

## Managing Anger

*“When I snap, I turn around immediately and apologize. I have sometimes warned someone by e-mail that I can be irritable from the pain.”\**

### Why Is this Important?

The stress of having a health condition can make you more irritable and impatient. Symptoms, pain and limitations can make you edgy and less able to deal with frustration. Of course, sometimes it’s appropriate to be angry, because it helps you deal with an unfair situation. Anger can motivate you to take action. For example, if you feel pressured to carry out household duties that are not recommended for your health condition, you might feel angry and tell your family members the limits of what you can safely do.

But if you are experiencing *too much anger*, then anger may stop being helpful and instead, cause harm. You may then be experiencing what we call Anger Thoughts. Your anger is too much, if:

- Your anger is harming relationships
- You are becoming verbally or physically aggressive
- You always feel like you’re ready to snap if someone says the wrong thing.

Excessive anger, anger that is too intense or too frequent, can have negative effects on your life. These effects include:

- **Offending or upsetting friends, family members or treatment providers** whose emotional and practical support you need.
- **Triggering or intensifying symptoms** of your health condition. Anger is associated with increased muscle tension, accelerated heart rate, increased blood pressure, reduced function of your digestive system, rapid breathing, and other changes. These effects might worsen your symptoms. *Even when your anger seems justified*, it may still trigger physical symptoms. Research has shown that being easily angered or feeling angry much of the time is generally bad for your physical health and, in particular, bad for your heart health.
- **Feeling emotionally worse.** For most people, excessive anger feels miserable. Having a health condition feels bad enough, without adding another source of emotional suffering.

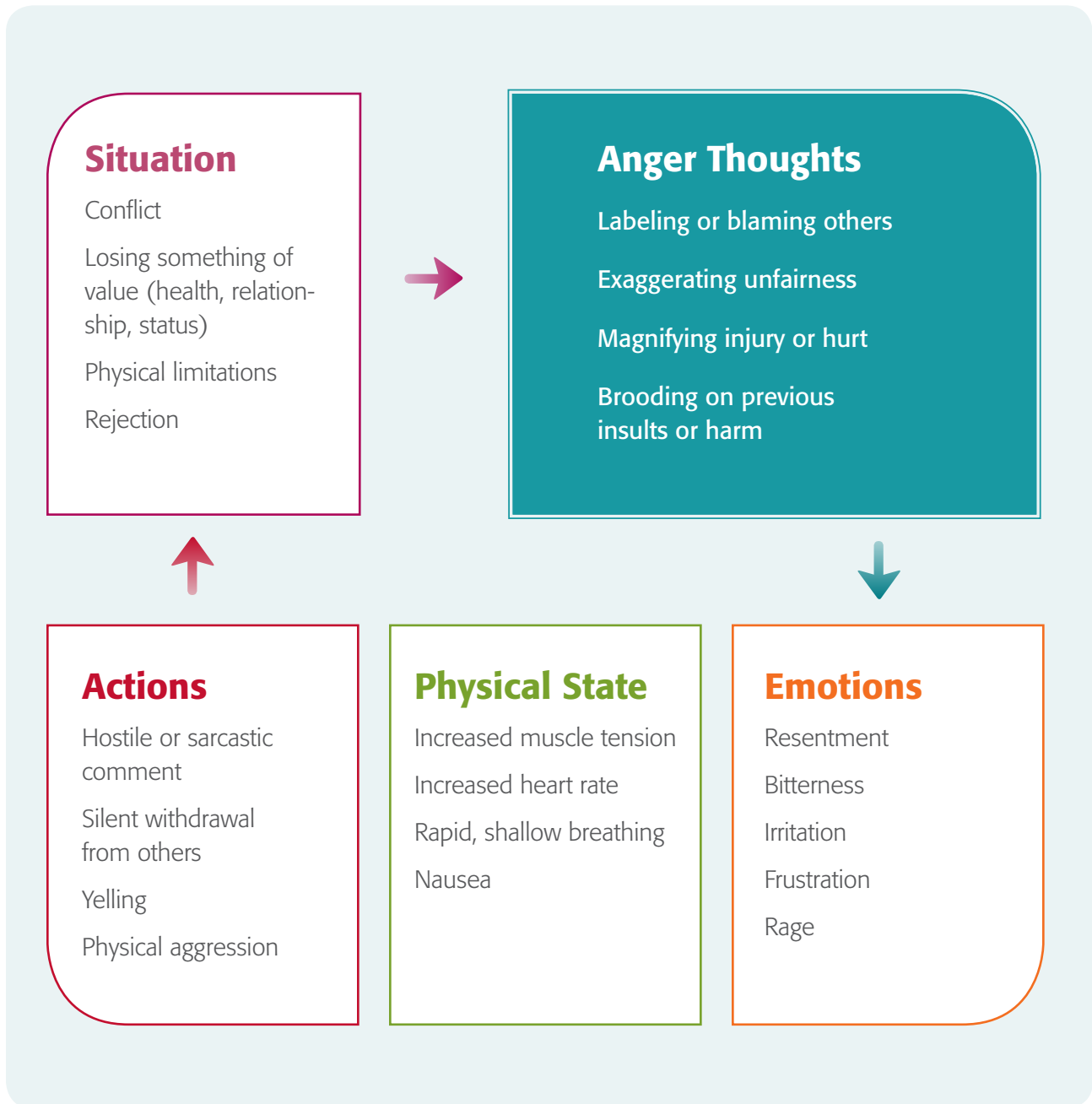
You should be aware that certain health conditions can directly (physically) cause increased irritability. For example, if your blood sugar drops to a low level, you might experience an episode of sudden rage, because your brain has been temporarily affected by your physical state. Sometimes the medications used to treat health conditions make you irritable. If you’re noticing unusual emotional reactions possibly related to your health condition or its treatment, please check with your physician.

