

Mental Health Foundation



# Cool down

Anger and how to deal with it

## Anger: a powerful emotion

*“I get this bubble of rage. I go wild. I feel like crying cos I don’t know how to control myself. It happens too quickly.”*

When was the last time you really lost it? Was it when your child ran across the road and narrowly missed being run down? Or when someone elbowed you out of the way to get on the bus? Or was it when you were rejected for a job you thought you deserved to get?

We all feel angry at times and it’s a natural response to threats and attacks, injustice and disappointment. Anger is a powerful emotion and releasing the pressure that builds inside you is often essential to let you deal with problems and move on. But if anger isn’t dealt with in a healthy way, it can have a significant effect on your daily life, relationships, achievements and mental wellbeing.

This booklet outlines how anger works and explains the benefits of keeping your anger level under control or expressing it in a constructive way. It also describes some of the tactics you can use to manage your anger more effectively and minimise the personal costs of times when anger gets the better of you.

## What is anger?

Anger is one of the most basic human emotions. It is a physical and mental response to a threat or to harm done in the past. Anger takes many different forms from irritation to blinding rage or resentment that festers over many years.

At any point in time, a combination of physical, mental and social factors interact to make us feel a certain way. It’s different for each of us. Our feelings are influenced by our emotional make-up, how we view the world, what happens around us and our circumstances. Like other emotions, anger rarely acts alone.

## How does anger work?

As we go about our lives, we're constantly weighing up situations and deciding what we think about them: good or bad, safe or unsafe etc. How we interpret a situation influences how we feel about it. If we think a situation means 'you are in danger', we feel afraid. If it means 'you have been wronged', we feel angry. And these feelings determine how we react to the situation. We translate meanings into feelings very fast. With anger, that speed sometimes means that we react in ways we later regret.

From the moment we are born, we are observing events, giving them meanings and making associations between them. From our experience we learn to size up each situation. That decides which emotion influences what we do next.

## How do our bodies respond to anger?

*“My heart was racing,  
I was physically tense,  
I was gobsmacked.”*

Many of our emotions are linked to a particular physical response. Anger gets the mind and body ready for action. It arouses the nervous system, increasing the heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow to muscles, blood sugar level and sweating. It also sharpens the senses and increases the production of adrenalin, a hormone produced at times of stress.

At the same time as these physical changes, anger is thought to affect the way we think. When we are first faced with a threat, anger helps us quickly translate complex information into simple terms: 'right' or 'wrong' for instance. This can be useful in an emergency as we don't waste valuable time weighing up information that doesn't instantly affect our safety or wellbeing.

But it can mean that we act before we've considered what else is relevant and made a rational decision about how to behave. It may be that we need to take more time to look at the situation and deal with it differently. When anger gets in the way of rational thinking we may give way to the urge to act aggressively, propelled by the instinct to survive or protect someone from a threat.

## Why do we get angry?

*“I could scream down the throat of people who try to crowd into the train before people have the chance to get off.”*

The situations that trigger anger today are much the same as those faced by our ancestors. They include:

- facing a threat to ourselves or our loved ones
- being verbally or physically assaulted
- suffering a blow to our self-esteem or our place within a social group
- being interrupted when pursuing a goal
- losing out when money is at stake
- someone going against a principle that we consider important
- being treated unfairly and feeling powerless to change this
- feeling disappointed by someone else or in ourselves
- having our property mistreated

*“My ex drives way too close behind me. Hasn't she heard of safe stopping distances? One of these days someone's going to get killed.”*

*“If your integrity is questioned that touches something very deep.”*

*“I get very angry at global issues like the use of the death penalty, oppressive regimes and poverty.”*

*“My phone company hacks me off. They don't listen, they don't care: customer service my foot!”*

Whether or not we feel someone has wronged us on purpose is a crucial factor in whether we become angry. Our recent experience can also influence our reactions. If you're having a bad day and are in a state of constant tension, you're more likely to snap when the fifth thing in a row goes wrong, even if it's something that wouldn't usually bother you.

We may feel angry immediately or only feel angry later as we recall a situation. Anger that comes to the surface years later sometimes has its roots in abuse or neglect long ago. Sometimes anger hangs around inside us for decades because it wasn't dealt with sufficiently at the time.

