

## Anger and Addiction

By Dr. Sara Aharon, Psychologist

At Bellwood, we have always recognized the role of anger in addiction. In December of 2005, we enhanced our current education, treatment and training program by engaging a recognized expert in the field of anger management, Dr. Dave MacQuarrie. Arrangements were made with Dr. MacQuarrie, who runs weekend workshops in Orangeville, Ontario to facilitate weekend workshops at Bellwood.

### EFFECTS OF ANGER

During an angry response, hormones called catecholamines are released, which then generate a rush of energy that lasts for at least several minutes. Next, an adrenocortical arousal occurs and this can keep a person edgy for hours, even days. This explains why sometimes people explode over what seems to be a trivial incident, as it may in fact be triggered by something that happened earlier. For example, the anger a parent feels about a child leaving her clothes on the floor in the evening, may in fact be a response to being treated badly by the boss that morning.

The most recognized physical effect of anger is what we see as the result of hostility in Type A personality. This hostility is associated with coronary heart disease and sudden death. Acting on anger actually makes people angrier, increasing the blood pressure, adrenaline, heart rate etc. The sooner people can calm themselves down, the better they will feel. However, just repressing anger has physical effects too: headaches, dizziness, and muscle tension that can cause chronic pain problems - neck and back pain. The task is to identify healthy and appropriate ways of dealing with anger.

### HEALTH BENEFITS OF ANGER MANAGEMENT

Appropriate and effective anger management strategies can prevent all of the above and result in improved well-being. Effective anger management can result in effective and enjoyable social interaction and relationships. Healthy and rewarding relationships are associated with better physical and mental health.

### COPING STRATEGIES

- **Develop insight.** Learn your triggers and develop a plan to deal with it.
- **Notice bodily sensations when you are triggered.** Do you tense your muscles, do you stop breathing, does your heart race out of control? When you identify your pattern, stop the cycle of high arousal (or fight-or-flight response): count to 10 and breathe, take a time out, go for a walk. Do whatever you can to reverse the escalation in the physical symptoms. Take a break before responding to the people involved. Often a pause of a few minutes can prevent an escalation of your feelings, bodily response and the situation in general.

## Anger and Addiction (Cont'd)

- **Relax.** Address the physical response through deep breathing, getting some fresh air and relaxing your muscles.
- **Use humour** to de-escalate the situation when possible and appropriate.
- **Distract yourself.** Go for a walk, listen to music, read a book.
- **Engage in long-term stress and anger management.** Regular exercise, yoga, massage therapy, hobbies, art, social support, connecting with nature are helpful tools.
- **Notice the thoughts that underlie the trigger.** For example: My boss does not appreciate what I do and is trying to get rid of me, I am powerless, I am helpless, and the world is unfair.
- **Entertain other possibilities,** create alternative or more balanced statements such as: I know my boss values my work, or I may not be able to change my boss but I can change my responses.
- **Journal your thoughts and feelings.** Sometimes just writing about it helps to de-escalate feelings. While writing, you may also come up with some conclusions or strategies.
- **Explore** the possibility that other feelings may underlie the anger such as humiliation, frustration and resentment, and address them in a non-aggressive manner. Anger is often the result of a person's inability to express their feelings appropriately and assertively. What needs to be an assertive stance ends up being either passive or aggressive responses.
- **Write "an unsent letter"** to the person or thing you are upset with. Let it all out and then if you have someone you are comfortable with, a loved one or a therapist, read it to them. Having a witness or someone to validate your feelings can be helpful. Do not send the letter. However, writing it may help you identify what you need to address.
- **Do not be afraid of conflict.** Women tend to shy away from potential conflict and therefore end up not asserting themselves or their needs until they cannot "take it" anymore. Men are often afraid of losing control and tend to "fill up the pot until the lid blows". Disagreements and conflict are normal and necessary in life.
- **How we respond to conflict** is shaped to a great extent by how it was modelled at home growing up. It is a conditioned response. However, even a conditioned response can be changed. If your conflict style is ineffective, examine alternatives. For example, if you avoid situations, or try to evoke empathy and get nowhere with it, try something else. View conflict as an opportunity to resolve issues. Effective conflict management can prevent anger and resentment, clear the air, improve your relationships and lead to potential solutions to existing problems.
- **If all else fails, ask for help.** Sometimes, third party involvement is the only way to go. Family therapy or counselling may be needed. There are also anger-management workshops available for men and women together or separately.