

Strategies for Managing Anger

What is Anger?

Anger is a natural human emotion and feeling angry does not necessarily mean you have a problem. Most people do get angry occasionally, after all, it is part of a range of natural responses that help us to survive and protect ourselves and others. Anger is helpful and appropriate when it gives us the courage to defend ourselves and those we love or appropriately warns others not to take advantage of us. It may also motivate and inspire us to fight injustice and take social action.

A person who does not admit to any feelings of anger risks feeling depressed or a lack of self-worth and may find themselves pushed around or victimised. However, frequent or excessive anger is not useful either, in fact it is likely to have a negative effect on health (high stress, raised blood pressure), spoil relationships with others due to aggressive and destructive behaviour patterns and limit satisfaction and enjoyment of life.

For some, there is a pay off for getting angry, it may be to do with feeling powerful, or the opposite, a way of pretending that we are not afraid, but whatever the short-term gains, frequent angry outbursts usually make things worse rather than better.

How to handle anger

If you are trying to deal with your anger in a more responsible way then the following check list may help you bring about some changes.

- Get to know your warning signals. There may be obvious signs such as a rapid heart rate, tension and the urge to act impulsively. It may be that more passive symptoms arise, defensiveness, withdrawal, silence.
- If you feel yourself getting angry, breath, pause and think! It **is** possible to feel angry and not to **act** on those feelings.
- Develop good **communication skills** - this is one of the most important things you can do (see our leaflet on 'Being More Assertive').
- **Listen** to what the other person is saying to you, remembering that you have the right to disagree and that the other person has an equal right to speak.
- **Don't escalate** a situation, try to negotiate - tell the person what is making you angry, "It makes me feel angry when you.....", rather than, "You don't care about me! You're always....."
- **Take 'time-out'**. If you are getting nowhere in a heated discussion and you feel the warning signs of an angry outburst coming on, it's quite ok to say, "I don't think it's helpful for us to talk about this any more right now, I need some time to think". If it's a situation that often occurs with the same person, come to an agreement with them that you will take time out if you need to when things get heated. You are trying to control your behaviour and may need your friend/partner/colleague to know that this is a constructive way to manage your anger. It's not helpful to make this into a way of withdrawing in order to punish the other person, it is a recognition that angry outbursts or bullying behaviour are not acceptable and you are trying to take control of your feelings and actions.
- Learn some relaxation and breathing techniques, assertiveness skills or meditation; they can be useful strategies, as can sport and all physical exercises, when you are trying to deal constructively with angry feelings.
- Speak to a counsellor if you would like further support.

Suggested reading:

Thomas J Harbin, Beyond Anger: A Guide for Men: How to Free Yourself from the Grip of Anger and Get More out of Life. (2000, Marlow and Company)

W. Robert Nay, Taking Charge of Anger: How to resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships and Express Yourself without Losing Control. Volcano Press/Guilford Press

Mike Fisher, The Eight Point Plan for Coping with Rage Rider & Co

Alice J Katz, It's Not Personal! A Guide to Anger Management AJK Publishing

William Davies, Overcoming Anger and Irritability New York University Press

Harriet G Lerner, The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Pattern of Intimate Relationships Harper Collins

For further reading it is worth doing an internet search on the topic of anger management. The BBC/health website has some useful references as does www.student.counselling.co.uk, both are a good place to start.