

## **Session 4 Taking Control of Your Anger (Part 1)**

### **Doing Time Just Start!**

I don't like to exercise. Plain and simple... But I know it's important for my health so I do it. The hardest thing about exercising is starting it. The fact is, once I start, I'm in. If I'm willing to do it for a few minutes, I know that those few minutes will lead to a few more minutes and a few more minutes and before I know it, I've put in some solid time and effort. It is the act of starting that's key – and if I don't start, I'm certainly going nowhere with it. Whatever it is... exercise, writing a letter to someone, working on a particular project, meditating, calling someone who I need to call, working on a project... the trick is just to start. There is no success without it. So the next time you are resisting doing something you know would be a positive or constructive thing to do..... simply START. And pat yourself on the back for taking those first few steps!!!!

"Discipline yourself, keep your mind active and exercise. I spent a total of 2 years in solitary. I quickly realized that I had to learn to discipline myself. I would not allow myself to stay in bed, made myself keep regular hours, exercised a lot, read whatever I could read. Unable to look without, I was forced to look within." Troy, AL DOC

"I've started to STOP. BREATHE. And CHOOSE when someone or something triggers me. It has impacted me in ways I really didn't think was possible. I notice a big change in my attitude and behavior." Reynaldo, 5 years

# Session Notes

## Taking Control of Your Anger

♪ **I found a monster in me when I lost my cool. It lives inside me, eating what's in its way.** Kid Cudi

♪ **I really never profit from things I do in a rage.** Marvin Gaye

♪ **This anger I issue out, reflects I've been through a lot. Am I on mute? Does anybody hear me yelling out?** 50/50 Twin



"Anger and rage can overwhelm you and the hate that can come out of that distorts your rational thinking. There are a lot of micro aggressions - (shakedowns, the way food is presented, the heat and how hot or cold the place is, games that are played). Hate can build up. Paranoia is building. Other games are played. I would have literally cut off a guards head if I could have - and that isn't me. I saw my compassion and humanity slipping out of my hand. And it gets terrifying to think, "how much of me is going to be left after this?" What helped ground me was a positive interaction with an officer. There were others who were decent dudes. They didn't go out of their way to f with you. That helped ground me. Like I said, once I got grounded, I could look at the guard who was abusing his power for what he was... he was insignificant. I wasn't going to waste any more energy on him. I was doing my stretching for hours a day and I started working on my case."

Bobby [Bobby eventually overturned a life sentence and is out now.]

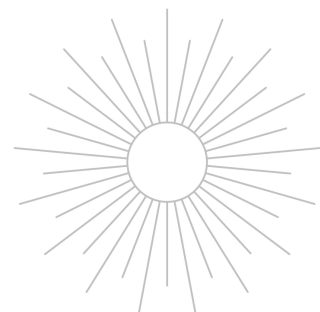
This session focuses on Chapter 5 in *Houses of Healing* – "Anger and Resentment: The Myth of Power." Knowing how to manage anger is important for anyone, but in prison taking control of your anger is critical because if you don't control your anger, it will control you. In prison where you have no choice but to be around a lot of people you might otherwise not choose to be around, with the feelings of powerlessness that come with the territory, and the feeling that things are unjust, anger can easily turn into aggression, rage, and a consuming desire for revenge. At

first these feelings can feel like the fuel that keeps you going but sustained anger will, *without question*, grind you down and leave you weaker.

Anger is a natural emotion that everyone experiences from time to time. And your anger may be totally justifiable. There's certainly nothing wrong with feeling angry. It often serves as a signal that something is wrong or unfair.

Yet anger becomes a problem when it gets out of control - when we find ourselves becoming angry all the time and staying that way. Or, when we know only unhealthy ways to deal with it like soothing ourselves with drugs or alcohol, using violence, or letting it consume us. Understanding our anger and learning strategies to deal effectively with it not only gives us more control over our emotions but over our lives as well.

