

Anger Management

What is anger?

Anger is a normal human emotion that, despite what most people think, can bring about good as well as bad results. Although anger can arouse some pretty strong emotions, it also can energize you to solve problems. And while it can be destructive, you can learn to channel anger in a positive manner.

Constructive Consequences

Anger provides people with the energy to solve problems and resolve differences. If people learn to recognize lower levels of anger, such as frustration, annoyance, and irritation, these emotions can be used as tools to help people act assertively, by communicating feelings calmly and effectively. A constructive and assertive response to anger may enhance interpersonal communication, build healthier and more satisfying relationships, increase self-esteem and decrease feelings of helplessness.

Destructive Consequences

Of course, anger can also lead to impulsive action, aggressive outbursts, inaction or passive aggression (the indirect expression of anger). These destructive forms of anger can generate everything from hurtful comments to health problems and outbursts of violence.

It can also be difficult to think clearly when angry. People communicate less effectively, sometimes taking actions that send the wrong signals and strain relationships. Worst of all, once an individual acts aggressively, others may be roused to hostility, increasing the likelihood of negative and unproductive confrontations.

At times, anger is met with a passive response, which results in another sort of communicative barrier. Someone who responds to anger passively may well experience frustration, bitterness, resentment, lowered self-esteem and even helplessness. Any one of these feelings, or a combination of them, may build silently, surfacing later, in an unexpected or even destructive manner.

Just as anger sometimes provokes an indirect response, it sometimes develops as an indirect result of other problems. For example, anger may spring from tensions associated with the abuse of or withdrawal from controlled substances. Feelings of depression, anxiety, and grief are sometimes associated with problematic anger as well.

The rise of anger can be accompanied by physical changes:

- Heart rate and blood pressure may increase.
- Energy level may increase.
- Levels of hormones and adrenaline may rise.

As a result, unexpressed anger may be associated with high blood pressure, heart problems, and depression.

Anger management techniques are aimed at reducing the intensity of the feelings and physiological responses that anger causes. You can't avoid or change everyone and everything that may anger you. However, you can learn to control your reactions and express them assertively and constructively. You can also control your own thoughts and how you perceive events.

Sometimes anger can overwhelm people before they even realize it. Learn to recognize the physical sensations and behaviors that precede anger, such as the following:

- Muscle tension
- Nausea
- Clenched fists
- Shallow, rapid breathing

- Increased heart rate
- Sweating or flushing
- Knots in the stomach
- Chest pain
- Grinding of teeth
- Trembling
- Dry mouth
- Headache

Pay attention to how you feel the next time you realize you're getting angry. You'll soon learn which physical symptoms you characteristically experience when your anger begins to build. These early warning signs will give you a few moments to react before your anger gets too hot to handle. With those few seconds and a simple technique or two, you can begin to reverse the physiological processes that anger calls up as it prepares your body for battle. Try one of the following tactics:

- Sit down and breathe slowly, until you feel as though you can speak calmly.
- Try to tense up a part of your body, such as your fingers or your toes, and then slowly release your muscles. Do this tension and relaxation exercise a few times; it'll give you a chance to calm down a bit, and maybe even ease some of the tension your anger has generated. Think peaceful thoughts.
- Express a request for something—and not as a complaint or an insult. You could say, for example, "That was upsetting. I think I'd like a glass of water."
- Take a walk.
- Move away from the source of your anger; toss a salad or take out the trash.
- Talk yourself out of your anger. Say to yourself, "It's not worth it," or "He's acting like an idiot and I'll be acting like an even bigger one if I pursue this."
- Count to 100. If that doesn't work, count to 200.

Now that you've given yourself the space to modify your anger, start trying to channel it into a positive tool for change.

- Speak calmly and quietly.
- Say what's on your mind now without dredging up old grievances.
- Provide specific examples such as "I feel frustrated when I can't get my work done because the TV is too loud."
- Start your sentences with "I feel," not "You always" or "I never." "I feel neglected because we hardly ever go out anymore" invites a reasonable response; "You always want to stay home" sounds like an accusation.
- Ask to be heard. In exchange, be sure you listen to what the other person has to say.
- If you really can't stand it anymore, don't storm out—ask for a breather. But be sure to plan a time to discuss the issue before you leave.

Above all, be patient. It takes a while to make this work for you—you have to practice! So start small, and build your way up to dealing with larger issues.

Workplace Benefits. (Updated 2009, August 4). *Anger Management*. Raleigh, NC: Author