

Anger Management

What is anger?

Anger is a strong feeling of displeasure or hostility. Although anger is a basic human emotion, feeling angry can be a problem for many people. This is because many people believe:

- nice people shouldn't be angry
- becoming angry means losing control
- if others are angry at me, I must have hurt them in some way and am therefore responsible
- anger means the end of a relationship or the end of loving or being loved
- anger is sinful.

Some people have trouble controlling their behavior when they are angry and may do things that are hurtful or destructive. Others feel so guilty about their anger that they keep it inside and may even be unaware of feeling angry.

Pain, fatigue, poor sleep, emotional stress, alcohol or drug use, and mood disorders (like depression and bipolar disorder) all can lower your threshold for angry feelings and behavior. Whether you yell and hit or fume silently, long-term anger may be linked to both health problems and unhealthy relationships.

What physical changes occur when I get angry?

During an angry episode, your blood pressure and heart rate rise. After the "fight or flight" hormones released by anger are activated, some people do not return to normal right away, but stay in a state of alert hostility for awhile.

What kinds of difficulties do people with anger problems face?

People who express too much anger often end up feeling alone and distant from others because their sullen, hostile, or sarcastic behavior can make people turn away from them. A vicious circle is then set up: they feel angry because of the way others are reacting to their anger.

People who feel it is wrong to ever be angry often can be out of touch with other feelings and may be unable to feel joy or love. They may fear they would not be loved if others knew how much anger was inside them, so they continue to conceal it. Then, because anger can almost never be completely hidden, they may act it out by doing things like being late or not keeping promises.

How do problems with anger develop?

People who grew up in healthy families may quickly blow off steam and get over angry feelings. They resolve the conflict and move on.

But when there are serious problems within a family, everyone in the family may feel angry much of the time. The anger becomes a big problem and guilt about it adds to the problem. These people may experience frequent outbursts of anger and feel that their angry impulses are not under their control. Or they may have a "false self" set of behaviors as adults in which they are always "nice" and expect the same of others. In other words, people with a lot of anger inside may be either out of control or too controlled.

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This means that for some people, the goal is to learn how to control their expressions of anger and to express anger less often. For others, the goal is to learn how to express anger more often. Both types of people should aim toward expressing anger verbally (rather than through actions) and in a controlled way.

How can I tell if I am an angry person?

In order to assess your level of anger, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I easily lose patience with people?
- Do I often feel that life is unfair to me?
- Do I say threatening or nasty things when I am angry?
- Do I get angry enough to hit, throw, or kick things?
- When I really lose my temper, am I capable of slapping or hitting someone?

What can I do when I get angry?

Talking with a sympathetic friend, spouse, health care provider, or therapist about life stresses can help to defuse anger.

Learn relaxation techniques. Slowing down your breathing, relaxing all the body muscles one group at a time, and visualizing a comforting or pleasant scene are the three basics of relaxation.

Self-statements can also be helpful. These statements can replace old ways of thinking. Some helpful self-statements are:

- I am disappointed, but I can handle this without blowing up.
- This will pass, and I can take a few deep breaths while it does.
- I can relax my body, and not be upset.
- I am getting better at handling my anger as I get more practice.
- I don't need to prove myself here.
- Maybe this person is having a bad day.
- I do not have to let this bother me.

Time-outs can also be useful. When you feel yourself getting tense or frustrated, say to the other person, "I'm beginning to feel angry and I need a time-out." Time-outs work best in this way:

- Designate a specific amount of time (15 minutes to 1 hour).
- Leave the situation (for instance, walk into another room).
- Calm yourself mentally with deep breathing and self-statements.
- Do some nonaggressive physical exercise such as walking, jogging, or bicycling.
- Return to the situation, only continuing the discussion if the anger does not return. If the anger returns, take another time-out. Do not use drinking or drugs as a way to cope during the time-out.

What is a healthy way to feel and deal with anger?

Feeling healthy anger involves five steps:

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- Feel it without judging it. Admit to yourself that you are angry and note where in your body you are feeling it (such as a pounding heart or sweaty palms).
- Question it. Ask yourself about its true cause (like hurt feelings or fear).
- Express it, using "I" statements and words rather than by using blaming "you" statements.
- Learn to use it to make positive changes in your life (for example, by changing jobs).
- Let it go. Concentrate on releasing the anger and feeling calm again.

How does anger management help?

Using anger management tools can enhance your self-esteem. Situations that had been out of control can now be handled confidently. Assertiveness can replace aggressiveness or passive silence when dealing with others. You may find it helpful to share this information on anger with your partner or family members, so that they have the same understanding of anger that you do. If anger is part of a psychological disorder, you should seek help from your health care provider.

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