## Is anger the same for everyone?

*“Since my dad died, I've found out that there are things my mum had never learnt to do. I get angry with myself that I can't find a different way of explaining to her things like how to change the timer on the boiler. I may sound impatient with her, but really I'm impatient with myself.”*

*“I don't feel so angry now I'm older. I've accepted how the world is.”*

*“When someone physically threatened my daughter when she was a newborn I exploded. I got a real physical sense of something being different that I haven't experienced before or since.”*

Faced with the same situation, some people will feel angry and others will not. Some will show their anger, in a variety of ways, while others will keep their anger to themselves.

As well as differences between the ways that individuals react to trigger situations, people's responses can vary according to their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social position or family history. The expectations of the people close to us or of society in general can influence how we act. For example, some people think it less acceptable for women to raise their voice in anger than for men to do the same. That may be why women tend to internalise their anger more than men, turning it in on themselves rather than letting it out in words or actions.

Throughout our lives we get used to behaving in set ways in reaction to certain situations. These 'learnt behaviours' can form a pattern which is sometimes hard to break. The way that parents behave when they are angry can influence how their children deal with anger throughout their lives so it's important that parents set a good example.

# How do people behave when they are angry?

Anger isn't always negative. It can be a force for good. Moral outrage can drive people to campaign for change, right wrongs and enforce the rules that govern our society.

People often think of anger and aggression as the same thing, but researchers estimate that people get aggressive just 10% of the times that they get angry.

Anger is an emotional state and aggression is just one of the ways that people behave when they are angry. Aggressive behaviour can be physical or verbal and gives the signal that someone intends to cause harm. It can mean people become violent towards others or throw things. Aggression often takes over when people act on their instinct to protect themselves or others. Alcohol can make some people act more aggressively and drug use can similarly lower our inhibitions.

People often express their anger verbally. They may shout, threaten, use dramatic words, bombard someone with hostile questions or exaggerate the impact on them of someone else's action.

Some people who are angry get their own back indirectly by acting the martyr. They get their own way by making other people feel guilty and playing on that guilt. Others develop a cynical attitude and constantly criticise everything, but never address problems constructively.

Some people internalise their anger. They may be seething inside and may physically shake, but they don't show their anger in the way they behave when they are around other people.

People who internalise their anger may self-harm when they are angry because they find it hard to deal with their emotions. They deliberately harm themselves, usually in secret, as a way of coping with intense feelings they can't express another way. Self-harm is most common among young people. They may feel it gives them a release from their anger, but any relief is only temporary and, like many more obvious ways of expressing anger, self-harming doesn't solve problems long term.

## What kind of problems can be linked to anger?

Anger in itself is neither good nor bad, but it becomes a problem when it harms us or other people. Anger is the emotion most likely to cause problems in relationships in the family, at work and with friends. People with a long term anger problem tend to be poor at making decisions, take more risks than other people and are more likely to have a substance misuse problem.

Long term and intense anger has been linked with mental health problems including depression, anxiety and self-harm. It is also linked to poorer overall physical health as well as particular conditions from high blood pressure, colds and flu to coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer and gastro-intestinal problems.

## Why do people tend to neglect anger problems?

Reports show that anger problems are as common as depression and anxiety, but people experiencing difficulties with anger often fail to identify their anger or see it as a problem. They rarely seek support and may be more likely to see other people as the problem.

If a member of their family or colleagues persuade them to seek help, they may be less willing to take on board any advice they are given than if they had asked for support themselves. Changing how you behave takes effort and can be made easier by the support of family and friends.

# How can managing my anger help me?

*“If I could have expressed my anger more openly and constructively it would have been less damaging to me. Otherwise you carry the hurt with you.”*

Most people get angry quite often, but their anger is within a normal and healthy range. Other people experience anger frequently and intensely enough for it to interfere with their everyday life.

Both sets of people can benefit from learning how to deal with their anger more effectively. There's lots of evidence to suggest that managing your anger in a healthy way can help people look after their mental and physical health, feel more positive about themselves, achieve their goals, solve problems and enjoy relationships with the people around them.

Anger can lead you to action, or even violence, you will regret. Keeping your temper under control can also save you from yourself, helping you to avoid the trouble or humiliation that may follow an outburst. Bottling up your anger for a long time isn't a good thing either. It's important to deal with anger and move on, not let it stew inside you.



