RECOVERY IN FOCUS

Anger & Communication

Reading the signal, saying it straight · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Anger is not a flaw in you. It is a signal, and it has a job: it fires when something you care about is being crossed, a boundary, your dignity, your safety, somebody you love. Clinicians describe anger as a **secondary emotion**, which in plain terms means there is almost always something underneath it: hurt, fear, shame, embarrassment, feeling disrespected. The anger is the part that shows; the softer thing underneath is what it is protecting. Healthy anger gets things done. It sets limits, it protects kids, it fuels people to leave bad situations and fix unfair ones.

The trouble isn't having anger. It's what we learned to do with it. Addiction tangles anger up badly: for some people the substance kept the anger numbed for years, and sobriety brought it back loud and unfamiliar. For others, anger was the one emotion that was always allowed, so it did the talking for every other feeling. And resentment, which is anger with a long memory, has been called the number one threat to recovery for as long as recovery programs have existed. In this session we look at what anger actually is, the four ways people mishandle it, how to say it straight instead, and how to repair things when it gets away from you.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

CLASS 1 **1.** What Anger Is **2.** The Four Bad Exits
CLASS 2 **3.** Saying It Straight **4.** Repair and the Plan

After this session you will be able to

- Catch your anger early by its body signs, and name what's underneath it
- Recognize your own bad exit: stuffing, blowing, leaking, or aiming it at yourself
- Say anger straight with "I feel" statements, in person and in texts
- Repair after a blowup, and use an anger plan that protects your recovery

What will be asked of you?

You'll be asked to look at your own anger patterns honestly, including where you learned them, and to practice saying hard things plainly, out loud, in the room. Nobody here will ask you to stop being angry. We're going to ask the anger what it's protecting.

Part 1: What Anger Is

WAIT, REALLY?

Researchers tested the old advice to "vent it out" by letting people hit a punching bag while thinking about what angered them. Venting didn't drain the anger; **it made people angrier.** Rehearsing anger trains anger.

The body does anger first. Adrenaline arrives within seconds: heat in the face, tight jaw, closed fists, a pounding chest. The body can't tell righteous anger from petty anger; it launches the same for both. By the time words come out, the body has been angry for a while, which is why catching it early is everything.

The iceberg. The anger you can see floats on top. Underneath, where it's harder to look, sits what the anger is actually carrying: hurt, fear, shame, disrespect, powerlessness. Finding the under-feeling isn't about excusing anything. It's about knowing what actually needs saying, because "I'm furious" starts a fight, and "that embarrassed me in front of my kids" starts a conversation.

EXERCISE 1

How does anger show up in YOUR body? Check what's true:

- ☐ Heat in my face or chest
- ☐ Jaw tightens, teeth clench
- ☐ Fists close on their own
- ☐ Voice gets loud, or goes dead quiet
- ☐ Heart pounds
- ☐ I stop hearing what's being said
- ☐ I replay it for hours after
- ☐ I can't sleep on it
- ☐ Other: _____

My earliest sign, the first one: _____

EXERCISE 2: THE ICEBERG

Think of a recent time you got angry. Fill in both layers:

What I showed (the above-water part): _____

What was underneath (hurt, fear, shame, disrespect, powerlessness, other):

_____

If I had said the under-feeling out loud instead, the sentence would have been:

_____

_____

Part 2: The Four Bad Exits

Anger has to go somewhere. When it doesn't get said straight, it takes one of four bad exits. Most of us have a favorite, and most of us learned it young.

- **Stuffing.** Swallow it, smile, say "it's fine." The anger doesn't leave; it builds up over time and turns into resentment.
- **Blowing.** Hold it, hold it, hold it, then detonate, usually at someone safer than the person who earned it.
- **Leaking.** Sarcasm, the silent treatment, "jokes" with teeth, slow-walking what somebody needs. Anger in disguise.
- **Aiming it inward.** The anger turns on you: self-hate, self-punishment, and the oldest self-punishment in this room is using.

EXERCISE 3

Answer yes or no:

1. I've said "it's fine" when it was very much not fine. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I've blown up at someone who wasn't the real target. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. People in my family handled anger by yelling, or by never speaking of things at all. ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. I've punished myself for being angry. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 4

My usual exit (stuff, blow, leak, aim inward): _____

Where I learned it: _____

What it costs me now:

_____

_____

Dan

Dan stuffs it all week. His supervisor talks down to him Monday; it's fine. His ride cancels Wednesday; it's fine. Thursday his teenage son leaves dishes in the sink and Dan goes off like the sink is the enemy, ten minutes, voice shaking the walls. The look on his son's face follows him to bed. Lying there with the shame of it, he thinks, for the first time in months, about using, the thing that always used to make shame quiet.

