

DEVELOPING AN ESCALATION PREVENTION PLAN

Punishing, disrespectful, and explosive anger do not “just happen.” There is always a gradual build-up of emotion and tension over time which you will be better able to recognize if you become more mindful of and more closely monitor your stress level on a regular basis. This internal state of tension is also related to childhood and life experiences which have contributed to the way that you look at yourself, other people, and the world around you (i.e. your thought distortions and unrealistic core beliefs). When stress builds, it seeks an outlet. You may turn your stress inward on your body itself which can lead to physical symptoms; you might use chemicals more frequently or eat more or less than usual; you may spend especially long hours trying to be “productive” in your work setting or at home; you might lack energy and become lethargic; you may lash out at someone emotionally or verbally, or you may react in a passive-aggressive manner to “get even” with another person.

Anger is a normal and natural emotion that allows you to set healthy limits and to increase the potential for intimacy if it is expressed in an assertive and respectful manner. This plan is the foundation of an effective anger and abuse program. It is literally a way to get to know yourself and your emotional process: noticing what is going on inside you (e.g. thoughts, feelings, physical sensations) and what you are reacting to that is occurring around you (e.g. trigger situations, people, places, and times). The purpose of this plan is to assist you in realizing when you are beginning to feel angry and to come up with more positive ways of handling the anger you feel when this occurs.

To help you pay better attention to your own anger “build-up,” several cue or trigger categories are provided below (some other names for cues and triggers include stressors, “pet peeves,” things that “bother” you, annoyances, and frustrations). The more awareness you have of the information about yourself and your life that fits into these categories, the greater potential you will have to make positive choices and moderate and control your abusive, disrespectful, self-defeating, and self-destructive behaviors that are related to your anger. Being aware of your cues and understanding where you are in your escalation process can help you use your this plan and do what you need to do in order to de-escalate before you say or do something that you may regret later.

Keep in mind that an “escalation” is not just the feeling of explosive anger or behavior that is disrespectful and abusive. It is actually that internal “churning” and “revving up” that is part of the “fight or flight” stress response and it is also the process of experiencing any and all feelings (e.g. anxiety, self-doubt, insecurity) and signs (e.g. increased heartbeat, sweating, loud voice) that may eventually lead to abusive and disrespectful anger. The key is to slow down the process and learn to intervene in it effectively as early as possible. This will also allow you to communicate your anger (and your other feelings underneath it) in a more assertive and respectful manner if that is what you choose to do at the time.

Write out as much information as you can about your cues and your plan to take care of yourself (and the others around you) in the spaces provided below when these cues are “popping off around you.” Be as specific, open, and honest as possible about your triggers. Also make an effort to rank your cues according to whether they are lower (1), middle (2), or upper (3) level cues depending on where they occur in your escalation process. Use other sheets of paper if necessary or put this on a computer so you

can easily add to it in the future. Remember that this document is supposed to be a “work in progress” and you need to continue adding to it as you continue to learn more about yourself. Remember too that you should include triggers not only that you experience in the present but also your triggers from the past (if they were triggers in the past, they can easily become triggers in the future if you do not stay aware of them and work to handle them effectively when they do arise).

CUES AND TRIGGERS THAT INDICATE WHEN YOU ARE BECOMING ESCALATED, STRESSED, TENSE, AND ANGRY

PROBLEM SITUATIONS AND ISSUES (What are the general situations and issues in your life when you find yourself escalating and feeling frustrated and angry? e.g. not getting your way with your partner, too much to do at work, financial pressure, when someone disagrees with or criticizes you, when your kids won't listen to you or do what you tell them to do, waiting in lines, someone cutting you off or tailgating you on the highway)

PEOPLE/ANIMALS (Who are the specific people or animals from the past or present with whom you are more likely to escalate when you are around them or think about them? e.g. your current partner, your parents, your in-laws, your boss, your children, your past partners, your co-workers, particular friends or acquaintances. Be sure to also think about and include general categories of people with whom you notice yourself escalating, e.g. slow drivers, inattentive retail clerks, authority figures, certain racial or ethnic groups, certain politicians or political parties)

PLACES (What are the places where you are more likely to escalate? e.g. specific rooms in your house or apartment, in the car, at a bar, on the phone, on a golf course or racketball/basketball court)

TIMES (What are some of the specific times when you tend to escalate?)

