

# Managing Your Anger

Anger is a normal human emotion and when it is managed properly it is not a problem. Everyone gets angry, and mild anger can sometimes be useful to express strong feelings and deal with situations. However, if anger is expressed in harmful ways, or persists over a long period of time, then it can lead to problems in relationships at home and at work, and can affect the overall quality of your life.

This Tip Sheet can help you understand anger and learn better ways to handle and express it.

Anger may be related to other problems such as an injury to the brain, or drug or alcohol use. It is important to get professional help for these problems.

## What is anger?

Anger is an emotion that can range from mild annoyance to intense rage. It is a feeling that is accompanied by biological changes in your body. When you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure rise and stress hormones are released. This can cause you to shake, become hot and sweaty and feel out of control.

When people have angry feelings, they often behave in angry ways too. Angry behaviours include yelling, throwing things, criticising, ignoring, storming out and sometimes withdrawing and doing nothing.

Anger can often lead to violence if not properly controlled and some people use anger as an excuse for being abusive towards others. Violence and abusive behaviour give someone power and control over another person usually through creating fear.

## Why do we get angry?

Anger is often associated with frustration - things don't always happen the way we want and people don't always behave the way we think they should. Anger is usually linked with other negative emotions or is a response to them. You may be feeling hurt, frightened, disappointed, worried, embarrassed or frustrated, but may express these sorts of feelings as anger. Anger can also result from misunderstandings or poor communication between people.

Men and women often, but not always, manage and express anger in different ways. With men, anger may be the primary emotion, as many men believe that anger is the more legitimate

emotion to express in a situation. Often men find it harder to express the feelings underneath the anger, like hurt, sadness or grief. For women the reverse may often be true - the anger gets buried under tears.

When is anger a problem?

Anger becomes a problem when it creates trouble for you with other people, your work, your health, day-to-day living or the law. Anger is also a problem when people around you are frightened, hurt or feel they cannot talk to you or disagree with you in case you become angry.

Some signs that anger is a problem include the following situations.

- Anger involves verbal, emotional, physical or psychological abuse.
- You feel angry a lot of the time.
- People close to you are worried about your anger.
- Anger is leading to problems with personal relationships and work.
- You think you have to get angry to get what you want.
- Anger seems to get bigger than the event that set it off.
- Anger lasts for a long time, and well after the triggering event has passed.
- Anger affects other situations not related to the original event.
- You are becoming anxious or depressed about your anger.
- You are using alcohol or other drugs to try to manage your anger.
- You are getting angry with the people who are closest to you, or with people who are less powerful than you, rather than dealing with the situation that sparked off your anger in the first place.

Why manage anger?

Anger is not usually a good solution to problems, even if it seems helpful in the short term. Unmanaged anger creates problems - sometimes for you and often for others around you. People with poor anger management are more likely to have problems with personal relationships, work, verbal and physical fights, and damaged property. They can also experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, psychosomatic illnesses and problems with alcohol or drugs. It is important to manage anger before it leads to other serious problems.

Some people used to believe that venting anger was beneficial. Researchers have now found that 'letting it rip' actually escalates anger and aggression and does nothing to resolve the situation. On the other hand, sitting on your anger and not expressing it may lead to the pressure cooker experience that many people are familiar with. Expressing some feelings of anger in a controlled way, rather than bottling it up, gives you an opportunity to release some of your underlying feelings, so that you can start to tackle the issues that are making you angry.

What is anger management?

Anger management is about understanding your anger and why it happens. It is about learning and practicing better ways of expressing anger, and sometimes knowing how to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Specifically, anger management is about knowing the triggers and early warning signs of anger, and learning techniques to calm down and manage the situation before it gets out of control.

Tips to help manage anger

### **Identify triggers and warning signs of anger**

The first step in being able to manage your anger is to recognise the situations that make you angry and your body's warning signs of anger.