EXERCISE 5

1. Which exits did Dan use, in order? _____

2. Who earned the anger, and who received it? _____

3. Trace the chain from the blowup to the using thought. What's the link?

_____

_____

4. Where does this pattern show up in your house?

_____

_____

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- What's your exit, and whose exit was it before it was yours?
- What's one thing you're currently calling "fine" that isn't?

Part 3: Saying It Straight

The straight exit is **assertiveness**: saying what's true without attacking and without folding. You have the right to say what you need, say no, ask for help, disagree, and be wrong. So does the other person. Two tools carry most of the weight:

The "I feel" statement. Two parts: how you feel, plus the specific thing. "I feel disrespected when plans get changed without anyone telling me." No "you always," no "you never," no diagnosis of the other person. Nobody can argue with how you feel, and the specific moment gives them something they can actually fix.

The 24-hour rule for screens. Anger plus a keyboard is a bad exit with a send button. Write the angry text if you have to, in your notes app, not the thread. Send it tomorrow if it still deserves sending. It almost never does.

EXERCISE 6: CONVERT THESE

Rewrite each attack as an "I feel" statement:

"You never listen to me." → I feel _____

"You always take her side." → I feel _____

Now one from your real life: _____

→ I feel _____

EXERCISE 7: ROLE PLAY

In pairs: one person brings a real (or realistic) situation, the other plays the listener. Say it straight using an "I feel" statement. Switch. Then answer:

Saying it straight felt (one word): _____

What I wanted to say instead of the straight version:

_____

EXERCISE 8

Answer yes or no:

1. I have sent a message in anger that I would pay money to unsend. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. It is harder for me to say "that hurt me" than to yell. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There's a conversation I've been avoiding that belongs in an "I feel" statement. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Part 4: Repair and the Plan

Repair. Everyone blows an exit sometimes, sober or not. What separates a bad moment from a broken relationship is repair, and repair has three plain parts: own your piece specifically ("I yelled, and that was about my week, not your dishes"), skip the word "but," and ask what would help. Repair without groveling. You're not a monster; you're a person retraining an exit.

The anger plan. Resentment is anger that never got said and never left, and it is a known relapse driver. The plan is simple: know your earliest body sign, have an exit line ready ("I need ten minutes, I'm coming back"), burn off the adrenaline, find the under-feeling, then come back and say it straight. Leaving without the coming-back part is just the silent treatment in disguise.

> **Reina**
> Reina's mother brings up the past at Sunday dinner, again, in front of everyone. Reina feels the heat hit her face, her earliest sign. She says her line: "I need ten minutes, I'm coming back." She walks the block twice, fast, finds the under-feeling on the second lap: shame, and underneath that, fear that her family will never see her as anything but her worst year. She comes back and says that sentence, almost exactly. Her mother goes quiet, then says, "I didn't know that's what I was doing." It isn't fixed. It's different.

EXERCISE 9

1. What saved Reina: the walk, the line, or the under-feeling?

2. Reina's problem with her mother isn't fixed, but something changed. Why is that still a win?

3. Who is your Sunday dinner, and what's your under-feeling there?

EXERCISE 10: MY ANGER PLAN

My earliest body sign: _____

My exit line, word for word: _____

How I'll burn it off (10 minutes): _____

My usual under-feeling, if I had to bet: _____

One repair I owe someone right now: _____

SKILL OF THE DAY: CATCH ONE ICEBERG

Once a day this week, when irritation shows up, anywhere, any size, ask it one question: "What's under this?" You don't have to do anything about the answer yet. Just catch it and name it. Be ready to share one next group.

Take it to the group

- What does your anger protect?
- What did anger have to do with your using, numbing it, fueling it, or excusing it?
- Which is harder for you, saying "that hurt" or hearing it? Why?
- What repair have you been putting off, and what's the first sentence of it?

Session summary

Anger is a signal with something softer underneath. Most of us learned a bad exit young: stuffing, blowing, leaking, or aiming it inward, and every bad exit feeds relapse risk through resentment and shame. This session you mapped your body signs and your iceberg, named your exit and where it came from, practiced saying it straight, and built a plan with an exit line, a burn-off, and a repair.

Words used in this session

- **Secondary emotion:** an emotion that rides on top of another one. Anger usually carries hurt, fear, or shame underneath.
- **Resentment:** anger with a long memory. Long called one of the biggest threats to staying sober.
- **Assertiveness:** saying what's true without attacking and without folding.
- **"I feel" statement:** how you feel plus the specific thing, with no "you always" and no "you never."
- **Repair:** owning your piece specifically, skipping "but," and asking what would help.

Takeaway: You don't have to stop being angry. You have to find out what the anger is protecting, say that part out loud, and come back after the walk. The coming back is the skill.