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\* Quote from a member of a chronic illness support group.

# The Positive Coping Skills

Here is a diagram that shows how what we call Anger Thoughts affect your emotions, physical state and actions. Anger Thoughts are ways of thinking about your situation that increase feelings of anger.



## How Can I Become Less Angry?

We're going to discuss Anger Thoughts and learn to replace them with calming and helpful thoughts.

### The steps toward Managing Anger are:

1. Select an anger situation
2. Identify Anger Thoughts
3. Recognize how your Anger Thoughts trigger angry mood
4. Challenge these Anger Thoughts
5. Replace Anger Thoughts with calming and helpful ones
6. Practice calming and helpful thinking

## 1 Select an Anger Situation

Think of a situation where you felt too angry – either it's your opinion that you were too angry or a person you respect told you that you were too angry. Maybe someone made a comment you saw as hurtful or did something you believed was thoughtless. Maybe an event happened that seemed unfair or someone didn't support you the way you believed they should have.

**Example:** *Geneviève always had a bit of an anger problem, becoming irritable and moody when she was under stress. But this anger*



*problem became much worse after she was diagnosed with coronary heart disease at the age of 65, shortly following retirement. She brooded on the unfairness of developing a serious health condition just when she was finally able to retire. She became more irritable with her family. Her husband often found her to be withdrawn but obviously angry. He started to avoid spending time with her, finding activities that took him out of the house. Geneviève's children also began to visit less often. Geneviève felt increasingly cut off and lonely and this made her more resentful – she couldn't get over how unfair it all was. At her next appointment with the heart specialist, Geneviève talked about her situation and how upset she was. The physician gave her a copy of this workbook. Geneviève recognized herself in the description of irritability as a stress symptom.*

Here is the anger situation she chose:

*Driving home from the hardware store, the traffic was heavy and there was a lot of bad driving. That made me angry. When I got home my husband was cleaning up a mess; he'd broken a dish. I felt really irritated with him. I didn't say anything but he knew that I was mad.*

Now write down an anger situation **you** have experienced.



**Anger Situation:**

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## 2 Identify Anger Thoughts

Anger Thoughts are thoughts that are unrealistic or unfair about your situation – they cause you to be angrier than is necessary or helpful.

