

Understanding Anger



Westlake Boys High School

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Anger is a normal, healthy emotion, neither good nor bad. Like any emotion, it conveys a message, telling you that a situation is upsetting, unjust, or threatening. If your kneejerk reaction to anger is to explode, however, that message never has a chance to be conveyed. So, while it's perfectly normal to feel angry when you've been mistreated or wronged, anger becomes a problem when you express it in a way that harms yourself or others.

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 have a negative impact on the way people see you, impair your judgment, and get in the way of success.

Affects of Anger

- **Physical health.** Constantly operating at high levels of stress and anger makes you more susceptible to heart disease, diabetes, a weakened immune system, insomnia, and high blood pressure.
- **Mental health.** Chronic anger consumes huge amounts of mental energy, and clouds your thinking, making it harder to concentrate or enjoy life. It can also lead to stress, depression, and other mental health problems.
- **Relationships.** Anger can cause lasting scars in the people you love most and get in the way of friendships and work relationships. Explosive anger makes it hard for others to trust you, speak honestly, or feel comfortable—and is especially damaging to children.

Myths 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: Respect 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 communicate your feelings without being verbally or physically abusive. Even if someone is pushing your buttons, you always have a choice about how to respond.

How Anger Management Can Help You

Many people think that anger management is about learning to suppress your anger. But never getting angry is not a healthy goal. Anger will come out regardless of how hard you try to tamp it down. The true goal of anger management isn't to suppress feelings of anger, but rather to understand the message behind the emotion and express it in a healthy way without losing control. When you do, you'll not only feel better, you'll also be more likely to get your needs met, be better able to manage conflict in your life, and strengthen your relationships.

Tip 1: Explore what's really behind your anger

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's likely that your temper is covering up your true feelings. This is especially likely if you grew up in a family where expressing feelings was strongly discouraged.

Anger can also mask anxiety. When you perceive a threat, either real or imagined, your body activates the "fight or flight" response. In the case of the "fight" response, it can often manifest itself as anger or aggression. To change your response, you need to find out what's causing you to feel anxious or scared.

Tip 2: Be aware of your anger warning signs

While you might feel that you just explode into anger without warning, there are in fact physical warning signs in your body. 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 – Breathing faster

Headaches - Pacing or needing to walk around - Seeing red

Having trouble concentrating - Pounding heart - Tensing your shoulders

Tip 3: Identify your triggers

Stressful events don't excuse anger but understanding how these events affect you can help you take control of your environment and avoid unnecessary aggravation. Look at your regular routine and try to identify activities, times of day, people, places, or situations that trigger irritable or angry feelings.

Negative thought patterns that can trigger anger and may include:

- **Overgeneralizing.** For example, “You ALWAYS interrupt me. You NEVER consider my needs. EVERYONE disrespects me. I NEVER get the credit I deserve.”
- **Obsessing over “shoulds” and “musts.”** Having a rigid view of the way a situation should or must go 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 they intentionally upset you, ignored your wishes, or disrespected you.
- **Blaming.** When anything bad happens or something goes wrong, it's always someone else's fault. You tell yourself, “life's not fair,” or blame others for your problems rather than taking responsibility for your own life.

Reframing: What is Fact and What is Fiction?

When you identify the thought patterns that fuel your anger, you can learn to reframe how you think about things. Ask yourself: What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true? Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at a situation? What would I say to a friend who was thinking these things?

Tip 4: Learn ways to cool down quickly

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.

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.

Get moving: A brisk walk around the block is a great idea. Physical activity releases pent-up energy so you can approach the situation with a cooler head.

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 and 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?

Tip 5: Find healthier ways to express your anger

Focus on the present. Once you are in the heat of arguing, it's easy to start throwing past grievances into the mix. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the present to solve the problem.

Be willing to forgive. Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.

Take five if things get too heated. If your anger starts to spiral out of control, remove yourself from the situation for a few minutes or for as long as it takes you to cool down.

Know when to let something go. If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

Tip 6: Stay calm by taking care of yourself

Taking care of your overall mental and physical wellbeing can help ease tension and diffuse anger problems.

Manage stress. If your stress levels are through the roof, you're more likely to struggle controlling your temper. Try practicing relaxation techniques such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing. You'll feel calmer and more in control of your emotions. (YouTube: Head space)

Talk to someone you trust. Nothing eases stress more effectively than chatting face-to-face with a friend or loved one. The person doesn't have to provide answers, they just need to be a good listener. But talking about your feelings and seeking a different perspective on a situation is not the same as venting. Simply venting your anger at someone will only fuel your temper and reinforce your anger problem.

Get enough sleep. A lack of sleep can exacerbate negative thoughts and leave you feeling agitated and short-tempered. Try to get seven to nine hours of good quality sleep.

Exercise regularly. It's an effective way to burn-off tension and ease stress, and it can leave you feeling more relaxed and positive throughout the day. Aim for at least 30 minutes on most days, broken up into shorter periods if that's easier.

Tip 7: Get Some Support

I can speak to:

- My Family
- My Friends
- My Doctor
- My Dean
- My School Counsellor
- Youthline 0800 376 633 or text 234