

Understanding anger

The emotion of anger is neither good nor bad. It's perfectly healthy and normal to feel angry when you've been mistreated or wronged. The feeling isn't the problem—it's what you do with it that makes a difference. Anger becomes a problem when it harms you or others.

If you have a hot temper, you may feel like it's out of your hands and there's little you can do to tame the beast. But you have more control over your anger than you think. You *can* learn to express your emotions without hurting others—and when you do, you'll not only feel better, you'll also be more likely to get your needs met. Mastering the art of anger management takes work, but the more you practice, the easier it will get. And the payoff can be huge. Learning to control your anger and express it appropriately can help you build better relationships, achieve your goals, and lead a healthier, more satisfying life.

Myths and Facts about Anger

Myth: I shouldn't "hold in" my anger. It's healthy to vent and let it out.

Fact: While it's true that suppressing and ignoring anger is unhealthy, venting is no better. Anger is not something you have to "let out" in an aggressive way in order to avoid blowing up. In fact, outbursts and tirades only fuel the fire and reinforce your anger problem.

Myth: Anger, aggression, and intimidation help me earn respect and get what I want.

Fact: True power doesn't come from bullying others. People may be afraid of you, but they won't respect you if you can't control yourself or handle opposing viewpoints. Others will be more willing to listen to you and accommodate your needs if you communicate in a respectful way.

Myth: I can't help myself. Anger isn't something you can control.

Fact: You can't always control the situation you're in or how it makes you feel, but you *can* control how you express your anger. And you *can* express your anger without being verbally or physically abusive. Even if someone is pushing your buttons, you always have a choice about how to respond.

Myth: Anger management is about learning to suppress your anger.

Fact: Never getting angry is not a good goal. Anger is normal, and it will come out regardless of how hard you try to suppress it. Anger management is all about becoming aware of your underlying feelings and needs and developing healthier ways to manage upset. Rather than trying to suppress your anger, the goal is to express it in constructive ways.

Why anger management is important

You might think that venting your anger is healthy, that the people around you are too sensitive, that your anger is justified, or that you need to show your fury to get respect. But the truth is that anger is

much more likely to damage your relationships, impair your judgment, get in the way of success, and have a negative impact on the way people see you.

- **Out-of-control anger hurts your physical health.** Constantly operating at high levels of stress and tension is bad for your health. Chronic anger makes you more susceptible to heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, a weakened immune system, insomnia, and high blood pressure.
- **Out-of-control anger hurts your mental health.** Chronic anger consumes huge amounts of mental energy and clouds your thinking, making it harder to concentrate, see the bigger picture, and enjoy life. It can also lead to stress, depression, and other mental health problems.
- **Out-of-control anger hurts your career.** Constructive criticism, creative differences, and heated debate can be healthy. But lashing out only alienates your colleagues, supervisors, or clients and erodes their respect. What's more, a bad reputation can follow you wherever you go, making it harder and harder to get ahead.
- **Out-of-control anger hurts your relationships with others.** It causes lasting scars in the people you love most and gets in the way of your friendships and work relationships. Chronic, intense anger makes it hard for others to trust you, speak honestly, or feel comfortable—they never know what is going to set you off or what you will do. Explosive anger is especially damaging to children.

Anger management tip 1: Explore what's really behind your anger

If you're struggling with out-of-control anger, you may be wondering why your fuse is so short. Anger problems often stem from what you've learned as a child. If you watched others in your family scream, hit each other, or throw things, you might think this is how anger is supposed to be expressed. Traumatic events and high levels of stress can make you more susceptible to anger as well.

Anger is often a cover-up for other feelings

In order to get your needs met and express your anger in appropriate ways, you need to be in touch with what you are really feeling. Are you truly angry? Or is your anger masking other feelings such as embarrassment, insecurity, hurt, shame, or vulnerability?

If your knee-jerk response in many situations is anger, it is very likely that your temper is covering up your true feelings and needs. This is especially likely if you grew up in a family where expressing feelings was strongly discouraged. As an adult, you may have a hard time acknowledging feelings other than anger.

Clues that there's something more to your anger

- **You have a hard time compromising.** Is it hard for you to understand other people's points of view, and even harder to concede a point? If you grew up in a family where anger was out of control, you may remember how the angry person got his or her way by being the loudest and most demanding. Compromising might bring up scary feelings of failure and vulnerability.

- **You have trouble expressing emotions other than anger.** Do you pride yourself on being tough and in control, never letting your guard down? Do you feel that emotions like fear, guilt, or shame don't apply to you? Everyone has those emotions, and if you think you don't, you may be using anger as a cover for them.
- **You view different opinions and viewpoints as a personal challenge to you.** Do you believe that your way is always right and get angry when others disagree? If you have a strong need to be in control or a fragile ego, you may interpret other perspectives as a challenge to your authority, rather than simply a different way of looking at things.

Some Dynamics of Anger

- We become more angry when we are stressed and body resources are down.
- We are rarely ever angry for the reasons we think.
- We are often angry when we didn't get what we needed as a child.
- We often become angry when we see a trait in others we can't stand in ourselves.
- Underneath many current angers are old disappointments, traumas, and triggers.
- Sometimes we get angry because we were hurt as a child.
- We get angry when a current event brings up an old unresolved situation from the past.
- We often feel strong emotion when a situation has a similar content, words or energy that we have felt before.

