# Controlling Anger-- Before It Controls You



We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it: whether as a fleeting annoyance or as a full-fledged rage.

Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion. 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. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion. This information is meant to help you to understand and get a handle on handling anger.

#### What is Anger?

The Nature of Anger: Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage, according to Charles Spielberger, Ph.D., psychologist who specializes in the study of anger. Like other emotions, it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as does the level of your energy hormones, adrenalin and noradrenalin.



Anger can be caused by both external and internal events. You could be angry with a specific person (such as a co-worker or supervisor) or event (a traffic jam, a canceled flight), or worrying or brooding about your personal problems could cause your anger. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.





# **Expressing Anger**

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats; it inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors, which allow us to fight and to defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.





●On the other hand, we can't physically lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us; laws, social norms and common sense place limits on how far our anger can take us.





People use a variety of both conscious and unconscious processes to deal with their angry feelings. 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. Anger can be suppressed, and then converted or redirected. 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 more 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.





- 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.
- Finally, you can calm 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.





As Dr. Spielberger notes, when none of these three techniques work, that's when someone or something -- is going to get hurt.

### Anger Management

The goal of anger management is to reduce both your emotional feelings and the physiological arousal that anger causes. 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 reactions.

# Are You Too Angry?

There are psychological tests that measure the intensity of angry feelings, how prone to anger you are and how well you handle it. But chances are good that if you do have a problem with anger, you already know it. If you find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, you might need help finding better ways to deal with this emotion.

# Why Are Some People More Angry Than Others?

- ●According to Jerry Deffenbacher, Ph.D., a psychologist who specializes in anger management, some people are really 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: for example, being corrected for a minor mistake.
- What makes these people this way? A number of things. 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 may be socio-cultural. Anger is often regarded as negative; we've 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.

## Is It Good to "Let It All Hang Out"?

Psychologists now say that this is a dangerous myth. Some people use this theory as a license to hurt others. Research has (bund that "letting it rip" with anger actually escalates anger and aggression and does nothing to help you (or the person you're angry with) resolve the situation.

It's best to find out what it is that triggers your anger, and then to develop strategies to deep those triggers from topping you over the edge.

# What Strategies Can You Use To Keep Anger at Bay?

**Relaxation**: Simple relaxation tools such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery can help calm down angry feelings. There are books and courses that can teach you relaxation techniques, and once you learn them you can call upon them in any situation. If you are involved in a relationship where both partners are hot-tempered, it might be a good idea/'or boil) of you to learn these techniques.



- 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.

#### Cognitive Restructuring

- Simply put, this means changing 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.'
- 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 not just inaccurate, they also serve to make you feel that your anger is justified and that there's no way to solve the problem. They also alienate and humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.
- ●For example, you have a friend who is constantly late when you make plans to meet. Don't go on the attack; think instead about the goal you want to accomplish (that is, getting you and your friend there at about the same time). So avoid saying things like, 'You're always late! You're the most irresponsible, inconsiderate person I have ever met!' The only goal that accomplishes is hurting and angering your friend.
- State what the problem is, and try to find a solution that works for both of you; or take matters into your won hands by, for instance, setting your meeting time a half-hour earlier so that your friend will, in fact, get there on time, even if you have to trick him or her into doing it! Either way, the problem is solved and the friendship isn't damaged.

#### Changing Your Environment

Sometimes it's our immediate surrounding that gives us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the trap you seem to have fallen into, and all the people and things that form that trap.

## Some Tips for Easing Up On Your self:

Timing: if you and your significant other ten 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 roommate'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 they 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 car pool.

## Do You Need Counseling?

lf you feel that your anger is really out of control, if it is having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, you might consider counseling to learn how to handle it better. Our staff members are available to work with you in developing a range of techniques for changing your thinking and you behaviors.

When you talk to a counselor, 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' -- that 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.

#### What About Assertiveness Training?

●It's true that angry people need to learn to become assertive (rather than aggressive), but most books and courses on developing assertiveness are aimed at people who don't feel enough anger. These people are more passive and acquiescent than the average person; they tend to let others walk all over them. That isn't something most angry people do. Still, these books can contain some useful tactics to use in frustrating situations.

Remember, you can't eliminate anger -- and it wouldn't be a good idea if you could. In spite of all your efforts, things will always happen that will cause you 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 responses can keep them from making you even unhappier in the long run.

For confidential individualized assessment applications for personal situations, please feel free to contact us at (918) 631-2200 for an appointment with one of our counselors

**Source:** Derived from "Controlling Anger Before It Controls You." American Psychological Association. <a href="http://helping/apa.org/daily/anger.html">http://helping/apa.org/daily/anger.html</a>.

#### Resources for Further Learning of Anger Management

Izzard, C. (1991). The psychology of emotions. New York: Plenum.

Slaby, R. & Guerra, N. (1988). Cognitive mediators of aggression in adolescent offenders, Developmental Psychology, 24.

Tarvis, C (1989). Anger: The misunderstood emotion. New York: Touchstone.

Tice, D. & Baumeister, R. F. (1989). Controlling anger: Self-induced emotion change. in B. Wegner & J. Pennebaker (Eds.), (1993). Handbook of mental Control. v. 5, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.