

Addiction and Recovery: Why Am I Still Angry In Recovery?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Why am I so angry? The transition into recovery can be quite an ordeal-- not just physically but psychologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. The physical challenges that come with detox are not so surprising. However, many people are unprepared for all the anger they may experience in early recovery. You might label it “mad, cranky, frustrated, irritated, angry, agitated, seething”, and many others. These terms describe the experience on a continuum of intensity. Who knew anger would be a hallmarks of early recovery?

There are many reasons why a recovering person would feel angry when they quit drinking and using drugs. Irritability and anger are frequent detox symptoms. Feelings, previously numbed, medicated, or generally altered by addictive substances, are probably still there. When the mood-altering drug is absent, feelings seem to come back with a vengeance. One of the most common roles that mood-altering drugs play in the life of someone with substance use disorder is an escape from uncomfortable feelings.

Early recovery is typically a time of turmoil. People at this stage of recovery are spending a lot of energy getting to the reality of their addiction, confronting once-buried feelings about past traumas, and adjusting to life without the substance. During this time, we expect anger. In their self-examination, newly recovering people may be coming to grips with the choices made and opportunities lost. A newly recovering person may feel shame and guilt for hurtful behavior toward others. People often experience these uncomfortable feelings as anger.

There may be some anger and resentment toward loved ones over how they came to be in recovery. They may be angry with everyone involved in their choice to get sober. Misdirected anger could include law

enforcement, the judge, the boss, the spouse, the family in general, the neighbor next door who knew about it, or society at large.

The cessation of drinking of drugs often involves detox symptoms. Detox brings about many changes in the body, including clearing up and improving thinking. Efforts at self-examination and detox assist in bringing more reality into focus.

Ambivalence is a normal part of early recovery, and many people in the transition into recovery often still believe they could have regained control over their use if they had just tried harder. A person in early recovery, facing the reality of losing power over the chemical, may feel anger at themselves for getting to this point and not taking control over their use. They might shift the blame and burden of their emotions onto others. Even if they're angry at themselves, their family often bears the brunt of it.

Cravings are the strongest during the interruption of the momentum of addiction and may continue intermittently for quite a while. Irritability and anger are common symptoms of cravings. Cravings are stressful, and a pile-up of stressors can quickly reduce our resilience.

Irritability refers to a heightened sensitivity or agitation that various factors, such as detox and other stressors, can trigger. Behaviorally, it often involves angry reactions to minor frustrations that might not typically provoke such a response. Irritability might also signal anxiety, depression, disruptions in sleep, and various other hidden mental health conditions, or it could simply result from temporary stressors or physical discomfort. Detox can set up all the conditions for irritability to occur, and it affects mood, behavior, and relationships.

Besides managing any physical symptoms, someone in early recovery would also be trying to make sense of their psychological and emotional experiences. In tackling obstacles, they strive to pinpoint and confront the root causes behind their anger. They may be extra sensitive to questions about their detox or transition into recovery and interpret questions as criticism. Any emotional discomfort may be converted into anger.

A typical example is fear. Fear is often quickly converted into a more comfortable feeling: anger.

It is also quite common for people in early recovery to experience anxiety and depression. A symptom common of anxiety and depression is irritability. Interactions with loved ones are colored by this irritability, creating more anxiety and distress for family members who are already at a loss for what to do to help the newly sober person.

In summary, we expect anger during detox and even early recovery. Irritability, anxiety, depression, and a barrage of emotions are common. When someone uses a chemical for feelings management, it may take time and effort to learn or relearn emotion management skills. Time and abstinence from the chemical should help with clearer thinking. Anger is there. What you do with it determines whether it is instructive or destructive. Identifying the feelings and talking about them is instructive. Cognitive therapy, writing, counseling, and support group involvement can help process feelings and learn new emotion management skills.

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Peggy



www.peggyferguson.com