

# Dealing with Frustration

By Tamara Mitchell  
Edited by Sally Longyear



In the last two articles, we explored the nature of frustration, typical responses to frustration, and some research relating to frustration. In this article, we discuss what you can do to deal with frustration. It is lengthy (we apologize!), but it only scratches the surface of the information available.

We'd like to expand our original definition of frustration. Frustration is the condition of wanting something and not getting it, or not wanting something and having it forced on you.<sup>1</sup> Frustration can be a result of interactions with machine or person, or environmental factors such as a locked door or a flat tire. Other people or situations do not *cause* frustration and anger. Frustration is how you react to the person or the situation. It is your *emotional response* to the situation. Frustration is a learned behavior.<sup>1,2</sup>

"You cannot always change the things that happen, but you can change the way you react to them". This phrase speaks the truth: *You can* learn a new way of reacting to situations if you want to. This is easier for some than others, however. Everyone experiences frustration, but some people are more easily angered by the situation due to their lower tolerance for frustration.<sup>3</sup> They feel that they should not have to be subjected to inconvenience or annoyance, have difficulty taking things in stride, and are particularly infuriated when a situation seems unjust to them. Unfortunately, some of these people use this as an excuse to be angry.

There are several steps on the road from frustration to anger defined by Hauck.<sup>1</sup> He states the first step as "I want something" and the second step as, "I didn't get what I wanted and I'm frustrated". By dividing the second step (i.e., First, you did not get what you want. Next, you feel frustrated.), we find an answer for dealing with frustration! It is actually possible to head off frustration rather than trying to manage your reaction to it after it happens.

## Heading off Frustration

Considering the multiple sources of frustration as listed by Maltz and Barker,<sup>2</sup> there are several suggestions for preventing frustrating situations. We encourage you to develop and nurture a personal style that fosters a calm, capable, and systematic approach to life. (Don't laugh, this is a process and worth it to keep trying!) This is how you will be able to lower your risk for chronic pain.

- **Believe that you are capable of handling the problem or situation.**<sup>2</sup> If you have a strong sense of self-respect, you will not as easily feel overwhelmed by challenging situations or people in positions of power.

- **Be persistent and believe in a solution.** Don't give up too soon or take a negative attitude that something cannot be done. Thomas Edison said, "Many of life's failures are men who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up".<sup>5</sup> He also said, "Nearly every man who develops an idea works at it up to the point where it looks impossible, and then gets discouraged. That's not the place to become discouraged."<sup>5</sup> Edison tested more than 6,000 vegetable growths from all over the world to find a filament that didn't burn out in the light bulb.<sup>6</sup>
- **Diminish the power of the problem.**<sup>2</sup> Give a potentially frustrating situation less attention and importance rather than dwelling on it and magnifying it.
- **Be a decision maker.** Indecision is actually a decision to fail. Procrastination is simply a bad habit.<sup>2</sup>
- **Do not worry about your decisions.** Once you have decided to take action, proceed full steam ahead.
- **Do not try to do more than one thing at a time.** Prioritize what needs to be done and do one thing at a time.<sup>2</sup>
- **Focus on a goal,** then break it down into steps. Do each step in turn, leading towards the goal.<sup>2</sup>
- **Learn to relax.** It is not necessary to hurry and scurry through life. It's fashionable to be too busy, always tired, and overworked. Simplify your life. Insist on scheduled time alone for uninterrupted relaxation. This does not have to be an extensive period of time, but long enough for you to envision your goals and see the "big picture".<sup>2</sup>
- **Do not wrestle with a problem all day.** There are three "periods" in a day. One part of the day is for working, one is for sleeping, and the other is for you, your family, and your outside interests.<sup>2</sup> Do not allow yourself to shortchange personal time because of workload on an ongoing basis. Also, do not allow yourself to take the problem physically or mentally into the other periods of your life. You will be doing and yourself and the people in your life an injustice and you will lose valuable sleep. An additional and important benefit of leaving a problem for a while is that, you can come back to it anew with a fresh perspective. People heal from injury faster when they get away and do other things. Obsessing about work is unhealthy. Get a life! Develop other interests to engage your mind. You will notice that you will be better able to deal with inevitable frustration.

