

MANAGING ANGER

Introduction

Just because you get angry does not necessarily mean you have a problem. Most people have been angry at times in their lives. It is after all part of the natural response that helps us to protect ourselves and others. Here are some examples of when anger is helpful and **healthy**:

- It gives us the courage to defend ourselves or those we love.
- It motivates us to improve the world by inspiring social action and justice.
- It confirms our individuality, especially when we are children.
- It warns others not to take advantage of us.

The person who is not able to admit any anger risks depression, low self-esteem and victimisation!

However, frequent or excessive anger is not useful; in fact it is likely to have a negative effect on your health, to spoil your relationship with others and to limit your life experiences and ability to achieve happiness. If you are concerned about this, see if you have any of the following symptoms of excessive unhealthy anger:

- A pattern of repeating the same anger words or deeds in particular situations
- An inclination to shout at people or to use violent words
- A tendency to brood or fantasise about angry scenes with people
- Inability to deal with difficult situations without becoming angry
- A temptation towards or actual recourse to violence, possibly resulting in trouble with the law
- A reliance on getting angry to make you feel better
- Substituting getting angry about a problem for solving or learning to live with that problem
- Anger-linked health problems, such as hypertension or digestive trouble
- Being recognised as an angry person and so teased, appeased or feared by others
- Having a strong prejudice against strangers because of their race, gender, sexuality etc
- Avoiding situations because you fear your temper

Explaining Anger

There is no simple explanation why some people are angrier than others; some of it might depend on our character or our early experiences. However the following contributory factors definitely act to maintain the situation:

- *Habit* – anger can become an automatic response to certain situations – and this habit can be reinforced by others if they have become used to us getting angry
- *Fear* – anger can be felt as a response to situations that we fear will overwhelm us if we do not go on the offensive
- *Shame* - anger can spring from feeling that we have to fight to preserve our dignity and sense of self-worth
- *Loss* – anger commonly accompanies the sadness which goes with a bereavement or severe setback
- *Lack of assertiveness* – if you cannot speak up for yourself and get some of your own way by negotiation you may find yourself exploding instead
- *Low frustration tolerance* – when you go on the attack to deal with situations that most people would just put up with
- *Response to past trauma* – if you have been badly hurt in the past you may, understandably, be reacting over-aggressively towards anything that seems threatening in the present
- *As a symptom of psychological or physical conditions* – conditions that involve constant pain, changed hormone level or mental disturbance may trigger anger.

What Can I Do About Managing My Anger?

There are three steps to anger management:

1. Understand the payoffs and triggers
2. Learn to calm yourself down in crisis situations.
3. Learn strategies to prevent anger rising in the future.

1. Understanding the pay-offs and triggers

Undoubtedly you will get some short-term benefits from your anger. Most of these can be gained more effectively by other means such as assertiveness. However, in the short term, you may have to experience discomfort as you lose some of the immediate gains of anger such as-

- I feel so much better afterwards
- It makes people listen.
- I feel more like myself when I'm angry.
- If I didn't get angry about things I'd just cry all the time.
- When I show my anger then people know where they stand and that's good.
- Anger stops me being afraid.
- If I don't show my anger then people will think I am a wimp.

Probably even as you read this you will begin to see that some of these things can be achieved by other more healthy means.

Now decide what particular situations trigger your anger so that you can practise staying calm when they next arise.

2. Calming yourself down in a crisis situation

The appropriate response depends on the situation e.g. whether you get angry when alone or when in dispute with another.

- **Substitute activities**

Describe the room to yourself around you in purely neutral terms.

Look at things, not people.

Think of things you have to do today.

Count to 10 (it does work!).

- **Avoidance**

Repeat what the other person has said and ask for time to consider.

Leave if you think you might otherwise lose your temper or be violent.

- **Change brain rhythms**

Play music to yourself and listen closely, if you don't have access to music, listen to it inside your head.

Take exercise of some type.

- **Relaxation**

Alter your breathing: take deep slow breaths right down to your belly, and as you breathe out, relax your face, hands, arms, shoulders and stomach muscles. Pause before taking the each breath.

Change posture, let your arms rest by your sides, and roll your shoulders. If appropriate, sprawl in a chair or even lie down.

- **Imagery**

Imagine a relaxing scene

Imagine laughing at yourself and the situation later.

Imagine neutral scenes, especially ones with people in them, like a park on a sunny day.

3. Learning Strategies to prevent anger arising in the future

Decide whether your anger is healthy or unhealthy (see above). If unhealthy:

- Avoid stimulants such as alcohol or other drugs if you are working on a long term solution
- Read about the subject
- Ask others who get less angry than you how they do it and try their ideas
- Develop a generally more relaxed lifestyle and try to manage stress better
- Challenge your angry thoughts
- Beware of disguised anger such as in sarcasm or cruel jokes
- Learn to assert yourself, maybe even go on an Assertiveness Skills course
- Consider the past origins of your anger
- Share your concern with a counsellor
- Seek out specific therapy for anger with referral to a clinical psychologist or psychotherapist who targets this problem.

Books

Managing Anger: Simple Steps to Dealing with Frustration and Threat Gael Lindenfield. HarperCollins Publishing

Overcoming Anger and Irritability: A Self-Help Guide William Davies. Constable and Robinson

The Anger Habit Workbook: Practical Steps for Anger Management Carl Semmelroth. Writer's Club Press

Assert Yourself: Simple Steps to Getting What You Want Gael Lindenfield. HarperCollins Publishing

Resolving Conflicts: How to Turn Conflict into Co-operation Wendy Grant. Element Books Ltd

Support/ Websites

SupportLine National Helpline for all emotional issues : Tel: 01708 765 200
www.SupportLine.org.uk