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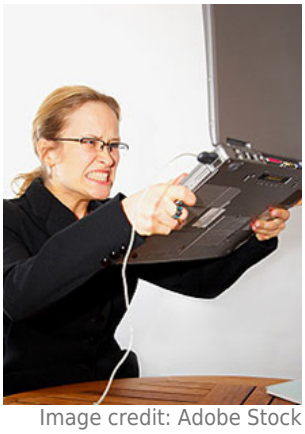
IWK Health Centre

Anger



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Summary: Anger is a normal emotion that we get when we feel wronged or when something gets in the way of our goals. Having just enough anger is helpful because it is a signal that something is wrong. Having too much anger however, can cause problems with your health and relationships.

Does any of this sound like you?

- Traffic is terrible today! It's making me very IRRITATED.
- My tax return is so complicated. It's making me very FRUSTRATED.
- I can't believe my mother would say something like that
- I'm really ANNOYED that my neighbour's garbage keeps getting strewn all over the alley!
- That driver just cut me off. I'm really IRATE about it!
- I'm so ANGRY!

Read on to find out if you have a problem with managing your anger and what to do about it.

Anger and Positive Change

ANGER is an emotion that tells us someone or something has interfered with our goals, gone against us or wronged us in some way. Anger can make us feel like defending ourselves, attacking or getting revenge. Kids and adults of all ages experience anger from time to time. How we experience and express our anger can be influenced by gender, culture, religious beliefs and other ways in which we vary from one another.

Anger can lead to positive change if we express it in a useful and constructive way.

For example, people who feel angry about social injustice often achieve positive results by speaking out to bring about changes to the system.

On the down side, too much anger is bad for us.

Anger can lead to problems in family life, relationships, work and health. Poorly managed anger is associated with

aggression towards other people, road rage, child and spousal abuse, and other violent crimes. People with poorly managed anger are more likely to get ill and are less able to fight off illness or disease. Anger problems have also been associated with higher levels of perceived pain and problems associated with heart disease.

People who experience more frequent and more intense anger often try to avoid expressing their anger or express their anger in unhelpful ways (e.g., yelling, making hurtful comments, etc.). When we experience anger problems, we tend to cope less well with stress, have lower self-esteem, are more likely to misuse drugs or alcohol, and judge other people unfairly. For example, we may blame others for bad events without knowing all the facts or assume other people have wronged us on purpose. Anger can also have significant effects on our body systems leading to muscle tension, increased heart rate, and other uncomfortable or unhealthy body responses. Clearly, too much anger is not good for us.

The goal of learning to manage anger is to minimize the negative consequences of this powerful emotion and maximize the positive ones.

Anger management is about:

- Problem-solving
- Not being a slave to your emotions
- Learning how not to get angry very often or for very long

What causes anger?

Anger-provoking situations

There are four main types of situations that tend to provoke anger: frustrations, irritations, abuse and unfairness. Some situations fall into more than one category.

1. Frustrations: Anger is a common reaction when we are trying to achieve something important and something gets in the way of success. For example, you apply for a new job you really want but do not get a job offer.
2. Irritations: Daily hassles are annoying and can trigger anger. For example, while trying to work, you keep getting interrupted or you leave something at home and have to go all the way back to get it.
3. Abuse: Anger is a normal and expected reaction to verbal, physical or sexual abuse. For example, someone putting you down, hitting you or forcing you to do something you do not want to do.
4. Unfairness: Being treated unfairly can also trigger anger. For example, being blamed for failing to meet a deadline at work when it was actually the fault of your co-worker.

How do I know if my anger is a problem?

