

"For every minute
you are angry,
you lose 60 seconds
of happiness."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

The A-B-C-D model is a classic cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) technique developed by one of CBT's founders, Albert Ellis. When applied effectively, this can help address a variety of emotional difficulties, including anger management problems. This post explains how the model works and how to start using it.

Overview of the A-B-C-D Model in Context of Anger Management

Below is an overview of the A-B-C-D cognitive-behavioral therapy model, using anger as the problem focus:

A = Activating Event

This refers to the initial situation or "trigger" to your anger.

B = Belief System

Your belief system refers to how you interpret the activating event (A). What do you tell yourself about what happened? What are your beliefs and expectations of how others should behave?

C = Consequences

This how you feel and what you do in response to your belief system; in other words, the emotional and behavioral consequences that result from A + B. When angry, it's common to also feel other emotions, like fear, since anger is a secondary emotion. Other "consequences" may include subtle physical changes, like feeling warm, clenching your fists and taking more shallow breaths. More dramatic behavioral displays of anger include yelling, name-calling and physical violence.

D = Dispute

D refers to a very important step in the anger management process. You need to examine your beliefs and expectations. Are they unrealistic or irrational? If so, what may be an alternative and calmer way to relate to the situation? By "disputing" those knee-jerk beliefs about the situation, you can take a more rational and balanced approach, which can help you control your anger.

Example of the A-B-C-D Model

Let's look at an example to illustrate how this model can be applied to anger management.

A = Activating Event

You're driving to work and somebody cuts you off, almost causing a collision. You were already feeling stressed to begin with because you were running late and had a big day ahead of you.

B = Belief System

You think to yourself, "people shouldn't drive like that," "I'm a courteous driver, I don't do that," "everybody on the road these days is a reckless driver," "if that car hit me, I would have been really late to work or even worse, I could have gotten injured."

C = Consequences

After the triggering event (i.e., being cut-off in traffic), you roll down your window and yell an expletive out at the other driver, while giving the bird. You notice that your muscles are tense, your heart rate is high and you feel like you want to hit the steering wheel. You also notice that you feel some fear.

D = Dispute

In response to the triggering situation and its sequelae, rather than reinforce what's fueling the anger, you could shift your thinking (this is the "D"/dispute part of the model). For example, you could say to yourself: "It's a bummer that some people drive recklessly, but that's just a fact of life. Most people actually do obey the rules of the road and I'm glad that I do as well. Who knows, maybe that driver had some emergency that he was responding to...probably not, but you never know. That was scary to almost get hit, but even if we got into a fender bender, I would have eventually gotten to work and probably nothing drastic would have happened because of it."

As you can see, using this type of rational self-talk is likely to diffuse some of the anger and help you calm down.

How to Apply this Model to Anger Management

The first step in using this anger management tool is to increase your awareness of what is happening in each step. To review:

- A) Identify what initially triggered the anger
- B) Reflect on how you related to the triggering situation (e.g., what did you say to yourself about it)
- C) Identify all of the specific emotional and behavioral responses that followed

Because our minds work so fast, we can get to C – the consequences – very quickly. So, to start applying this model, it can be helpful to do some analyses of prior situations that have triggered anger by writing down the information in each category. You can use the A-B-C-D Model Worksheet.

Taking the time to write out these steps can help get this learning into the subconscious mind, so that you can later draw upon it in the heat of the moment. In essence, you are practicing anger management tools when you are reviewing prior incidents and coming up with more positive solutions that help calm you down, rather than ratchet up the anger.

Writing out the A-B-C-D information is good practice, even though it's after the fact. This reflective process helps retrain your mind, by increasing your awareness of patterns and ways to respond to them more effectively. For example, you may start to notice that there are somewhat similar situations that continually bring up anger for you – these are essentially places of “vulnerability” to be aware of and work hard on. After you write down the A-B-Cs, fill-in the D-dispute area, by identifying more rational, realistic and calming things to say to yourself about the situation. You can also put specific behaviors in this box. For example, you might want to write down reminders to yourself like “take some deep breaths” or “count to 10 before saying anything.”

Oftentimes, people have insight after an angry incident, regretting what they did or said. But, in the moment, things just happen so quickly. This added awareness could help you slow down a bit, which is a key factor in anger management. Being able to pause, take a deep breath and then decide how to respond, rather than reacting to the situation can help you avoid negative consequences of your anger.

Source: [Anger Management: A Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy Manual](#)” by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.