

# Handling Anger and Conflict on the Job

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Activity 13-1	<b>What's New?</b>	 10-15 minutes
Activity 13-2	<b>My Work History</b>	 15-20 minutes
Activity 13-3	<b>The Price of Losing Control</b>	 25-30 minutes
Activity 13-4	<b>Strategies for Handling Conflict</b>	 30-40 minutes
Activity 13-5	<b>Feedback/Wrap-up</b>	 10-15 minutes

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## Key Concepts

- Conflict on the job is as normal and expected as conflict in relationships. As in relationships, it is important to manage workplace conflicts effectively and to control anger about job situations.
- The first step in managing workplace conflict is understanding the sources of anger, such as frustration, not getting respect, feeling taken advantage of, not liking the job, not knowing what's expected, and fear of failure.
- Angry people often act in ways that get them fired, or they quit, when there might have been ways to resolve the situation. A second step toward managing conflict on the job is developing self-control — for example, with “cooling off” techniques.
- Following workplace rules and taking direction from supervisors are situations in which men sometimes experience disrespect (even when it is not intended or might be corrected). To keep their jobs, men need to learn how to get along with supervisors and coworkers they don't like, without giving up their self-respect.

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## Materials Checklist

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### Activity 13-2 My Work History

- Handout, “My Employment Record”
  - Pencils (for everyone)
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### Activity 13-3 The Price of Losing Control

- Newsprint
  - Marker
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### Activity 13-4 Strategies for Handling Conflict

- Leader Resource, “Case Studies: Anger on the Job”
- Handout, “Strategies for Handling Conflict”
- Newsprint
- Marker

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**Planning Note:** This session follows up the previous one, moving the discussion from conflicts in personal relationships to conflicts in the workplace. Again, the goal is to assist the men in identifying strategies to control anger — in this case, to keep their jobs. The facilitator’s task is to help the men analyze their feelings and behavior relating to work conflicts.

As always, avoid “preaching,” focusing instead on the skills the men need to control anger and keep their jobs. As the men report their experiences, call the group’s attention to the similarities in their situations. For some, a one-time confrontation at work led to explosive anger that cost them their jobs; others underwent a “slow burn” — a steady buildup of anger and frustration — until the situation became unbearable and they quit. Help them identify patterns that are self-defeating and strategies for handling job situations (some of which may arise from discrimination, racism, cultural and class differences, etc.).

Before conducting this session, review the list of strategies to prevent and reduce stress, found in Session 12, Activity 12-3.

## What's New?

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**Planning Note:** Tailor the following questions so that you're asking the fathers about specific ideas and skills that they reviewed in Session 12.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. Would somebody please tell the group what we talked about in the last session?
2. What part of last week's discussion about managing conflict and handling anger had the greatest impact on you? Why?
3. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself last week?
4. Did you talk about the last session with anyone you fight with a lot? What was the conversation like?
5. What insights did you gain that may improve your relationships with people who are important to you?
6. Did you try any of last week's suggestions for handling anger without violence? If so, which suggestions did you try? How did they work?

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## My Work History

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**Purpose:** To explore the participants' work histories, identifying what they liked and disliked about the jobs they have held — and what conflicts they may have had on the job.

**Materials:** Handout, “My Employment Record”; pencils (for everyone).

**Time:** 15-20 minutes.

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**Procedure:** Remind the men that in previous sessions they discussed sources of conflicts in their relationships with their children, children's mother, family members, and friends. Tell them that today's session will concentrate on their work experiences, focusing on conflicts the men may have had with employers, coworkers, and customers. Say something like, “We are going to start today's session by thinking about the different jobs that each of you has held. Then we'll draw on the skills you learned for managing conflict and handling anger in order to identify ways to handle work problems without losing your job.”