# How can I manage my own anger?

## Buying time: practical ways to calm down

When you feel the first surge of anger boiling up inside you, pause for a moment. Think about what has made you angry, think about the consequences of exploding in a rage and then choose how to respond. Delaying your reaction can make all the difference between blowing your top and dealing with the situation calmly and constructively. Even in the middle of an argument, it's not too late to take a deep breath and choose to express your feelings differently. Give rational thinking time to kick in.

- Count to ten before you act
- Drop your shoulders and breathe deeply to help you relax – your instincts may be telling your body to get ready to fight, but your rational self can reverse this message by telling your body to chill out
- If you feel the urge to throw something or hit out, remove yourself from the situation and try taking it out on something soft like a cushion that you won't damage and which won't hurt you
- Try screaming if it won't disturb people near you or scream into a pillow to release your tension

*“Now I play the drums. It's a very good way of dealing with my anger. When I feel worked up, I think 'I'm just going to pound something for a few hours.' It works really quickly. It takes my mind off it and then I just enjoy playing.”*

- Talk yourself down – imagine what your calmest friend would say to you and give yourself the same advice
- Imagine yourself in a relaxing scene
- Distract yourself or take yourself out of the situation that made you angry - read a magazine, do a crossword, listen to soothing music, go for a walk
- Pour out how you feel in writing or redirect your energy into another creative activity
- Offload to a friend who will help you get perspective on the situation

There are other activities which may help you almost immediately, later the same day or if you make them part of your lifestyle longer term:

- Work off your anger through exercise – channelling your energy into exercise instead will increase the release of feel good brain chemicals called endorphins which help us relax
- Use relaxation techniques like yoga or meditation – techniques like these challenge the physical aspects of anger, such as the brain chemicals that prepare you to fight, before these chemicals lead you to act impulsively

### Being assertive

*“If you keep shouting, people will stop listening.”*

Being assertive is a healthier way to express anger than aggression. Before you allow yourself to flare up, put yourself into another gear and take ownership of your feelings.

- Tell people that you are feeling angry and why
- Talk slowly and clearly
- Use the word “I” to make it about you, not about them
- Make requests rather than demands or threats
- Say “I could” and “I might” instead of “I must” or “I should”

Assertiveness training tends to be aimed at people who find it hard to speak up for themselves, not at people who may need to convert their aggression to assertiveness. Self-help guidance may give you useful tips on assertive communication and body language.

*“I managed to talk to her later and that completely cleared the air.”*

Good communication skills can help you get your message across. Keep the lines of communication open. Listen to other people’s point of view. Assuming you know where they stand can create a problem where there is none and escalate a situation from bad to worse.

## Knowing yourself

Longer term, it can be really helpful to work out what makes you angry and how it makes you behave. Think about it when you're not feeling angry. Talk it through with someone who you trust and who knows you well.

- “Now I can control it. I just think ‘For goodness sake’. I recognise the situation for what it is.”*
- What triggers your anger?
  - What signs tell you that you're on the brink of uncontrolled anger?
  - Have you fallen into any unhelpful patterns of behaviour?
  - What have the consequences been?
  - What works to calm you down?
  - Are there any triggers in your daily routine or your environment that you could change?

Being good at solving problems can help you avoid feeling like a victim when something doesn't go well. Some problems are beyond your power to change. If you accept that, you can concentrate on working out what you can change. For instance, you could give yourself more time to complete tasks when you expect they'll be frustrating.

## Protecting your mental health

Feeling stressed out makes us more likely to lose our temper and people in good mental health are better able to cope when things go wrong.

- Keep physically active
- Eat a balanced diet – some foods are more effective than others at supplying us with a steady flow of fuel to help us function well, while nutrients found in certain foods can affect mood in different ways
- Drink sensibly, however tempted you may be to improve your mood with a drink or by using drugs
- Keep in touch with friends and loved ones - talk about your feelings with them and ask for help when you need it
- Take time to relax and enjoy yourself
- Accept who you are and do something you're good at
- Care for others

# How can I deal with other people's anger?

Being on the receiving end of anger or just being a witness to it can be tough. Many people put up with regular displays of anger from people close to them because they love them, fear them or feel that they deserve no better. But if other people's anger is really getting you down, you shouldn't have to put up with it.