Anger management tip 2: Be aware of your anger warning signs and triggers

While you might feel that you just explode into anger without warning, in fact, there are physical warning signs in your body. Anger is a normal physical response. It fuels the "fight or flight" system of the body, and the angrier you get, the more your body goes into overdrive. Becoming aware of your own personal signs that your temper is starting to boil allows you to take steps to manage your anger before it gets out of control.

Pay attention to the way anger feels in your body

- Knots in your stomach
- Clenching your hands or jaw
- Feeling clammy or flushed
- Breathing faster
- Headaches
- Pacing or needing to walk around
- "Seeing red"
- Having trouble concentrating
- Pounding heart
- Tensing your shoulders

Identify the negative thought patterns that trigger your temper

You may think that external things—the insensitive actions of other people, for example, or frustrating situations—are what cause your anger. But anger problems have less to do with what happens to you

than how you interpret and think about what happened. Common negative thinking patterns that trigger and fuel anger include:

- **Overgeneralizing.** For example, "You always interrupt me. You NEVER consider my needs. EVERYONE disrespects me. I NEVER get the credit I deserve."
- **Obsessing on "shoulds" and "musts."** Having a rigid view of the way things should or must be and getting angry when reality doesn't line up with this vision.
- **Mind reading and jumping to conclusions.** Assuming you "know" what someone else is thinking or feeling—that he or she intentionally upset you, ignored your wishes, or disrespected you.
- **Collecting straws.** Looking for things to get upset about, usually while overlooking or blowing past anything positive. Letting these small irritations build and build until you reach the "final straw" and explode, often over something relatively minor.
- **Blaming.** When anything bad happens or something goes wrong, it's always someone else's fault. You blame others for the things that happen to you rather than taking responsibility for your own life.

Anger management tip 3: Learn ways to cool down

Once you know how to recognize the warning signs that your temper is rising and anticipate your triggers, you can act quickly to deal with your anger before it spins out of control. There are many techniques that can help you cool down and keep your anger in check.

Quick tips for cooling down

- **Focus on the physical sensations of anger.** While it may seem counterintuitive, tuning into the way your body feels when you're angry often lessens the emotional intensity of your anger.
- **Take some deep breaths.** Deep, slow breathing helps counteract rising tension. The key is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible into your lungs.
- **Exercise.** A brisk walk around the block is a great idea. It releases pent-up energy so you can approach the situation with a cooler head.
- **Use your senses.** Take advantage of the relaxing power of your sense of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. You might try listening to music or picturing yourself in a favorite place.
- **Stretch or massage areas of tension.** Roll your shoulders if you are tensing them, for example, or gently massage your neck and scalp.
- **Slowly count to ten.** Focus on the counting to let your rational mind catch up with your feelings. If you still feel out of control by the time you reach ten, start counting again.

Give yourself a reality check

When you start getting upset about something, take a moment to think about the situation. Ask yourself:

- How important is it in the grand scheme of things?
- Is it really worth getting angry about it?

- Is it worth ruining the rest of my day?
- Is my response appropriate to the situation?
- Is there anything I can do about it?
- Is taking action worth my time?

Anger management tip 4: Find healthier ways to express your anger

If you've decided that the situation is worth getting angry about and there's something you can do to make it better, the key is to express your feelings in a healthy way. When communicated respectfully and channeled effectively, anger can be a tremendous source of energy and inspiration for change.

Pinpoint what you're really angry about

Have you ever gotten into an argument over something silly? Big fights often happen over something small, like a dish left out or being ten minutes late. But there's usually a bigger issue behind it. If you find your irritation and anger rapidly rising, ask yourself "What am I really angry about?" Identifying the real source of frustration will help you communicate your anger better, take constructive action, and work towards a resolution.

Take five if things get too heated, then respectfully express your anger

If your anger seems to be spiraling out of control, remove yourself from the situation for a few minutes or for as long as it takes you to cool down. A brisk walk, a trip to the gym, or a few minutes listening to some music should allow you to calm down, release pent up emotion, and then approach the situation with a cooler head. As soon as you're thinking clearly, express your frustration in an assertive but non-confrontational way. State your concerns and needs clearly and directly, without hurting others or trying to control them.

Relaxation

Some simple steps you can try:

- Breathe deeply, from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest won't relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your "gut."
- Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax," "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
- Use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination.
- Non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer.

Practice these techniques daily. Learn to use them automatically when you're in a tense situation.

Better Communication

Use "I" Statements - To avoid criticizing or placing blame — which might only increase tension — use "I" statements to describe the problem. Be respectful and specific. For example, say, "I'm upset that you left the table without offering to help with the dishes," instead of, "You never do any housework."

Angry people tend to jump to—and act on—conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be very inaccurate. The first thing to do if you're in a heated discussion is 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. At the same time, listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

Listen, too, to what is underlying the anger.

It's natural to get defensive when you're criticized, but don't fight back. Instead, listen to what's underlying the words: the message that this person might feel neglected and unloved

Using Humor

Remind yourself that anger won't fix anything and might only make it worse.