**Distribute** the handout “My Employment Record,” asking the men to complete it in about 5 minutes. In the blanks provided, each participant should list the different jobs he has held (any and all jobs) and the reasons why he left each job. (If anyone has difficulty reading, explain the headings on the handouts.) You may want to conduct this activity by pairing the men and having them interview each other (verbally) about their various jobs. (Match readers with nonreaders.) When everyone has completed the handouts, tell the men to circle the jobs they liked best and to cross out the jobs they liked least.

**Note:** The men in your group may have completed similar résumés or employment records during their participation in an employment program. If so, acknowledge the repetition of this activity, but point out that it will serve a different purpose in this session.

**When** everyone is ready, ask the following questions to discuss the men's work histories.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. How many jobs did you list on your Employment Record?
2. Which jobs did you like best? Why? (Did you like your boss? The kind of work you did? The job setting? The pay?)
3. Which jobs did you like least? Why? (Was the job boring? Too demanding? De-meaning or underpaid? Did you hate your boss or hate having to work?)
4. In general, what reasons did you give for leaving most of your jobs? (For example, were you laid off, fired, replaced by someone else, or hurt? Or did you quit?)
5. What patterns, if any, do you see in your job histories? (For example, did you have the same job for a long period of time? Did you move a lot from job to job? Were there large gaps in your employment history? Did you leave jobs because of conflicts with your boss or coworkers? Did you lose jobs because of situations you believe were created by discrimination?)
6. What makes it hard for you to get and keep jobs?
7. What, if anything, would you like to change about your work habits?

***Tell the men*** that the next activity will ask them to describe in detail a work conflict with an employer or coworker or customer that resulted in their losing a job or nearly losing one.

## My Employment Record

Age When Held Jobs	Job Positions	Reasons for Leaving
Under 18	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
18-21 years old	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
	3. _____	3. _____
22-25 years old	1. _____	1. _____
	2. _____	2. _____
	3. _____	3. _____

# HANDOUT

<b>Age When Held Jobs</b>	<b>Job Positions</b>	<b>Reasons for Leaving</b>
<b>26-29 years old</b>	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____
<b>30-35 years old</b>	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____
<b>Over 35</b>	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____	1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____

## The Price of Losing Control

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**Purpose:** To help participants identify the kinds of work-related problems that may have caused them to lose their jobs.

**Materials:** Newsprint and marker.

**Time:** 20-30 minutes.

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**Planning Note:** Write the following on newsprint, and post it in front of the room.

- Describe the situation that made you angry on the job.
- What did your boss/supervisor/coworker/customer want from you?
- How did this person let you know what was wanted or expected from you?
- What did you see as the problem?
- What exactly did you say and do?
- How did the other person respond?
- What was the result of the conflict?
- What feelings did this conflict raise in you? (Did you feel embarrassed, stupid, relieved, powerless, defeated?)
- Were you more angry or less angry after the conflict?
- How did this situation affect your personal life?
- Did this kind of situation happen more than once? If so, when else has it happened?

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**Procedure:** Say something like: “You’ve just had an opportunity to talk about all the jobs you’ve had and what they were like. In the last session, we learned that conflict and anger are normal but that problems occur when we lose control or resort to violence. Now I’d like each of you to think of a work situation that made you angry with someone. Think of a situation where you really messed up or things got out of hand. I’m going to ask for volunteers to talk about such situations with the group. Then we’ll use these questions to help us understand what happened.” (Read aloud the questions that you’ve posted on newsprint.)

**Ask** for volunteers to share their individual stories. Try to get each of the men to describe one situation, and focus in detail on five to seven situations. Use the questions on newsprint to guide the men’s responses. Encourage the men to tell plausible stories about what happened when they lost control. Use the examples given after each question as *probes* to help the men open up about how they may have lost a job by losing control.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. In general, what kinds of situations got most of you angry?

(For example, was it usually something the boss asked you to do? Or was it *how* he or she asked? Was it the fact that you didn’t like the job? Was your anger related to how others treated you? Was it an issue of discrimination? Was it a problem of communication between you and your boss because of racial or ethnic differences? Was it a male-female conflict? Was this an issue of how someone handled authority or how you reacted to authority?)

