

Understanding and Controlling Your Anger



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Everyone gets angry from time to time. Anger isn't "good" or "bad" and you should not feel ashamed or embarrassed about expressing it. The key is to recognize what's beneath the anger and express it in a more appropriate and healthy way. Understanding anger and practicing new responses to conflict and stress can make a big difference in your life.

Why do you feel so angry?

Anger can become a habit that you use automatically to reduce feelings of stress and physical tension. It is a response you may have learned very early in life to help you cope with pain, to overcome feelings of hurt and helplessness, or to get people to pay attention to your needs. Most of us know what causes us to feel angry. Triggers for anger include problems at work or school, time pressures, traffic jams, financial concerns, and relationship conflicts. Angry outbursts or expressions may temporarily make you feel more powerful and in control but usually have long-term negative consequences both physically and emotionally.

What happens when you express anger inappropriately?

Despite the popular belief that suppressing anger is bad for you, "blowing off steam" may be worse. When you get angry, your body launches a "stress response" to prepare for danger. Adrenaline and other

chemicals enter your bloodstream, your heart pumps faster, blood flows more quickly throughout your body, and your muscles get tense. This stress response is good if you are truly in a dangerous situation that may cause you serious harm or death. Fortunately, you rarely experience such situations in your life. Continuous feelings of anger that evoke the body's stress response can increase blood pressure and, in turn, lead to heart disease and other health problems, such as back pain and ulcers.

In addition to increasing health risks, anger can affect your relationships with others costing you a great deal in terms of how you feel about yourself. When you use anger to feel powerful or in control, the people around you will usually feel resentful and may avoid you to escape your angry behavior. This may lead to isolation, depression, and addictive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

What should you do when you first begin to feel angry?

Take a time-out. People become angry when they *think* that they are threatened, when they *think* that harm will come to them, or when they *think* that another person has wronged them in some way. These thoughts are often inaccurate, incomplete, or untrue perceptions. When you start thinking angry thoughts, allow yourself to stop and take a "time-out."



Rethink the situation. Spending a little time alone may help calm you and allow you to rethink the situation. The first step in controlling anger is to recognize what exactly triggers your anger and to also recognize the thoughts and responses that are often associated with those triggers. *Become aware of the warning signs:* negative thoughts and physical responses, followed by aggressive or harmful behavior.

Breathe. Slow, deep breathing is a quick way to cool off and increase feelings of relaxation. Inhale as deeply as possible through your nose, expanding your stomach and chest. Then exhale through your mouth. Continue this breathing exercise for a couple of minutes and try to practice it several times a day. Breathing exercises can be a powerful tool in preventing your anger from escalating and in helping you to achieve a new perspective or outlook.

Other healthy ways to express and control anger

- *Assertive communication.* Express yourself clearly, calmly, and directly without verbally attacking the other person.
- *Listen to the other person.* Allow the other person to state what is wanted and to express his or her feelings and needs.
- *Name the problem.* Explain why you are angry. Don't yell, use insults, or make threats.
- *State your feelings.* State what the impact of the situation is on you. Use "I statements," such as "I feel ..." or "I think ..." or "I want ..." to describe your own reaction rather than blaming another person.
- *Identify solutions.* State what you would like to change or see happen in the future. If you're having a conflict with another person, try to find a solution together.
- *Exercise.* Walking, jogging, swimming, or bicycling can provide a natural outlet for stress and anger. Exercise releases chemicals in the brain (endorphins) that help us relax. Also, exercise usually removes us from a stressful situation, gives us time to think, and helps us feel re-energized physically and emotionally.
- *Be good to yourself.* Get adequate sleep each night and refrain from using drugs or alcohol to solve your problems.
- *Get help if you need it.* Talk with a trusted family member or friend. Consider seeing a counselor or other health care professional.

Other resources

Books

- *When Anger Hurts: Quieting the Storm Within* (1989). Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, Judith McKay
- *Learning the Art of Anger Management on the Job* (1995). Hendrie Weisinger
- *The Anger Control Workbook* (2000). Matthew McKay and Peter Rogers

Web sites

- American Psychological Association: Warning Signs of Violence
helping.apa.org/warningsigns
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
healthfinder.gov

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.