

Controlling Anger Before It Controls You

Anger

Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. We've all felt anger; perhaps as a fleeting annoyance or as a full-fledged rage. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems: problems at work, in your personal relationships and in the overall quality of your life. It can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion. This fact sheet is meant to help you to understand and get a handle on handling anger.

Signs and Causes of Anger

Like other emotions, anger is accompanied by physiological and biological changes. When you feel angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as does the level of your energy hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline.

Anger can be caused by both external and internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (such as a coworker or supervisor) or at an event (a traffic jam or a canceled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about personal problems. Also memories of traumatic or enraging events can trigger angry feelings.

Problems Caused By Unexpressed Anger

Unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on) or a personality that seems perpetually cynical and hostile. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything and making cynical comments haven't learned how to constructively express their anger. Not surprisingly, they aren't likely to have many successful relationships.

Why Are Some People More Angry Than Others?

Some people really are more "hotheaded" than others; they get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person. There are also those who don't show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don't always curse and throw things; sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk or get physically ill.

People who are easily angered generally have what some psychologists call a *low tolerance for frustration*, meaning simply, that they feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience or annoyance. They can't take things in stride and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust, such as, being corrected for a minor mistake.

Possible Causes of Anger

One cause may be genetic or physiological. There is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another cause may be sociocultural. Anger is often regarded as negative; we're taught that it's all right to express anxiety, depression or other emotions but not to express anger. As a result, we don't learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

Research has also found that family background plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic and not skilled at emotional communications.

Express Your Angry Feelings in a Positive Way

You can't get rid of, or avoid the things or the people that enrage you, nor can you change them, but you can learn to control your emotions. The three main approaches are **expressing, suppressing and calming**.

- **Expressing** your angry feelings in an assertive -- not aggressive -- manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding. It means being respectful of yourself and others.
- **Suppressing** anger and redirecting it. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into constructive behavior. The danger in this type of response is that if it isn't allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward - on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure or depression.
- **Calming** yourself down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down and let the feelings subside.

Tips for Controlling Your Anger

Relaxation

Practice these techniques and learn to use them when you're in a tense situation.

- Breathe deeply, from your "gut"; breathing from your chest won't relax you.
- Slowly repeat a word or phrase such as "relax," or "take it easy" as you deep breathe.
- Visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination.
- Try non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises to relax your muscles and calm you.

Change the Way You Think

Angry people tend to curse, swear or speak in highly colorful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you're angry, your thinking can get very exaggerated and overly dramatic. Try replacing these thoughts with more rational ones. For instance, instead of telling yourself, "Oh, it's awful, it's terrible, everything's ruined, tell yourself, "It's frustrating, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it anyhow." Try replacing these thoughts with more rational ones.

Be careful of words like "never" or "always" when talking about yourself or someone else. "This !&%*@ machine never works," or "you're always forgetting things" are inaccurate, and serve to make you feel that your anger is justified and that there is no way to solve the problem. They also alienate and humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.

Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it is justified, can quickly become irrational. So use cold hard logic on yourself. Remind yourself that the world is "not out to get you," you're just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life. Do this each time you feel anger getting the best of you and it'll help you get a more balanced perspective.

Learn to Problem Solve

Sometimes, our anger and frustration are caused by very real and unavoidable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it's a healthy, natural response to these difficulties. There is also a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to our frustration to find out that this isn't always the case. It may be better to think about coping with the problem rather than finding a solution that may not exist.

Try to Communicate Better

Angry people tend to jump to and act on conclusions. Some of those conclusions can be pretty wild. The first thing to do, if you're in a heated discussion, is to slow down and think through your responses. Don't say the first thing that comes into your head, but slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

Listen to what is underlying the anger. For instance, you like a certain amount of freedom and personal space, and your "significant other" wants more connection and closeness. If he or she starts complaining about your activities, don't retaliate by painting your partner as a jailer, a warden or an albatross around your neck. It's natural to get defensive when you are criticized, but don't respond right back. Instead, listen to what's underlying the words; the message that this person might feel neglected and unloved. It may take a lot of patient questioning on your part, and it may require some breathing space, but don't let your anger - or a partner's allow a discussion to spin out of control. Keeping your cool can keep the situation from becoming a disastrous one.

Use Humor When Appropriate

Two cautions in using humor. First, don't try to just "laugh off" your problems; rather, use humor to help yourself face them constructively. Second, don't give in to harsh, sarcastic humor, that's just another form of unhealthy anger expression.

What these techniques have in common is a refusal to take yourself too seriously. Anger is a serious emotion, but it's often accompanied by ideas that, if examined, can make you laugh.

Change Your Environment

Sometimes our immediate surroundings give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel "trapped"; making you resentful towards all people and things that form that "trap".

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some "personal time" scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. One example is the working mother who has a standing rule that when she comes home from work, for the first fifteen minutes "nobody talks to Mom unless the house is on fire." After this brief quiet time, she feels better prepared to handle demands from her kids without blowing up at them.

Other Tips For Releasing Yourself From Anger-Producing Situations

- **Timing.** If you and your spouse tend to fight when you discuss things at night (perhaps you're tired, or distracted, or maybe it's just habit) try changing the times when you talk about important matters so these talks don't turn into arguments.
- **Avoidance.** If your child's chaotic room makes you furious every time you walk by it, shut the door. Don't make yourself look at what infuriates you. Don't say "Well, my child should clean up the room so I won't have to be angry!" That's not the point. The point is to keep yourself calm.

- **Finding alternatives.** If your daily commute through traffic leaves you in a state of rage and frustration, give yourself a project -- learn or map out a different route, one that's less congested or more scenic. Or find another alternative, such as a bus or commuter train.

Do You Need Counseling?

If you feel that your anger is really out of control and it is having an impact on both your relationships and important parts of your life, you might consider counseling on how to handle it better. A psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can work with you in developing a range of technique for changing your thinking and your behavior.

When you talk to a prospective therapist, tell her or him that you have problems with anger that you want to work on, and ask about his or her approach to anger management. Make sure this isn't only a course of action designed to "put you in touch with your feelings and express them" which may be precisely what your problem is.

With counseling, psychologists say, a highly angry person can move closer to a middle range of anger in about 8 to 10 weeks, depending on circumstances and the techniques used.

Remember, you can't eliminate anger - and it wouldn't be good if you could. In spite of all your efforts, things will always happen that will cause you anger and sometimes it will be justifiable anger. Life will always be filled with frustration, pain, loss and the unpredictable actions of others. You can't change that; but you can change the way you let such events affect you. Controlling your angry response can keep them from making you even more unhappy in the long run.

For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to www.mhacolorado.org.

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