2. How did most of you handle your anger?

(Did most of you just quit? Did you start a physical fight or become verbally abusive? Did you have a chance to defend your position? Did you handle your anger at work, or did you take it out on your children, your partners, or yourselves?)

3. How did most of these conflicts end?

(Did most of you lose the job? Were you able to resolve the conflict without being fired? Did you feel that the situation was handled fairly? If not, why not?)

4. Do you usually respond in the same way to everyone who makes you angry, regardless of who the person is? If so, what is your usual response? If not, what things do you consider when deciding how you will respond to someone who makes you angry?

(For example, if you like the job, do you try harder to keep your cool? Do you respond differently when you have financial pressures? When you have a lot of stress in your personal life, do you tend to lose your cool more quickly? Do you respond differently to female supervisors than to male supervisors? Do you blow up more quickly when you are angry at a coworker than when you are angry at your boss?)

5. What role does disrespect play in the problems that you have had as a worker?

(For example, do you get angry about being disrespected at work? Has anger ever cost you your job? Is it hard for you to deal with other people telling you what to do? Is it hard for you to get along with people who are different from you?)

6. How does stress in your personal life interfere with your ability to keep your job?

(For example, does too much personal stress make you want to quit your job because you feel that you can't cope?)

7. Which of your own characteristics or personal traits influence how people treat you as a worker?

(For example, does your level of education, skill, sex, race, or age affect how you are treated by employers, supervisors, coworkers, customers?)

8. What things have worked well for you when responding to people who make you angry at work?

9. In the last session, about handling conflict and managing anger, we talked a lot about strategies for "keeping your cool." Which of these ideas do you think would work best when you get angry or have a conflict at work?

(If necessary, remind the men of the strategies listed in the handout for Activity 12-5, "Anger Management Skills." Emphasize such strategies as avoiding conflict when possible, taking a time-out until people cool down, expressing how you feel about the situation, and saying what you would like to see happen.)

**Tell the men** that next they will role-play some of the situations they have just discussed. The role play will help them identify ways to handle anger and conflict without losing their jobs — or their self-respect.

## Strategies for Handling Conflict

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**Purpose:** To help participants deal with conflicts at work by identifying strategies that allow them to stay in control.

**Materials:** Leader Resource, “Case Studies: Anger on the Job”; Handout, “Strategies for Handling Conflict”; newsprint and markers.

**Time:** 30-40 minutes.

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**Planning Note:** This activity will help the men identify ways to cope with anger and conflict at work so that they do not jeopardize their jobs. The men will be asked to role-play the work-related conflicts that they identified in Activity 13-3. Choose situations to role-play that represent a variety of conflicts (such as one involving a female boss, one where the issue was discrimination, etc.). Also, select situations that reflect both one-time conflicts and conflicts in which anger built up over a long time. The Leader Resource “Case Studies: Anger on the Job” provides situations that you can use if the men’s stories do not provide enough variety.

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**Procedure:** Say something like, “I am going to ask for volunteers to role-play some of the situations you described about job-related conflicts. The role plays will help us figure out some ways to deal with anger without risking your job.”

**Divide** the participants into small groups, and assign each group one of the situations from Activity 13-3 or from the Leader Resource (do not let anyone role-play his own situation). Give the men approximately 10 minutes to plan a brief role play in which they identify strategies that the worker can use to handle anger without losing control. Tell the men that in planning their role plays they should consider all the reasons why the worker was angry as well as how he could control his anger without losing self-respect. Tell them also to consider whether it is best to walk away from this conflict or whether the conflict really is unacceptable and must be faced. Give the small groups about 10 minutes to come up with suggestions for how the worker can deal with his anger and to select actors to play the roles.

**Reconvene** the large group, and begin the role plays. After each role play, ask the actors why they chose the strategies they used. Then ask the person whose situation was reenacted to comment on the strategies the actors used. After each role play, ask the entire group:

- What are your reactions to how the worker in the role play managed his anger?
- What strategies did this worker use?
- Do you think these strategies would work in real life? Why or why not?
- How would *you* feel using the strategies shown by the actors? Why?
- How might the real-life worker benefit if he used the strategies suggested by the actors?

