

DEALING WITH ANGER ON THE COURSE

©Carey Mumford 2004

There are many forms and intensities of emotion that humans must deal with in life (and golf). The problem we all face is that emotion is not on the human list of options. It is not a matter of you can leave it out if you don't want it. It's coming, ready and willing or not. Among those emotions, golfers frequently bring up the one we all call "anger," probably because it is painful and causes us damage in the game. We are subject to every range of emotion during every game. Most of that emotion will be experienced as "agony" or "ecstasy," and be called by many names, with "anger" being one of the first to pop up.

We have no choice about whether emotion will be present. *It will be there, wanted or not.* The problem is how to deal with it effectively during the game. Emotion is part of everything we do, though we may not recognize it till it "bites" us. Opportunity to be "bitten" abounds during a golf game. "Bites" can be cumulative, scenarios numberless.

A poor tee shot on the first hole, a three putt green, hitting it stiff for birdie, a buried bunker shot, three great shots in a row, all create emotion. Some of it is pleasurable, some painful. We recognize the pain more than the pleasure. That's how we are conditioned. But elation (pleasure) can get in our way, too. We can get such a "high" from a great shot that we forget to focus our attention on the next one.

So what do we do with all that? First of all, we need to learn to recognize emotion. It follows a very reliable pattern. We can understand it. When something goes wrong, it produces pain every time. When something goes right, it produces pleasure every time. It makes no difference to our systems which one is there. Both have to be dealt with. We like pleasure, so generally speaking we have learned to be more adept at handling it and accepting it. Exceptional pleasure is just as difficult to deal with as pain, however.

We are more aware of pain, which inevitably produces anger (we tend to call it frustration). Any kind of pain will produce some degree of anger, large or small. Pleasure always leads to joy (we tend to call it fun). If we aren't in the habit of recognizing our emotion as we are playing, we can still "see it" in our "self-talk." When we "damn" what we are doing, pain is there. When we pat ourselves on the back, pleasure is there.

In golf, there is so much time between shots, and so many occasions for up's and down's, we either get frazzled or over-confident before we know it.

How do we manage our emotions? Understand that emotion accompanies everything we do, whether we want it or not. Put yourself in charge of the emotion, rather than allowing the emotion to be in charge of you. If you wait till it comes, it will be in charge. If you make a covenant in advance, when the pressure is not on, you will be in charge of it. (Make your Covenant with yourself at home when all is quiet and you are alone. Don't wait till something happens to do that. It must be done when the air is calm and clear). Decide, *in advance when not under pressure*, that you will accept that and honor it. When you hit a good or a bad shot, give it its due, *then dismiss it.*

The Covenant is critical. Promises are easily broken (see New year's). Covenants tend to stay with us long term. Make no promise - just a Covenant.

Set a time-frame for how long an emotional response will continue. If we miss a shot, do we need to be mad (angry) for the rest of the round, a day, a week, or the rest of our lives? Pre-determine a time limit.

The solution is simple, not simplistic. Admit the feeling. Express it to yourself. *Set a time limit* on its duration. If you three-putt a green, acknowledge to yourself that you didn't like it. Visualize your anger, but honor your Covenant with yourself that it's over before you face your next shot.

Problems occur when we fail to consider how long or how severely we need to fret. Allowing it to happen, as though we had no control over it, or trying to over-control or deny it is self-defeating.

It works like goal setting. A goal isn't a goal until we set a time to go with it. "I'll do it sometime" is not a goal statement. Neither is "When it's over, it's over."

It is important to remember that practice is required to develop the necessary skill to set limits on emotion. We can't practice it if we don't know what it is and how it works.

Emotion that is held in festers. Emotion that is released subsides. If you hit a bad shot, release your emotion, with a time limit determined in advance. Don't wait until you're knee deep in the situation before you try to figure it out or set a limit. Then, on the next shot, you can re-focus your attention, and continue confidently - but only if you have made your covenant with yourself in advance.

If emotion is not released, it will boil, becoming louder and stronger, and one is not likely to need reminding that can take a player completely out of his/her game. If your self-management is "not working," check the time-frame you have set (or failed to set) on your release of emotion. Then, put your attention where it belongs - on the shot at hand. Better yet, use a Clear Key as a signal that reminds you it's time to "stop" emotional traffic before you "go" again.