### Types of Anger Thoughts

#### Filtering

In this kind of angry thinking, you only look at the bad side of the situation, never the good. Since all you see is the negative side of other people's comments or actions, these people seem totally inconsiderate or against you. **Realistic thinking considers positive and negative aspects of other people's actions equally.**

#### Labeling

You think about other people in a harsh way, calling them names like "idiot," "selfish," or whatever the worst insults are for you. Often

these kinds of labels go along with blaming the other person for a stressful situation. These kinds of blaming labels have been described as "hot thoughts" because they trigger strong reactions. **Realistic thinking rarely uses blaming labels – these labels are usually not realistic or fair, and they can be so infuriating that it becomes difficult to think about the situation in a calm way.**

#### Magnifying

You magnify the amount of harm done to you by an event or person. You see a small disappointment as though it were a disaster, a single thoughtless comment as though it were a total rejection, etc. You might say things to yourself like *"I can't stand this"* or *"this is too much."* For example, a family member is late to pick you up at the clinic, making you wait for twenty minutes. You tell yourself, *"Now I can't do anything I planned, the afternoon is ruined,*

*I'm always waiting for her to come, I can't stand this."* Instead of feeling mildly frustrated and asking if she could be a bit more punctual in the future, you feel outraged and tell her off for being so inconsiderate. But the next time you need a lift, maybe she'll be busy – which would only reinforce your belief that she doesn't care and make you feel angrier. **Realistic thinking tries to keep events in perspective, not exaggerating the importance of an event or magnifying the "badness" of other people.**

## Perfectionism

You set very high standards for other people and then you're indignant when they don't meet these standards. For example, you expect to be given treatment that will take away all symptoms and bring you back to exactly how you were before the health condition. When you realize that you still have symptoms after treatment, you feel betrayed, like the health system failed you. **Realistic thinking gives credit for what has been accomplished, even if the result is less than perfect. Few of us achieve perfect outcomes, but our achievements are meaningful.**

## Mind-Reading

You feel as though you know what others are thinking about you, and it's always negative. As a result, you react angrily to what you imagine they think, without checking. For example, you tell yourself that family members think of you as "a burden," and you resent their attitude – but you don't ask them what they really think. **Realistic thinking recognizes that guessing what others think is likely to be inaccurate, especially when your mood is down or you are already feeling irritable.**

## Shoulds

You think that you know how the world *should* be, and it isn't like what you expect. You know how other people *should* behave, and they don't. As a result, you're frequently angry. For example, you tell yourself that your specialist *should* set aside at least half an hour for each visit, but you actually get only ten minutes – so you feel infuriated. **Realistic thinking understands the limitations of the world – trying for improvement but also accepting how things are. The world isn't always going to be fair and just.**

There are other types of Anger Thoughts, but these are common ones. When you catch yourself thinking in an angry way, it can be useful to look at this list to see if you are using one of them. Most thinking is so quick and automatic that we don't even realize we're doing it. We must learn to become aware of anger thinking as it occurs. An excellent strategy is to notice thoughts you are having when you experience increased anger – it can be very helpful to write these thoughts down.



# The Positive Coping Skills

Here is what Geneviève from our example wrote:

**Situation:** Driving home from the hardware store, the traffic was heavy and there was a lot of bad driving. That made me angry. When I got home my husband was cleaning up a mess; he'd broken a dish. I felt really irritated by his carelessness.

Anger Thought	<i>What Type of Anger Thought is this?</i>
So many stupid incompetent drivers, getting in my way. They should be taken off the road.	<i>Labeling Magnifying</i>
Why can't he pay attention? He's always breaking things. He better face up to what it's like on a fixed income with big medicine costs.	<i>Filtering Magnifying</i>

Now write down some of your anger thoughts.



**Situation:**

Anger Thought	What Type of Anger Thought is it? <small>(choose from list on pages 70 &amp; 71)</small>

## 3 Recognize How Your Anger Thoughts Trigger Angry Mood

Most thinking is so quick and automatic that we don't even realize we're doing it. We must learn to become aware of anger thinking as it occurs. An excellent strategy is to carry around a pencil and paper for a week. Every time you feel irritated, ask yourself this important question:

*"What was going through my mind just then?"*

What were you thinking about? What were you reacting to?

Keep recording your thoughts until you notice that the same kinds of Anger Thoughts come up again and again. You might find yourself placing a checkmark beside some of the thoughts you wrote down previously. *"Oh, that one again."* When this happens, you have probably identified your most common kinds of anger thinking. Then what? Some of your Anger Thoughts may seem obviously distorted. *"Nobody promised that treatment would take away all my symptoms, so why did I expect that?"* It can sometimes be enough just to know that your mind generates anger thinking in certain kinds of situations.