It's important to step back and take a look at our anger and have some positive ways to deal with it. How do we handle our own anger? Do we blow up? Simmer? Stuff it inside? What are our anger patterns? Are there ways to deal with our anger that leave us an emotional victor in life rather than an emotional victim? These are a few of the things you'll take a look at in this session.



**Thinking about Your Anger:** As it says in *Houses of Healing*, anger is a natural emotion. Everyone feels angry from time to time. It can be a signal that something in our lives is wrong, unfair, or unsafe. It only becomes a problem....

- if we're always angry,
- if we express our anger in ways that harm others such as dumping it on others through emotional or physical violence,
- if we only use unhealthy ways to deal with our anger like numbing it with drugs or alcohol,
- or it causes us to lose important things in life (like losing our job, losing a relationship, losing our kids, losing our freedom).

Understanding our anger and learning strategies to effectively deal with it gives us a lot more control over our lives.

**Trauma and Anger:** One thing you should know about anger.... You may find your anger more easily triggered if you experienced trauma growing up. Some examples of the kinds of trauma many people have experienced are:

- growing up in a house with violence
- growing up in a violent neighborhood
- experiencing racism or discrimination
- witnessing violence
- having a parent addicted to drugs
- having a family member go to jail/prison
- being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused
- being neglected – adults did not take care of your needs

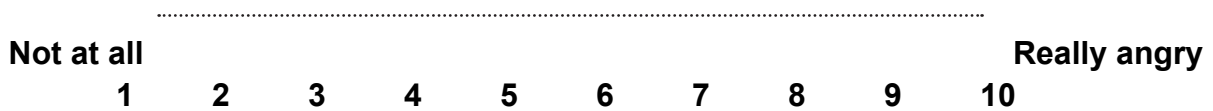
When you have a lot of trauma it affects your brain. The part of the brain that is responsible for survival works overtime and is hypervigilant. In other words, it rarely rests. It's always on the lookout for danger because experience tells it that danger may be just around the corner. We'll call this the "guard dog" part of the brain. This part of the brain acts without thinking. For example, if a car is rushing toward you or somebody is threatening you with a knife you act without thinking in order to protect yourself.

Sometimes you might react if you aren't in danger because you've had to be so hyper alert to danger in the past. "Better safe than sorry" is your brain's mode of operating. The more trauma we've experienced, the more the guard dog takes over even when we're not really in danger. If we want to be emotionally healthy we've

got to train the guard dog to not automatically react, but get a realistic reading on whether there is a real danger - or not. This way our brains can relax when there's no real threat.

**Being Aware of Your Triggers:** A big part of taking control of anger is knowing what our triggers are. The more aware we are of our triggers, the less likely we are to get hijacked by them.

Below is a list of triggers. After you read the trigger, put the number that represents **how much this would trigger your anger** on the line next to it:



**Rate Your Triggers from 1-10:**

- \_\_\_ Not being listened to
- \_\_\_ Someone cutting in front of you for the phone
- \_\_\_ Being accused of something you didn't do
- \_\_\_ Someone stealing or destroying personal property
- \_\_\_ When you squeeze ketchup and water comes out over your French fries
- \_\_\_ Being interrupted
- \_\_\_ Being disrespected by a CO
- \_\_\_ Someone cheating at a game
- \_\_\_ Stepping in dog shit
- \_\_\_ Someone not showing up for a visit after they said they would

On the list you just read, what was the situation that would trigger you most? If you did this exercise in a group, you would easily see that different situations trigger people differently. Why do you think people react differently to the same trigger?

In addition to understanding our anger we need to have the **skills** to handle our anger in a good way once we become triggered. One powerful skill to handle anger in a good way is "Stop. Breathe. And Choose."

**If you automatically react aggressively every time someone triggers you, you are actually training your brain to be aggressive.** It's like driving the same path in the mud over and over. Eventually the tracks get deeper and the wheels have a hard