

Anger Contracting

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Commit With A Contract

It is a very good idea to draw up a written contract detailing the things you agree to practice in the course of your anger management program. Signing such a contract is a way of providing yourself structure and support, both important for your success. Print out your contract on paper and sign it with ink. Get one or more people who want to support your anger management progress to co-sign as witnesses. You may even consider posting the contract in a public place so that people you interact with on a regular basis become aware of your commitment. Going public with your contract and intention to change will strengthen your commitment.

The details of the contract - exactly what you write into it - are important. You want to be very specific in describing:

- Your goals for the program (What you hope to accomplish)
- What you agree to do in the service of those goals
- How and when you will practice those things you've agreed to do.

Be specific! Do not write down obvious generalities, such as "I intend to stop overreacting." as your program goal. Vague goals like that are impossible to measure and leave you too much wiggle-room to compel real change. Instead of vague goals, describe specific situations that are upsetting to you, and the specific behavioral techniques you will practice and use when confronted with those situations. We've already covered many of the techniques useful for controlling your anger, but they bear repeating just the same. Repetition helps with understanding.

Take a time-out

Agree that you will take a temporary time-out (a temporary break) when confronted with angering situations, whenever this is possible to do. Taking the opportunity to step away from an angering situation will give you space and time you need to calm and gather yourself, and to evaluate the situation from a more rational, cool-minded perspective. Return to the situation when you're done with your time-out.

As an illustration, when a fight breaks out between you and your spouse or partner, agree to take a temporary break from the fight to allow both of you to cool down. You already know that if you let the fight progress, it will get increasingly out of control. Taking a few minutes to step away, calm down, and think critically about the issue you're fighting about can put you into a better frame of mind to deal with the issue at hand.

Similarly, if you are habitually overwhelmed by family demands upon returning home from work, agree that you will provide yourself with private decompression time after work but before you return home. Note that having a drink is not a healthy way to decompress! Drinking alcohol will only make your situation worse. Instead, go to the gym and work out. Take a yoga class. Simply sit in your car for 10 minutes and read that magazine or book you've been interested in. Do something to provide yourself with a little buffer zone so that when you do return home to your family you can appreciate what is good there and not be cranky or hostile. Often, a few minutes of alone-time or time-out can help you to better handle the situation when you do arrive at home.

Relax

Agree that you will practice relaxation exercises on a regular basis (preferably on a daily basis).

Since learning to control your anger often means learning to react less violently during stressful situations, it will be beneficial for you to become skillful at relaxing yourself. Relaxation techniques (including deep breathing exercises, meditation, and physical exercise as well) are an effective means of calming yourself down. When practiced daily, relaxation techniques become a proactive means of reducing your general overall arousal

Examine Your Angry Thoughts

As we described previously, the first thoughts that come into your mind when you are angry are likely to be impressionistic and judgmental and to be based on incomplete information. If you simply react to these incomplete impressions, you will end up attacking the people you are upset with, and this may not be the smart or right thing to do. Instead of just 'going off', agree that you will carefully and critically examine and evaluate each circumstance that provokes your anger. The best time to do this is during the time-out that you should take before your anger gets out of control.

Learn to recognize the types of situations that trigger you, and the types of characteristic angry thoughts that tend to occur to you when you are faced with those triggers. Take time out to decide whether or not reacting in anger will be your best choice. Retrain yourself to think logically and critically about provocative situations that would otherwise be guided by your automatic (and frequently wrong-headed) emotional reactions.

Speak Assertively

Agree that you will spend some time each day practicing assertive communication skills. Read a book about assertive communication. Write down the aggressive things you'd like to say to people who piss you off, and then re-write them in more assertive ways. Practice speaking the more assertive statements out loud in front of the mirror, or with a partner (during role-playing). Practicing these statements in advance of angering situations will make them easier to use when you are confronted with the real thing.

Along side of practicing your assertion skills (which are about how to respectfully say what you need to say), you might also benefit from practicing listening skills. Becoming a skillful active listener will improve your communication abilities, thereby expanding your options for getting what you want from other people.

Make It Short

The duration of your anger management contract is important. Specifically, any contract you draw up should only cover a short span of time – one to several days at a time are a good sized duration. Many people start out with a twenty-four hour contract and continue to make new commitments as they reach the end of the previous ones. Holding yourself accountable over shorter periods of time will allow you to adapt your contract as you learn to put anger management techniques into practice. Shorter contract terms also help you to feel successful. You can reward yourself upon successful completion a short contract, feel good about that, and then create a new contract (also for a short time). Contrast this with a long contract where you don't get rewarded for weeks! Shorter contract terms and frequent small rewards for success make for the best, most effective contracts.

Whether you decide to go day by day or for longer periods, you and your witness should both sign the dated contract, and you should keep a copy of your contract with you or posted in a public place so it serves as a reminder of your commitment.

Let Your Friends Help You Reality Test

Your partners, friends, and trusted associates can often recognize when you are getting angry better than you can, so it is a good idea to include them in your anger plan, if possible. Agree on a signal that friends can give you when they see you start sliding into old aggressive patterns. Once you receive the signal, you will know you need to change your behavior to avoid escalating your anger. You may want to take a time-out or agree to postpone your argument until you can speak about it from a more calm and rational place.

Reward Yourself

Write rewards for yourself into your anger contract. You should have a reward each time you successfully do the things you said you'd do during each short contract. The reward you choose should be simple and reasonably healthy—something you won't mind going without if you have a setback in working your program, but nevertheless something you want, are willing to work for and can feel good about enjoying when you succeed. For example, you might reward yourself with a small portion of your favorite food, or a small donation to your favorite charity. Small, frequent rewards are more useful than infrequent, larger rewards.