Try to become aware of the anger thinking as it happens and remind yourself where it comes from. *"I think this way because I feel stressed and frustrated."* You may find that you take the Anger Thoughts less seriously once you know where they come from.

## 4 Challenge These Anger Thoughts

Challenging angry thoughts involves deliberately rethinking the situations or events that contribute to angry mood. You can use a strategy called **Challenging Anger Thoughts**.

Think of a situation where you were feeling really angry. First, make a brief note about the situation. Next, write down any thoughts that made you feel angry. You might try to describe the type of Anger Thoughts you were having, by using the *Types of Anger Thoughts* list above. Finally, take a good look at each of these Anger Thoughts and challenge it. Challenging Anger Thoughts means that you figure out how these thoughts are unfair or unhelpful and then come up with more calming and helpful ways of thinking. In order to help you come up with calm and helpful thoughts, work through these Reality Questions:

### ? Reality Questions

#### **CAN I GET MORE EVIDENCE, MAYBE BY ASKING SOMEONE ABOUT THE SITUATION?**

It's often helpful to get another person's opinion about a situation where you've been feeling angry. For example, you tell a friend that you've been really angry at a family member who treats you like you can't do anything for yourself. Your friend helps you see that the family member is well-intentioned but needs information about how she can be most helpful.

## **WOULD MOST PEOPLE AGREE WITH THIS THOUGHT? IF NOT, WHAT WOULD MOST PEOPLE THINK?**

Just by imagining how most people would react to a certain Anger Thought, you might be able to come up with a more reasonable and calm way of thinking. When you step outside yourself and examine your thinking from another viewpoint, it's easier to see how your thoughts may be distorted.

## **WHAT WOULD I SAY TO A FRIEND, IF MY FRIEND WERE IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?**

If a good friend talked about feeling very angry in a situation like yours, what would you say? You might be able to help your friend think more fairly, to look at the situation in a balanced way. You might find it easier to think fairly and realistically for a friend than for yourself!

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CONTINUE TO THINK THIS WAY?**

It's important to consider what will happen if you continue thinking in an angry way. What will be the results for you and others if you continue to feel and act in an angry way?

## **WHAT IS A MORE CALMING OR HELPFUL WAY OF THINKING?**

Can you come up with another thought that would have better results for you and others? Is there a way of thinking that would be more encouraging and helpful in improving the situation?

## **Example**

This is how Geneviève, from our example, answered the Reality Questions:

## **CAN I GET MORE EVIDENCE, MAYBE BY ASKING SOMEONE ABOUT THE SITUATION?**

*My oldest daughter was visiting and told me I was being too hard on my husband. She reminded me that he has been taking medication that makes him drowsy, and he might drop things because of that, so it's not his fault. And my son told me I often seem to be angry.*

## **WOULD MOST PEOPLE AGREE WITH THIS THOUGHT? IF NOT, WHAT WOULD MOST PEOPLE THINK?**

*I guess that most people would think I should take it easy on him.*

## **WHAT WOULD I SAY TO A FRIEND, IF MY FRIEND WERE IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?**

*When my best friend is having a disagreement with her husband, I usually stay out of it. But I might remind her that she always says how bad she feels when they're arguing – so maybe she should take a breath and give him the benefit of the doubt.*

## **WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CONTINUE TO THINK THIS WAY?**

*If I keep on being so mad at my husband, I'm worried that he'll avoid me more. I miss spending time with him – he's my best friend.*

## **WHAT IS A MORE CALMING OR HELPFUL WAY OF THINKING?**

*I can remind myself that he does his best, the same as me, and I'm certainly not perfect. When I get irritated with him, I should take some time by myself to calm down, then come back. I can also remind myself that he is a kind person who deserves to be treated with kindness. Anyway, it's not true that he always breaks things.*



Now do this worksheet for one of the Anger Thoughts that have been affecting you.