### **Dealing with Frustration**

Of course we cannot always get our own way and no one will ever be able to completely avoid frustrations in life. But by successfully coping with the causes of frustration, we can develop initiative, autonomy, and a sense of capability.

**Re-learn your reaction to frustration.** If you learn nothing else from this article, *this is the single most important thing to remember!* ***We become upset by thinking in upsetting ways, not by encountering frustrating situations.*** To remain un-angry and un-frustrated throughout life, you need to learn to question the idea that not getting your way is unbearable. When someone doesn't do what you wanted, or does something that you don't want them to do, they are exercising their own right. And when something doesn't work out as you planned (e.g. your computer keeps crashing), it is not the end of the world. Life will go on. It may be very inconvenient and disappointing, but you do not have to get angry. Getting angry makes it very difficult to generate a solution and it may even lead you to do something thoughtless or dangerous. Frustration and anger

can definitely cause muscle tension, which sets the stage for a lifetime of cumulative trauma disorders. Next time you feel frustrated, stop to ask yourself if you really have to have your way.

This method of dealing with frustration is a relatively new theory of psychotherapy called rational-emotive therapy (RET). It deviates significantly from prior methods of dealing with frustration and anger. The premise of RET is that your life history is not what matters, and putting a lid on anger or finding appropriate ways to express anger is not the solution. Learning to react to frustration calmly, thoughtfully, and politely, without ever feeling anger, is most effective. There is so much more to this topic than can possibly be covered here, so we encourage you to read the book by Hauck<sup>1</sup> if you want to learn more about how to retrain your reaction to frustration.

**Believe in yourself.** We have a tendency to maintain an image of ourselves that was planted there by other people when we were children. These images imposed on us should be assessed to determine if they are still true now that we are adults. We must realize that in many cases, these people were somewhat neurotic and that the labels they pinned on us were never true in the first place. They were misdirected attempts to make us behave in a certain way. You must try to rid yourself of long-held beliefs that are not useful and that hold you back from being the person you truly want to be.<sup>1,2</sup>

**Change your environment.** As discussed in the first article, if a frustrated person is removed from a frustrating environment, the level of frustration diminishes. The natural reaction to frustration is often to retreat into a shell. Stimulate yourself with a new environment by removing yourself from the frustrating situation. Often this will bring to life something new and challenging beyond the negativism of frustration. It isn't always possible to do this, but it is helpful to take 5 minutes to go outside.<sup>2</sup>

Another way to change the environment involves restructuring situations. If you know you get frustrated more easily when you are stressed and/or tired, give yourself a break at these times. Have standing rules with family or co-workers that you need certain times alone, such as the first 15 minutes after you arrive to and from work. Don't approach problems or serious discussions at times or in places that have a proven track record of leading to frustrating arguments or misunderstandings. Close the door to your child's messy room if it upsets you. Take an alternate route to work or start taking the train if your commute makes you crazy.

**Don't make mountains out of molehills.**<sup>1</sup> Most events are not so serious as we think they are. Even if an event is very serious, we make matters worse by getting upset over it. Learn to distinguish between annoyances and catastrophes.

**Do not wallow in self-pity.**<sup>1</sup> When you pity yourself, you depress yourself. You build up the injustice done to you so much that you talk yourself into thinking that the most awful things have happened to you and that someone ought to be badly punished. You become more and more bitter and resentful. The self-pitier is his own enemy, hurting yourself much more than you are hurting the person you believe is doing you wrong.

**Don't bother venting to other people.** Research has shown that venting frustrations to people uninvolved in the situation does not relieve frustration.<sup>8</sup> Not only is it not effective, it actually helps you recall the situation, relive the frustration and may increase your frustration and multiply your grudges.