Anger becomes a problem if it is:

1. Too frequent: Sometimes anger is appropriate and useful in pushing us to solve problems. However, if you are coping with lots of anger on a daily basis, it may be reducing the quality of your life, your relationships and your health. Even if your anger is justified, you will feel better if you pick only your most important battles and let go of the rest.
2. Too intense: Very intense anger is rarely a good thing. Anger triggers an adrenalin response and all kinds of physiological reactions (e.g., heart pumps faster, breathing increases, etc.). When we become very angry, we are also much more likely to act on impulse and do or say something we later regret.
3. Lasts too long: When angry feelings last for a long time, they are hard on your mood and on your body. When you stay angry, the littlest thing can really set you off.
4. Leads to aggression: We are more likely to become aggressive when our anger is very intense. Lashing out at others either verbally or physically is an ineffective way to deal with conflict. When anger leads to aggression, no one benefits.
5. Disrupts work or relationships: Intense and frequent anger can lead to problems in your relationships with co-workers, family members and friends. At its worst, anger can lead to the loss of employment and damage or destroy important relationships.

Sometimes anger can lead to serious problems in our life.

When to Get Help

Please consider getting help if anger is damaging your life in any of the following ways:

- Anger interferes with family life, job performance or school performance
- Anger leads you to lose control of your actions or what you say
- Anger prevents you and your loved ones from enjoying life
- Anger leads you to act in a threatening or violent manner towards yourself, other people, animals or property

Ask your physician or trained health professional about anger management courses and other helpful resources in your community.

What can I do about my anger?

Anger is a sign that you need to take constructive action. Anger is a source of energy to get things done and to solve problems.

Emotions

- Relaxation: Learn to relax. You cannot be relaxed and angry at the same time. If you think of anger as reaching the boiling point, turning down the temperature is a good way of keeping yourself from boiling over. This way, when you are provoked, you have a much greater distance to travel before you get extremely mad.
- Humour: You also can't be angry when you are laughing. It is easy to take life's annoyances too seriously. Making an effort to see the humour in our frustrations and aggravations can help to combat a knee-jerk angry reaction.

Thinking patterns

- Empathy: Anger can be caused by thinking that the other person's behaviour was intended to hurt us in some way. Often, other people's behaviour has nothing to do with us personally and instead reflects how they are coping with things in their own lives. To make empathy work for you, you need to routinely ask yourself: "what does this situation feel like for the other person?Manage Your Thoughts: A good way to lower anger is to manage hostile thoughts about the situation. Take the following steps:
- Examine the evidence: What actual evidence do you have to support your view of the situation?
- Look for alternatives: What are some alternative ways of viewing the situation or conflict? Can you think of some other explanations for why this has happened? What evidence do you have for the alternative explanations?

Behaviours

- Problem-Solving: Anger management is strategic and calculated confrontation aimed a solving a problem. The trick to managing anger well is to have a problem-solving goal. This means making sure that your response to your angry feelings is directed at solving the problem. Don't take your feelings out on everyone around you. Instead, use them in a directed way to solve the problem. [See our problem-solving module]
- Being Assertive Without Being Aggressive: How we communicate depends on our goals. Your goals (even when angry) may include improving a valued relationship, maintaining your self-respect, solving a problem, reiterating a request, communicating your feelings, showing understanding, and more. Assertive communication is a skill that can be learned by anyone. Being assertive does not mean behaving aggressively to get your own way. Genuine self-assertion is about respecting yourself, respecting others, and learning how to communicate your feelings honestly and with care. See our list of select sources for some books you may wish to look at to learn more about this very powerful form of communication.

Negative Reactions to Anger: The 3 Don'ts!

How we behave once we have experienced an anger-provoking situation can have a big impact on how much anger we experience and how long the feeling lasts.

Try to avoid doing the following...

- Bottling it up. One way to deal with anger is to avoid saying anything and walking away mad. This way of coping with anger is usually ineffective as a) the problem doesn't go away, b) when you think about what happened, you get angrier, c) over time, your anger turns into resentment, and d) because you haven't tried to solve the problem, you may feel discouraged and worse about yourself.
- Getting defensive. If you react too quickly to feeling angry, you are more likely to express unhelpful hostility towards others. When you come across as bitter or antagonistic, it is more likely the other person will act hostile in return.
- Lashing out. Physical or verbal aggression is rarely the best response to an anger-provoking situation. Aggressive acts are usually impulsive acts that are later regretted. Aggression leads to negative consequences for everyone involved and doesn't solve anything in the long run.

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Acknowledgements

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