## Anger Thought:

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•> **Can I get more evidence, maybe by asking someone about the situation?**

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•> **Would most people agree with this thought? If not, what would most people think?**

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•> **What would I say to a friend, if my friend were in a similar situation?**

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•> **What will happen if I continue to think this way?**

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•> **What is a more calming or helpful way of thinking?**

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## 5 Replace Anger Thoughts with Calming and Helpful Ones

Pick a situation in which you were feeling too angry. *First*, make a brief note about the situation. *Next*, write down any Anger Thoughts that seem related to how you felt. *Finally*, use the Reality Questions to come up with more calming and helpful thoughts.

Here's what Geneviève did with this worksheet:

**Situation:** Driving home from the hardware store, the traffic was heavy and there was a lot of bad driving. It made me angry. When I got home my husband was cleaning up a mess; he'd dropped a plate. I felt really irritated by his carelessness.

Anger Thought	Calming and Helpful Thought
<p>So many stupid incompetent drivers, getting in my way. They should be taken off the road.</p> <p>(Labeling; Magnifying)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Some of these drivers are going slowly because they're elderly and it wouldn't be safe to drive faster – if they are all taken off the road, that will happen to me too when I reach that age, and it's not so far away!</i></li> <li>• <i>When I get so mad I start driving in a riskier way, cutting off other drivers. Maybe I become a bad driver too, and I could cause a serious accident – I don't want to die to prove a point. So breathe slowly and remind myself that a few minutes delay won't do any harm.</i></li> <li>• <i>I bring my road rage home with me, and it's not fair to my husband.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Why can't he pay attention? He's always breaking things. He better face up to what it's like on a fixed income with big medicine costs.</p> <p>(Filtering; Magnifying).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>That's not fair; he's careful with money and really doesn't spend much.</i></li> <li>• <i>I'm exaggerating the importance of such a small event.</i></li> <li>• <i>He's under a lot of stress.</i></li> <li>• <i>I know that his medication makes him tired and shaky.</i></li> <li>• <i>I don't want to take my anger out on him.</i></li> </ul>

Now fill out this worksheet for the situation **you** choose.



**Situation:**

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<b>Anger Thought</b>	<b>Calming and Helpful Thought</b>

## **6** Practice Calming and Helpful Thinking

It's not enough to come up with a calming and helpful thought just once. Angry thinking gets repeated over and over, sometimes for years, until it becomes automatic. More balanced thinking will help you feel better, but it won't be automatic – at least not for a while. The good news is that changing anger thinking doesn't take years. In fact, people with angry mood often notice a difference after a few weeks of practicing calming thinking.

Try to think of a few situations where you often have Anger Thoughts. What are these situations?



**Situations:**

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When you find yourself in these stressful situations, deliberately practice calming and helpful thinking. Don't assume that it will happen on its own. You have to tell yourself how to look at the situation, just as you might give advice or encouragement to a friend. Talk back to the anger thinking. Don't allow anger thinking to happen without replying to it. Every time you talk back, you make the anger thinking weaker and the calming thinking stronger – it takes time, but calming and helpful thoughts will eventually have more influence over you than angry ones.

You will probably find that in the beginning the calming thinking seems false to you. If your thinking has been distorted for some time, it can be difficult to see the truth. Imagine that you've been thinking in an angry way about your health condition, telling yourself, *"If I don't get back to exactly the way I was before this health condition, then these stupid doctors don't know what they're talking about."* Having this thought regularly may cause you to feel bitter and angry. You realize that this is unfair thinking and come up with a calming and helpful thought like *"It's not realistic to expect total recovery – significant improvement is pretty good."* At first, this realistic thought may seem false, as though you're just fooling yourself. Only with time and repetition does calming thinking begin to feel true to you. Eventually, you'll be able to accept calming and helpful thoughts.