**After** all the role plays, ask the following questions to continue the discussion about managing anger at work.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. What were some of the ideas that came up in the role plays about how to handle conflicts at work? (List these suggestions on newsprint for everyone to see.)
2. Can anyone think of other strategies that people can use when they are angry on the job? (Examples: taking time out instead of exploding; delaying a response until everyone is calmer; avoiding conflicts that may get out of hand; asking exactly what is expected of you in advance; requesting a meeting with a third party, such as a mediator or supervisor; talking with a friend or partner about what makes you angry about your boss or coworker; asking for help with difficult tasks *before* a problem arises; deciding in advance how you will deal with a difficult boss or coworker so that you are ready to handle the situation if it comes up.)
3. Which conflicts on the job seem hardest to deal with? (For example, is it harder to handle anger that builds up over time? Or is it harder to handle spur-of-the-moment anger?)
4. Are the strategies for dealing with a one-time conflict on the job the same as the strategies for managing the day-to-day frustrations of a job that takes advantage of you? Which strategies help with daily frustration? Which help with one-time conflicts?
5. How do conflicts with customers differ from conflicts with bosses or coworkers? What are some ways to handle conflicts with customers? (Examples: excuse yourself and ask a coworker to handle a customer; walk away until you feel calmer; tell the customer to speak with a supervisor or manager about the problem.)
6. Has anyone faced a situation in which none of these strategies would work? If so, describe the situation? What choices did you have? (Discuss situations in which the only choice may be to leave the job.)
7. Is it possible for men to control their anger — maybe even walk away from a conflict — without losing self-respect? If so, how?

8. What role does “attitude” play in how you deal with anger at work? For example, if you are in a good mood, do things bother you less? If you are working at a particular job that is temporary, do you have more tolerance? If you dislike your boss, is it harder to maintain your cool?
9. What are some things you can do to control situations that make you upset? (Examples: take care of yourself by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising so that you lower your stress; identify what you like and dislike about your job so that you can prevent conflicts from arising; ask your boss or supervisor to clarify what is expected of you; leave your job problems at work so that they don’t interfere with the rest of your life; make an effort to be a reliable, productive employee so that you feel good about your work.)
10. Ask the men to think about the time that they have spent together in the peer support group. What have they learned about themselves from their discussions of manhood, communication, and relationships? What have they learned about how they can deal with conflicts at work?

**Ask** each of them to fill in the following blanks: “I used to deal with my anger at work by \_\_\_\_\_, but now I plan to \_\_\_\_\_.”

**After** the men have answered the questions, give each of them the handout “Strategies for Handling Conflict.” Tell them that it summarizes today’s session and that it may be helpful to keep the handout somewhere at work, to use if the need arises. They can also discuss this handout with family members and friends.

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## Leader Resource

### Case Studies: Anger on the Job

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**SITUATION 1.** You are a postal worker who sorts mail on the night shift. A female supervisor has been on your case for the past few months, complaining that you are not working fast enough. You've just taken a break after sorting mail for three hours, and she comes up to you and says that *she* is the one who decides when you take a break. She demands that you go back to work and threatens to write you up for slacking off. What do you do?

**SITUATION 2.** You are a clerk in the mail room of a law firm. You usually work the dayshift, and you get along well with your supervisor and coworkers. Now your boss says that he needs you to cover the evening shift for about three weeks because one of the workers is having minor surgery. You agree, figuring that it will look good on your record. On your first evening shift, you sense that your new supervisor doesn't like you, but you don't pay much attention to him. Before the shift is over, your supervisor has accused you of being "lazy" and "slow." You sense that he is attacking you because of your race, but you've also heard him talk this way to other people. When you show up for work the next day, he takes one look at you and says, "Hey, useless is back." What do you do?

