is the Trigger
Sometimes specific people can also be anger triggers. Most of us know someone whose habits or way of speaking just annoys us. We might say that such a person “drives us crazy.” Often, we can’t put our finger on it, but we tend to feel frustrated or tense when we are around this person. We find it difficult to control our anger when we are with him/her. Like situational triggers, the first step in understanding our anger is to identify the trigger, in this example, the specific acquaintance. Then, spend some time thinking about why this individual makes you angry. For example, perhaps you will discover that you are both very competitive so that friendly games quickly become angry “win or die” matches! With this knowledge, you can improve the relationship and avoid being angry. In terms of how this can be changed, you might decide not to engage in activities that are potentially competitive with this person. Better yet, talking about it might help both of you learn to be aware of this competitiveness and thus control it better. In summary, if we probe beneath the surface, we may realize it is our lack of identifying underlying triggers that is the real cause of our anger. Remember, we
have to take responsibility for our feelings. The best way to do this is to follow these three steps:

(1) identify your anger triggers;
(2) consider what changes can be made to prevent this anger; and
(3) explore why these situations or people are so often associated with anger for you.

Instructions:

(1) Write down some things or people that seem to be associated with you getting angry, i.e., ANGER TRIGGERS.

(2) Then, consider HOW THE SITUATION CAN BE CHANGED: Are there specific things you can do to prevent this trigger from making you angry? This might be anything from changing your attitude to changing the actual circumstances.

(3) Lastly, and most difficult, see if you can figure out WHY these things make you angry. You may find it has to do with your assumptions, interpretations, or feelings about the situation and not the anger trigger itself. Be aware that it may take a long time—and even the help of a professional—for you to understand why certain situations and people make you angry. But if you can identify the what or the who and come up with ways to alter these circumstances, you will have done a lot toward managing your anger.

Example:

1. ANGER TRIGGER
   My mother’s bugging me to clean my room.

   HOW THIS CAN BE CHANGED
   1. Talk to my mom about letting me keep my own space the way I like it.
   2. Talk to my mom about some sort of compromise about what’s considered “clean.”
   3. Clean my room regularly so she can’t say anything.

   WHY I GET ANGRY
   1. It makes me feel like a baby.
   2. It makes me feel like I have no privacy.

Now, identify and respond to your own anger triggers.
Identifying and Responding to Anger Triggers

1. MY ANGER TRIGGER

   ____________________________________________________________

   HOW THIS CAN BE CHANGED

   1. _______________________________________________________

   2. _______________________________________________________

   3. _______________________________________________________

   WHY I GET ANGRY

   1. _______________________________________________________

   2. _______________________________________________________

2. MY ANGER TRIGGER

   ___________________________________________________________

   HOW THIS CAN BE CHANGED

   1. _______________________________________________________

   2. _______________________________________________________

   3. _______________________________________________________

   WHY I GET ANGRY

   1. _______________________________________________________

   2. _______________________________________________________