## **THESE SKILLS ARE ALSO HELPFUL FOR MANAGING ANGER:**

### **Solving Problems**

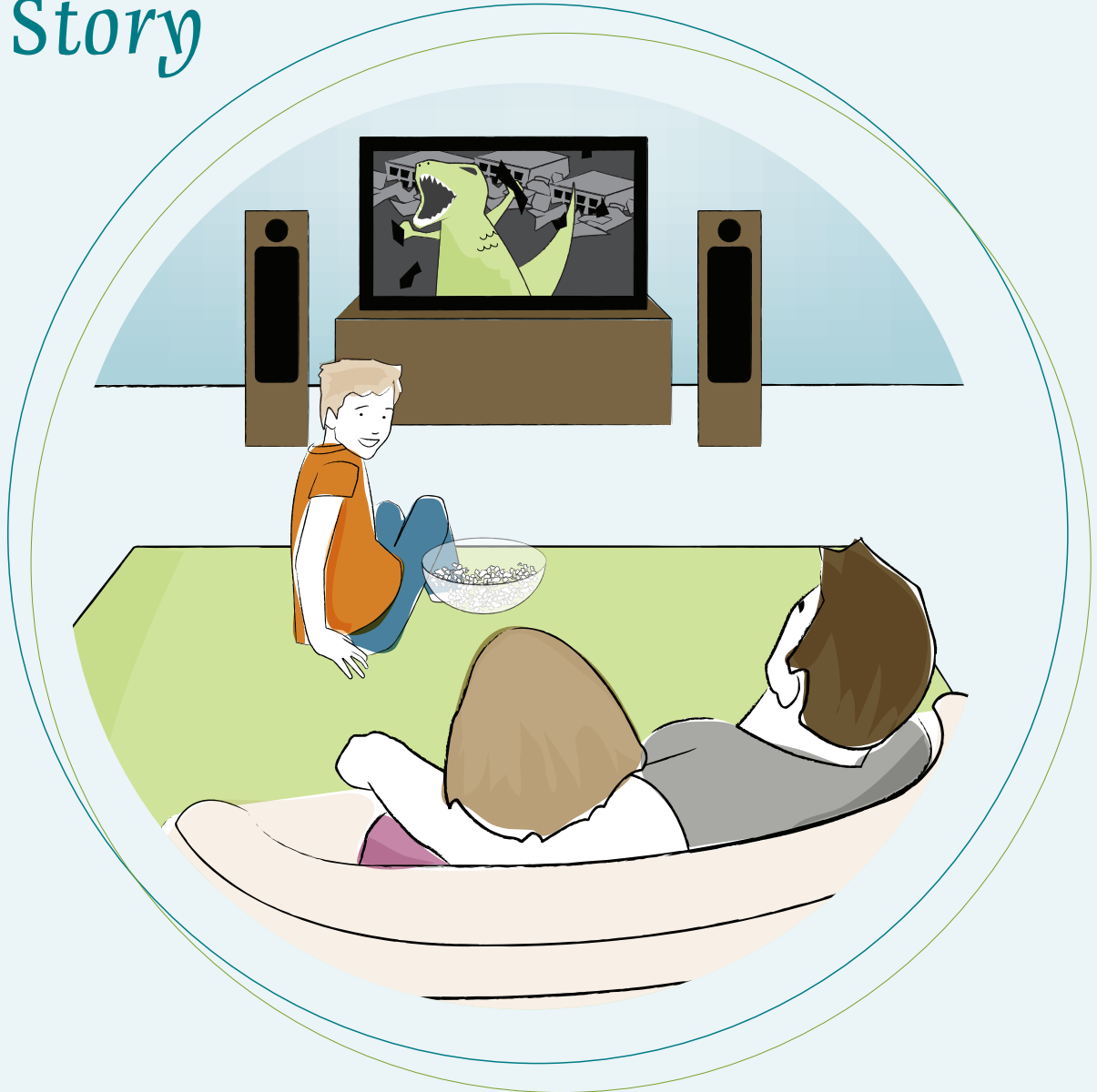
Often there's a real problem that is causing conflict or frustration. Becoming angry may alert you to the problem, but it won't solve it. To solve the problem, it's helpful to use the Solving Problems skill in this workbook. This skill can help you figure out a solution, or at least part of a solution. When you've been in a situation where you became angry, ask yourself, *"What exactly was the problem?"* Then use Solving Problems to find a more useful way of dealing with the problem. After all, you don't become angry because you enjoy being angry (most people find it pretty unpleasant), but because there's some kind of problem. Beginning to solve the problem could reduce your anger.

### **Relaxation**

When you're angry, your body becomes agitated and you will likely experience tense muscles, rapid breathing or flushed face. But being agitated or tense can make it difficult to think clearly or act in a way that will improve the situation. You can use the Relaxation skill in this workbook, along with the Relaxation CD. This skill will help you to settle down your body when you're physically angry. Practice with the Relaxation CD, especially the Slow Breathing method, until it feels pretty natural. Then you'll be able to use this method to help calm yourself in an angry situation. Sometimes it's a good idea to leave the anger situation for a little while ("time out") so you can calm yourself before returning to the situation. Using a relaxation method will help you think more clearly and act more effectively.