**SITUATION 3.** You are working on a demolition team that is tearing down an abandoned building. For three days in a row, the foreman has come to the job site and told you to stop what you were doing and go get coffee and donuts for the crew's morning break. You are fed up with this "gopher" work, and you vow that the next time you're going to tell the foreman where to get off. You know that he decides which guys to lay off when things get slow, but you've had enough of him. What do you do?

**SITUATION 4.** In your factory job, you are responsible for keeping the machinery running. You don't like the job, but you were out of work for two years before getting it, so you know you've got to keep it, no matter what. One guy you work with has been giving you a hard time ever since you started working there. You don't know what his problem is, but you've decided to stay clear of him. Things at home have been rough lately, too. Your son has been in and out of the hospital with high fevers that the doctors can't figure out, and the boy's mother has been taking her worries out on you. You feel stressed out and are afraid that you're going to blow your fuse if anyone messes with you. As you are cleaning one of the machines at work, the guy who has been giving you a hard time starts getting in your face. What do you do?

**SITUATION 5.** After graduating a year ago from a training program in office machine repair, you were hired by a large computer company for a one-year, temporary position (you get a salary but no benefits). In the time that you have worked for this company, you have received outstanding evaluations from your boss as well as eight letters of recommendation from pleased customers. During the year, five other temporary workers who were hired when you were have moved into permanent positions, and so you ask your boss whether there is a permanent position for you, too. He says that the company doesn't have any more openings and that you will have to leave. Because only one of the workers who was offered a permanent position is a person of color, you think that the situation involves racial discrimination. What do you think? What do you do?

## Strategies for Handling Conflict

As you consider these suggestions for handling conflict at work, remember that no single strategy is effective every time. You may have to try several strategies, depending on the situation at the moment. If you have other ideas for handling work conflict, add them to the list.

- Use time-outs. Walk away from the coworker who is making you angry, and wait for at least ten minutes.
- Whenever possible, delay your response until you and your boss or coworker are calmer.
- Avoid conflicts with coworkers before things get out of hand.
- Ask your supervisor to explain what is expected of you in advance, so that you will know where you stand.
- Talk with your friends or partner about what makes you angry on the job.
- Ask for help with difficult tasks *before* a problem arises.
- Prepare in advance how to deal with a difficult boss or coworker so that you will be ready to handle any situation that comes up.
- Keep stress low by taking care of yourself; get enough sleep, eat right, and exercise.
- Ask yourself what you like and what you dislike about your job so that you can avoid or handle situations that make you angry.
- Leave your job problems at work; don't let them interfere with your personal life.
- Make every effort to be reliable and productive at work so that you will feel good about your performance.

If a conflict arises that you cannot resolve, request a meeting with a third party, such as a mediator or supervisor, to help you and your coworker work things out.

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## Feedback/Wrap-up

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Ask the following questions to summarize the session and help the men express what they got out of it.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. Would somebody like to tell us what he got out of today's session? (Follow up by asking whether the others want to add anything.)
2. Which of the strategies for handling conflict at work do you think will be helpful to you? Which of the strategies would not work for you? Why?
3. Did you learn anything today about job conflicts that will be useful in handling anger and conflict in your personal relationships? If so, what?
4. Based on your experiences, is it easier to control anger in your personal relationships or on the job? Why?
5. So far, we have focused on anger in personal relationships and anger in the workplace. What other situations come up where you could use some of the strategies we've discussed? (For example, how you are treated as a customer? How are you treated in your child support situation?)
6. What, if anything, do you still need to work on concerning the way you deal with anger or with conflict? (For example, do you need to learn to "walk away"? Do you need to be more assertive in stating your position? Do you need to learn how to take time-outs?)

**Remind** the men that it takes practice to control anger, especially when we don't like the person we are angry with. Point out that they now know some ways to deal with anger without having to lose their self-respect and without having to lose their job.

**End** the session by thanking the men for their participation. Tell them that the next session will help them to improve their work experiences by focusing on what is expected of them as workers, how to negotiate for what they need on the job, and their legal rights as employees.