

## **Addiction and Recovery: Why Am I Still Angry in Recovery?**

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Anger can be labeled anger, mad, cranky, frustrated, irritated, irate, agitated, seething, and many more, describing the experience of the emotion anger on a continuum of intensity. Many alcoholics/addicts and their family members are surprised that to find that the newly recovering person continues to experience a lot of anger. There are many reasons why a recovering person would continue to feel angry once they have quit drinking/using.

Initially, detox may have something to do with it. As the addict makes the transition into early recovery, the numbing properties of the drugs on their brains begin to wear off and feelings come back with a vengeance. They may have been numbing feelings about relationship issues, or situations in life that they felt helpless about changing. They may be angry with themselves for poor choices or any number of other reasons. When they stop using, the anesthesia for feelings wears off. Most of the situations or conditions that lead to the creation of the feelings that they sought to escape have remained the same. The anger returns about these issues.

Sometimes the newly recovering person is still angry about how they came to be in recovery. They may be angry at law enforcement, the judge, the boss, the wife, the family in general, or society for not condoning active addiction. They may be angry with everyone involved in the intervention.

As the body and mind continues to detox, thinking continues to clear up and improve. Reality comes into clearer focus. The addict may feel anger at himself/herself for getting to this point and not taking control over their own use, long before now. They may still believe that they could have regained control and still be able to use. The newly recovering person, still not very adept at processing feelings, may project blame and responsibility for their feelings onto others. Although they may be angry with themselves, the family may still be getting the brunt of it.

Cravings can continue or can return after a reprieve. People often feel irritable and angry when craving. They may be angry with themselves for cravings or thinking about using. They may be consciously or subconsciously planning their relapse and interpret family member behavior as control, or attempts to keep them using. Cravings are stressful and the newly recovering addict can feel especially sensitive to criticism and feel angry about things or events that would not have bothered them on a different day under different emotional circumstances.

Newly recovering addicts can also experience other uncomfortable feelings, not know how to identify those feelings (much less work through them), and convert them into anger. Since anger is the secondary emotion, they may never get to the real feelings or even the real issue to address it. An example is fear. Fear is very common in early recovery. Many alcoholics/addicts do not allow themselves to feel their fear and quickly

convert any fear to anger. An addict experiencing unidentified fear may have an array of negative consequences from his/her “anger”, when much of the time simply identifying the fear and sharing it with someone else is enough to reduce it or neutralize it. It is also quite common for addicts in early recovery to experience a return of anxiety. Inadequate or ineffectual skills for reducing anxiety and managing stress can lead to irritability.

The family members of alcoholics/addicts also have anger. Instead of the addict being grateful for family members getting them into treatment and saving his/her life, the addict is angry at them. They cannot understand this because they remind the addict that is, and has been, the family that has been holding down the fort, making all the payments, taking care of the kids, the bills, the house, etc. The family member has been taking care of everything and the addict is mad at them!

The addict does not understand why the family member is not giving him/her credit for his sacrifice and understanding how difficult this has all been. The addict is angry that when they do make efforts to do the things that family members have been asking them to do for a long time, that the family member either does not notice or that that family member just expects it. From the family member’s perspective, the fact that the addict wants a reward for doing what everyone else is expected to do, is inconceivable. Neither understands the other’s frame of reference.

Family members may be angry that the addict is not recovering far enough fast enough. They are not changing in the ways that the family member fantasized that it would happen when they finally quit drinking/using. Family members may still feel compelled to “help” by making suggestions, by guiding, manipulation, etc.

From the addict’s perspective the family member is controlling with intrusive, prying questions, constant checking up on him/her, and a general lack of trust. When family members question do this or question whether they have relapsed, the addict feels hurt and angry. Family members, unable to trust at this stage of recovery, have often made the addict responsible for the family wellness. They often think and behave as if their own recovery is contingent on the health of the recovery of the addict. Family members and addicts are often in relapse at the same time. And anger is a common symptom that it is happening.

The addict is learning in AA or NA that s/he can’t afford resentments, which is unresolved, recycled anger. The reality is that everyone experiences anger. Not knowing how to appropriately deal with anger and let go of it leads to resentment. People often act out anger or resentment in nonconscious ways. Anger and resentment can also be triggers for cravings and relapse in addicts and in family members. Anger can trigger a return to maladaptive compulsive behavior or responses in family members. A family member is in full-blown relapse when s/he returns to spending more time trying to figure out how to make the addict straighten up than on ones’ own self-care and recovery.

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