DURING THE DAY (e.g. when you get the kids up and off in the morning, at dinnertime, just before leaving for work, on the way to or from work, getting the kids in bed at night)

DURING THE WEEK (e.g. weekends when you have more time around your partner and children, the day or night before returning to work, at a weekly staff or work meeting)

DURING THE MONTH (e.g. when you write out your bills or balance the checkbook, at the end of the month because you run out of money, at a monthly work meeting)

DURING THE YEAR (e.g. specific holidays; before, during, or after vacations; slow or busy times at work; when your kids come home for summer or go back to school in the fall; particular seasons like winter when it's cold and dark or summer when it's hot and humid)

SELF-TALK (the words, phrases, and sentences that you say to yourself)

NEGATIVE THOUGHTS/WORRIES (Give general examples of when you think, brood, or “stew” about things from the past or in the present until you become tense and angry, e.g. thinking that your partner may be interested in another person, worrying about the level of conflict in your relationship, “stewing” about your partner’s spending habits or not having enough money to pay all your bills, brooding about your health problems, fretting about how your kids are doing in school, “dwelling” on all the mistakes you have made in past)

NEGATIVE REHEARSAL (Give examples of when you visualize, plan for, or anticipate a negative outcome in the future even before anything actually occurs, e.g “setting up” a confrontation with your partner that might not even be necessary, “working yourself up” over a situation that doesn’t necessarily turn out badly the way you thought it would, imagining your partner flirting with another man when she goes out with her women friends, worrying that you will never be able to effectively handle your anger, brooding about the idea that you will probably end up getting a divorce because your relationship is so “bad”)

SPECIFIC NEGATIVE SELF-TALK (What specific words and phrases do you think to yourself about yourself and about others that indicate when you are angry, tense, and escalated OR that indicate that there is the potential for you to escalate?)

THOUGHTS ABOUT YOURSELF (e.g. *“How can I be so stupid?, I’m a loser, I’ve screwed it up again, I’ll never get it right, What a dummy, I’ll always be an angry jerk, what’s the matter with me?”*)

THOUGHTS ABOUT OTHERS (e.g. *“Here she goes again, Why doesn’t he get off my back?, She’s really asking for it now, He’s a jerk, She’s a bitch, What’s the matter with her?”*)

TRIGGER WORDS/PHRASES (What are some specific words and phrases that others say to you that are “instantly” irritating or frustrating AND that you say to others that indicate that you are escalated or escalating?)

WORDS OTHERS SAY TO YOU (e.g. *“Grow up, You’ll never amount to anything, Get a life, Screw you, What’s your damn problem?, No!, You’re abusive; Stop it!”*)

WORDS YOU SAY TO OTHERS (e.g. specific cuss/swear words like *“go to hell”* and *“damn you;”* name-calling like *“bitch,”* or *“asshole;”* *“Whatever;”* *“Fine;”* *“You’re crazy;”* *“What’s the matter with you?;”* *“You aren’t listening to me;”* *“You’re exaggerating”* *“You’re not understanding me”*)

TRIGGER GESTURES AND NON-VERBAL SIGNALS (What are some of the specific gestures and non-verbal signals that others do around you that are “instantly” irritating or frustrating for you? e.g. rolling their eyes, shaking their heads, clicking their tongues, walking away from you, looking at a cell phone, a tablet, or a computer when you are trying to talk with them)

PHYSICAL SIGNALS (How does your body tell you that you are getting angry, tense, and escalated (or “set the stage” for you to escalate)? What happens to you physically when you are escalating? This can include your own trigger gestures and non-verbal signals, e.g. tight jaw, clenched fists, rapid breathing, headaches, lifting an eyebrow, getting louder, staring/glaring at the other person, being hungry or tired; loud and very noticeable sighing)

EMOTIONAL CUES (What feelings do you experience before and as you escalate?, e.g. anger, frustration. What feelings might be underneath your anger and escalation [i.e. what feelings does your anger “hide” from you?], e.g. hurt, sadness, fear, disappointment, rejection, abandonment, shame, anxiety, self-doubt, insecurity)

MY DE-ESCALATION STRATEGIES (aka “MY ANGER TOOLBOX”)

These are the specific things you will commit to do in order to intervene in your escalation and deal respectfully with others when your cues are popping off around you and you are feeling tense, stressed, frustrated, or angry. What will you do to slow your escalation process and calm yourself:

- so that emotional and verbal abuse and threats and attempts to intimidate do not occur and
- so that you can learn to communicate more effectively and respectfully with those around you?

Remember too that this part of the *Escalation Prevention Plan* is not just for acute escalations where you are feeling angry and might actually become controlling, explosive, or abusive right then but also can and should be used for long-term preventative maintenance related to decreasing the overall frustration, tension, stress, and anger in your daily living.