**Do not place blame.** <sup>1</sup> Separate the person's actions from them as a person. Identify the problem and what is at fault to decide what needs to be corrected. By blaming a person, you are indicating that you feel they are inferior. Blame affects performance and makes people feel hostile, angry, and defensive. Blame distracts you from finding a solution to your frustration by focusing on personalities rather than answers.

**Forgive, but don't forget.** <sup>1</sup> Forgive the people who have treated you badly, but do not forget. By forgiving them, you will calm down and stop holding a grudge, which will improve your well-being. By not forgetting, you will not repeat the scenario by avoiding it in the future. For example, if a person does not repay a loan, forgive them, but do not loan them money again.

**Be assertive or aggressive without anger.** This generally requires that you first have sufficient self-respect. It is essential that you are firm and assertive with people who are doing you wrong. Even aggressiveness has validity if you have goals, but it doesn't mean hurting others or throwing your weight around. It is best to be assertive without anger, but if you cannot learn to do this, it is better to be angry than to let people walk all over you and not express your feelings. If you are dominated, it is because you have allowed it. Do not be passive when someone causes you to feel frustrated.

### **Dealing with Anger**

Anger is the most common reaction to frustration.<sup>4</sup> By now you know that anger is not inevitable and after practice, you will probably be able to avoid anger much of the time. In the last article, we discussed the harmful effects of anger. But for those of us mortals who still get mad when we're frustrated, we need to learn to handle it better.

People use three main approaches to deal with angry feelings.<sup>3</sup>

**Expressing anger** in an assertive, but not aggressive manner is the healthiest way to deal with it. We discussed this in item 9 above.

**Suppressing anger** means you hold it in, stop thinking about it, or focus on something positive in an attempt to convert anger into more constructive behavior. This can turn inward toward oneself resulting in hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression. Unexpressed anger can also lead to passive-aggressive behavior or to a personality that seems perpetually cynical or hostile.

Suppression is a very dangerous reaction to frustration. You don't want to make waves, so you give in and let others have their way. This can go on for a very long time until after days, months, or even years of depression and brooding over the cumulative injustices, you give way to an explosion. Up until the explosion, the other person is probably not aware there is a problem. This is one of the most damaging ways of dealing with frustration from a psychological standpoint because of the extreme unhappiness it causes the person suppressing their feelings. The resulting explosion generally damages the personal relationship involved beyond repair, too (as opposed to a quick flare-up and resolution of anger).

**Calming anger** involves not only controlling your behavior, but also controlling your internal responses. It involves cooling yourself down when you are hot under the collar. This approach may involve relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, relaxing imagery, calming phrases and exercises.

Better communication is important when you are frustrated and angry. Rather than leaping to conclusions and acting on them, slow down and think through your communications. Counting to 10 is an old-fashioned method of giving yourself a chance to think and to prevent yourself from saying something you'll regret later. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying and what the real message may be. For example, what seems like criticism may actually signify feelings of neglect or hurt.<sup>1,3</sup>

Humor can always be relied on to help ease tension.<sup>3</sup> Refuse to take yourself too seriously. Anger is often accompanied by ideas that, if examined, can make you laugh. If you become aware of the other person's neuroses that frustrate you, it's not usually that hard to create visions which will turn their frustrating behavior into humorous behavior. However, do not use humor to laugh off your problems and do not use humor in sarcasm. Sarcasm is just another form of anger-expression, not truly humor, and it is indirect.

### **Conclusion:**

If you feel that you need help dealing with your frustration and anger, especially if you are experiencing depression due to frustration, please seek help through the SRI Employee Assistance Program. You can call Value Options directly 24 hours a day at **1-800-662-7241**. We recommend that you seek help from a RET therapist, as discussed in this article. Value Options does not offer a list of RET therapists, but you can call ask the therapist to whom you are referred if they do this type of therapy and, if not, locate one who does.

### **References:**

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