

Managing Anger

WHAT IS ANGER?

Anger is a natural human emotion with an important purpose. Its usefulness is in its ability to empower people to respond to threats and injustice. Anger helps people recognize situations in which rules are being broken, behavior is inappropriate or a deliberate attack is occurring. In essence, anger is nature's way of signalling potential harm.

Anger in and of itself is not a problem. Everyone becomes angry. How anger is managed, however, can be problematic.


Outward signs of anger can include a raised voice, scowling, clenched jaw and/or fists, glaring, twitching, and flushing. The physiological changes that accompany anger include increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure and muscle tension. Chronic anger has been shown to contribute to a variety of medical difficulties, including digestive and coronary problems (McKay, Rogers and McKay, 1989).

WHAT CAUSES ANGER PROBLEMS?

Difficulties managing anger may stem from a history of numerous adverse life events (e.g., poverty, illness, loss), being violated (e.g. physically abused) or repeatedly observing anger being managed in inappropriate ways. For some people, unresolved feelings, such as anxiety, grief or worthlessness, are expressed as anger. Further, cultural standards for appropriate masculine and feminine behavior can contribute to anger problems. Society often creates role expectations for men regarding power and control (e.g. men must be physically and intellectually strong). Gender role socialization for women includes messages about being "nice", avoiding conflict and working to please others. These cultural standards can be a factor in mismanaged anger for some men (feeding aggressiveness) and women (promoting the denial and internalization of anger).

HOW DO I BETTER MANAGE ANGER?

- Work to view anger as a legitimate emotion and a natural part of life and relationships. It provides you with important information. Denying anger means denying an aspect of who you are.
- Ask yourself where your anger is coming from. Is it a legitimate response to a transgression, or is it a way to distance yourself, cover feelings of hurt, or a way to act powerful when you feel powerless?
- Decide to be in charge of you. Stay focused on choosing angry responses with care.



Recognizing and addressing an anger problem is an important step in maintaining your health, enjoying satisfying relationships and promoting healthy self esteem. Well managed anger results in feelings of competency and maturity.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE AN ANGER PROBLEM?

The following may be signs of poorly managed anger:

- Violent behaviour (e.g., hitting, pushing, slapping, throwing/breaking objects); threats of violence
- Yelling; put-downs; ridiculing; frequent sarcasm; using anger to gain power and control
- Sudden explosions of anger; “raging”
- Intense and frequent feelings of resentment
- Seeking opportunities to “rebel”; looking for reasons to get angry
- Obsessing about having been mistreated
- Focusing on revenge or hate
- Over-reacting to minor transgressions
- Enjoying a “rush” when intensely angry
- Feeling out-of-control, childish or guilty for “exploding”
- Others express concern or fear in response to your anger
- Avoiding the expression of any anger; feeling guilty about, or afraid of, expressing anger
- Isolation; lost relationships, jobs or opportunities because of mismanaged anger
- Passive aggressiveness (covertly expressing anger. For example, being chronically late).

- Anger signals a problem. The goal is to address the problem, not simply hide or express the anger. Work to see anger as a temporary emotional state that can be relinquished once an issue is addressed.
- Pay attention to how your thinking contributes to your anger. For example, blaming and catastrophizing will likely increase feelings of anger. Believing you are incapable of managing conflict contributes to suppressed anger and lingering resentment.
- Learn to recognize your triggers. Do you over-react in situations that leave you feeling incompetent? Are you more likely to explode when stressed and over-tired? Do you swallow your anger when someone communicates in an aggressive manner?
- Learn to recognize the signs that your anger is building (e.g., pacing, shortness of breath, dwelling on how you have been wronged).
- As soon as you feel yourself becoming overly tense, begin to breathe deeply. Exercising, listening to relaxing music, allowing yourself to cry or simply resting can help you to feel calmer.
- Before responding to a situation, assess whether you feel able to address the problem in a calm and respectful manner. Also, approach the other person when s/he is calm and has time to talk.
- Develop a repertoire of healthy anger responses. This typically involves enhancing your communication, assertiveness, problem-solving and/or relaxation skills. During times of conflict, it is often helpful to sit down, breathe deeply, speak calmly, and avoid swearing or using sarcasm. Listen. Focus on what you can do versus how you believe you have been wronged.
- Practise relaxation (e.g., yoga). Learn to recognize how different your body feels when it is relaxed.
- Seek professional assistance if your anger scares others, interferes with your relationships, or results in emotionally abusive (e.g., name-calling, threats) or physically abusive (e.g., throwing objects, punching, hitting, grabbing) behavior.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

If you think that you may be experiencing problems with anger, and require professional assistance, call **Student Counselling Services at 966-4920**.

Potter-Effron, R. & Potter-Effron, P. (1995). *Letting Go of Anger: The ten most common anger styles and what to do about them*. Oakland: New Harbinger.

McKay, M., Rogers, P. & McKay, J. (1989). *When Anger Hurts: Quieting the storm within*. Oakland: New Harbinger.