### **List things that can trigger your anger**

Make a list of the things that often set off your anger (for example, running late for an appointment and not being able to find a car park, your teenager leaving dirty dishes in the sink or a co-worker blaming you for something you didn't do). If you know ahead of time what makes you angry, you may be able to avoid these things or do something different when they happen.

### **Notice the warning signs of anger in your body**

Notice the things that happen to your body that tell you when you are getting angry (for example, a pounding heart, flushed face, sweating, tense jaw, tightness in your chest or gritting your teeth). The earlier you can recognise these warning signs of anger, the more successful you will probably be at calming yourself down before your anger gets out of control.

### **Learn strategies for managing anger**

There are a number of different ways of managing anger and some strategies will suit you better than others.

### **Control your thinking**

When you're angry, your thinking can get exaggerated and irrational. Try replacing these kinds of thoughts with more useful, rational ones and you should find that this has an effect on the way you feel. For example, instead of telling yourself 'I can't stand it, it's awful and everything's ruined', tell yourself 'It's frustrating, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the

end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it'. Psychologists call this type of thinking 'self talk'.

Develop a list of things to say to yourself before, during and after situations in which you may get angry. It is more helpful if these things focus on how you are managing the situation rather than what other people should be doing.

**Before:**

- 'I'll be able to handle this. It could be rough, but I have a plan.'
- 'If I feel myself getting angry, I'll know what to do.'

**During:**

- 'Stay calm, relax, and breathe easy.'
- 'Stay calm, I'm okay, she/he's not attacking me personally.'
- 'I can look and act calm.'

**After:**

- 'I managed that well. I can do this. I'm getting better at this.'
- 'I felt angry, but I didn't lose my cool.'

**Take time out**

If you feel your anger getting out of control, take time out from a situation or an argument. Try stepping outside the room, or going for a walk. Before you go, remember to make a time to talk about the situation later when everyone involved has calmed down. During time out, plan how you are going to stay calm when your conversation resumes.

**Use distraction**

A familiar strategy for managing anger is to distract your mind from the situation that is making you angry. Try counting to ten, playing soothing music, talking to a good friend, or focusing on a simple task like polishing the car or folding laundry.

**Use relaxation**

Relaxation strategies can reduce the feelings of tension and stress in your body. Practice strategies such as taking long deep breaths and focusing on your breathing, or progressively working around your body and relaxing your muscles as you go.

**Learn assertiveness skills**

Assertiveness skills can be learnt through self-help books or by attending courses. These skills ensure that anger is channelled and expressed in clear and respectful ways. Being assertive means being clear with others about what your needs and wants are, feeling okay about asking

for them, but respecting the other person's needs and concerns as well and being prepared to negotiate. Avoid using words like 'never' or 'always' (for example, 'You're always late!'), as these statements are usually inaccurate, make you feel as though your anger is justified, and don't leave much possibility for the problem to be solved.

### **Try to acknowledge what is making you angry**

Acknowledge that a particular issue has made you angry by admitting it to yourself and others. Telling someone that you felt angry when they did or said something is more helpful than just acting out the anger.

Make sure you think about whom you express your anger to, and take care that you aren't just dumping your anger on the people closest to you, or on people who are less powerful than you. For example, don't yell at your partner, children, or dog when you are really angry with your boss.

Sometimes it can help to write things down. What is happening in your life? How do you feel about the things that are happening? Writing about these topics can sometimes help give you some distance and perspective and help you understand your feelings. Work out some options for changing your situation.

### **Rehearsing anger management skills**

Use your imagination to practice your anger management strategies. Imagine yourself in a situation that usually sets off your anger. Imagine how you could behave in that situation without getting angry. Think about a situation where you did get angry. Replay the situation in your mind and imagine resolving the situation without anger.

Try rehearsing some anger management strategies with a friend. Ask them to help you act out a situation where you get angry, so that you can practice other ways to think and behave. Practice saying things in an assertive way.