Anger tends to be catching, but staying calm yourself can help both of you. If you get angry as well, things can quickly escalate.

- Bear in mind the tactics that calm people down (see page 9) – use them yourself and remind the other person what can help them relax or distract themselves
- Help them to consider why they are angry and encourage them to explain it to you calmly
- Explain that sometimes anger is justified, but it can also make people lose perspective - unnecessary aggression makes things worse

It's easy to absorb other people's negativity so it's often useful to take yourself away from an angry person. Give them time to cool down, wait a few minutes, then talk with them when they seem less agitated and may be more able to look at the situation neutrally.

No-one needs to put up with violence. The advice in this booklet can't help you to deal with violence so if you are afraid or feel threatened you should ask for help – see the helplines listed on the last page. If you have been assaulted, call the police.

## Where can I go for further help?

If you are worried about anger or another aspect of your mental health and want advice on what to do, your GP is a good place to start. Your GP may suggest ways you can manage your anger yourself or they may refer you to another service for further support. You may have to join a waiting list for further support on the NHS and so some people choose to arrange and pay for support themselves.

**Talking therapies** such as counselling or CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) can help people explore what makes them angry, work out why anger has become a problem for them and learn how to change the way they respond to the situations that typically make them angry. Talking therapies are usually provided over a course of several weeks or months.

**Anger management courses** often involve counselling and group work with other people with similar problems. The courses take place either over a day or a weekend or in sessions over a period of weeks.

**Domestic violence programmes** help people whose anger leads them to violence against members of their family. They usually help people take responsibility for their actions and understand their impact on those close to them. They may also ask people to change other parts of their life such as addressing any problems with alcohol or drugs.

**Local support groups** can be a way for people with a problem in common to share their experiences and support and encourage each other to change their behaviour. They may be led by someone who has themselves had a problem with anger in the past.

**Faith leaders** or others of the same community can help people reflect and get perspective on a situation that has made them angry. They will help set the situation in the context of the values that the faith follows.

# Where can I find support if I am able to pay?

## Anger management courses

*“Anger management really works, but you have to practise.”*

The British Association of Anger Management runs weekend and evening courses for people who want help dealing with their own anger and for people who work with those who have difficulties with their anger.

Visit [www.angermanage.co.uk](http://www.angermanage.co.uk) or call 0845 1300 286

## Talking therapies

Talking therapies provided on the NHS are given by trained professionals, but you should check that any independent therapist you approach is registered with one of these organisations:

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

Visit [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk) or call 020 7014 9955

British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC)

Visit [www.pschoanalytic-council.org](http://www.pschoanalytic-council.org) or call 020 7267 3626

British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Visit [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) or call 0870 443 5252

British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

Visit [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com) or call 0161 797 4484

## Relationship counselling

Counselling from Relate can help people talk through relationship difficulties, whether they are married, living together, in a same-sex relationship, separated, divorced or single. There is a fee for Relate counselling if you contact Relate at the suggestion of your GP or if you yourself decide it might help you.

## More information and advice

### Anger management videos

- Visit [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/video/anger1.aspx](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/video/anger1.aspx)

### Emotional support

- Samaritans 08457 90 90 90 (local rate, 24 hours a day)
- Email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### Domestic violence helplines – all free, 24 hours a day

- England National Domestic Violence Helpline 0808 200 0247
- Scotland Domestic Abuse Helpline 0800 027 1234
- Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 801 0800
- Northern Ireland Domestic Violence Helpline 0800 917 1414

### Parenting advice – help your children deal with their emotions

- Young Minds Parents Information Service 0800 018 2138 (free, times vary)
- Parentline Plus 0808 800 2222 (free, 24 hours a day)
- Kidscape for parents worried about bullying 08451 205 204 (Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm)

### Advice for adults worried about a child

- NSPCC Child Protection Helpline 0808 800 5000 (free, 24 hours a day)
- Visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline) for helplines in other languages

### Support for children in distress or danger

- Childline 0800 1111 (free, 24 hours a day)

### Advice on workplace bullying

- Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) helpline 08457 47 47 47 (Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm)
- Visit [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

### Local services

- Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/organisations-and-websites](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/organisations-and-websites) to find organisations that can support you and your family in your area

Thanks to everyone who shared their experiences of anger with us.

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