Managing Anger:

# John's Story



John, 43 years old, worked his way up in the construction industry until he was an assistant project manager. He liked his work. But over the years, he had more and more trouble with his back – all those years of shifting heavy loads seemed to have caught up with him. One day, while helping to unload some machinery, he felt excruciating pain in his back. He had to go home that day, and when he woke in the morning the pain was still there. There was no way he could concentrate. His family physician sent him for x-rays – although these were inconclusive, his physician recommended several months off work in order to recover. John was given some pain medication.

However, the pain did not improve over a three-month work absence. In fact, John became more disabled by pain over the next two years, despite using prescribed medication and visiting a physiotherapist. He ended up on long-term disability with Chronic Pain Syndrome as his diagnosis. He experienced constant pain, which worsened when he carried out physical activity.

At the end of his second year off work, John was referred to a pain specialist, who spotted a problem. John was trying to avoid using the medication as long as possible, only taking it when he found the pain unbearable and then using the entire daily amount, even some meant for the next day. He would then again resist taking medication, until he had to take a large amount – and the cycle repeated itself. The specialist recommended that John take pain medication at regular intervals throughout the day in order to *prevent* pain from building up.

The specialist gave John a copy of this workbook, encouraging him to decide which parts were most relevant. John took the *Stress Symptoms Test* and decided that he was having problems with irritability. His wife had told him that he was angrily raising his voice more frequently – his children were staying away from him. He loved his family and felt hurt that they were avoiding him. John decided to use the Managing Anger skill to get on top of this problem – it was hard enough dealing with pain without also having to deal with loneliness.

He identified a recent situation at home where he became quite angry with his 13-year-old son. His son had been playing video games with a friend and making a lot of noise, and John had yelled at his son to keep the noise down or else he would take away the game. As he went through the workbook exercise and thought about the situation, John identified his Anger Thoughts. *"He's old enough to know that I can't take noise. What's wrong with him? Doesn't anyone here care about what I'm going through?"* John examined these thoughts using the Reality Questions.

> *continued*

> *Managing Anger: John's Story*

**Anger Thought:** He's old enough to know that I can't take noise.  
What's wrong with him? Doesn't anyone here care about what I'm going through?

**CAN I GET MORE EVIDENCE, MAYBE BY ASKING SOMEONE ABOUT THE SITUATION?**

*Actually, my wife has been telling me that I'm getting too angry with the kids, and I think she's right.*

**WOULD MOST PEOPLE AGREE WITH THIS THOUGHT? IF NOT, WHAT WOULD MOST PEOPLE THINK?**

*When I hear other people talk about their teenagers, I realize that this is a pretty common problem. I think other people might think I'm being a bit too hard on him.*

**WHAT WOULD I SAY TO A FRIEND, IF MY FRIEND WERE IN A SIMILAR SITUATION?**

*I'd tell a friend to sit down with his son and let him know how he can be helpful – for example, keeping the video game volume lower.*

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CONTINUE TO THINK THIS WAY?**

*If I keep snapping at my son and others in my family, they'll keep avoiding me and it could hurt our relationship. I never want that to happen.*

**WHAT IS A MORE CALMING OR HELPFUL WAY OF THINKING?**

*When I'm feeling angry about a situation, before speaking to my son or other family members, I should take a walk and remind myself that I'm really angry because of the pain; they probably don't mean any harm; I really want them to feel comfortable with me; and I don't want to hurt them. Then it will be easier to speak to them in a calm way. I can also use Slow Breathing (**Relaxation** skill) to calm myself before I deal with the problem.*

John practiced these ways of changing his anger. When he noticed himself becoming angry, he would take a short break from the situation, returning when he felt calmer. He used the Slow Breathing method and practiced calming thoughts like "I want my family to like being with me, they don't mean harm, they don't know how my pain feels." With determined practice, John was able to change his way of handling anger. He still had to deal with pain, but he felt more supported by his family and that was a big improvement.