

Controlling Anger -- Before It Controls You

We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it, whether as fleeting annoyance or as full-fledged rage.

Anger is a completely normal, and usually healthy, human emotion. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems: problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.

What is Anger?

Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Like other emotions, it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, and so does the level of your energy hormones, adrenalin and noradrenalin.

Anger can be caused by external or internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (such as a coworker or supervisor) or event (a traffic jam, a canceled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about your personal problems. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.

Expressing Anger

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats; it inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors that allow us to fight and defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.

On the other hand, we can't physically lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us. Laws, social norms, and common sense place limits on how far we should let our anger take us.

People use a variety of both conscious and unconscious processes to deal with their angry feelings. The three main approaches are expressing, suppressing, and calming.

Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive -- not aggressive -- manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding; it means being respectful of yourself and others.

Another approach is to suppress anger and then convert or redirect it. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive to do instead. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behavior. The danger in this type of response is that if your anger isn't allowed outward expression, it can turn inward--on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause

hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression.

Unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger such as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on), or a perpetually cynical and hostile attitude. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to express their anger constructively. Not surprisingly, they aren't likely to have many successful relationships.

Finally, you can calm yourself down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down, and let the feelings subside.

Anger Management

The goal of anger management is to reduce both your emotional feelings and the physiological arousal that anger causes. You can't get rid of or avoid the things or people that enrage you, nor can you change them; but you can learn to control your reactions.

Are You Too Angry?

There are psychological tests that measure the intensity of angry feelings, how prone to anger you are, and how well you handle it. But chances are good that if you do have a problem with anger, you already know it. If you find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, you might need help finding better ways to deal with this emotion.

Why Are Some People More Angry Than Others?

Some people are really more 'hotheaded' than others; they get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person. There are also those who don't show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don't always curse and throw things; sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk, or get physically ill.

People who are easily angered generally have what some psychologists call a low tolerance for frustration, meaning simply that they feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience, or annoyance. They can't take things in stride, and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust: for example, when they are corrected for a minor mistake.

What makes these people this way? A number of things. One cause may be genetic or physiological; there is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy, and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another may be how we're taught to deal with anger. Anger is often regarded as negative; many of us are taught that it's all right to express anxiety, depression, or other emotions, but not to express anger. As a result, we don't learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

Research has also found that family background plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic, and not skilled at emotional communication.

Is It Good to 'Let It All Hang Out'?

Psychologists now say that this is a dangerous myth. Some people use this theory as a license to hurt others. Research has found that 'letting it rip' with anger actually escalates anger and aggression and does nothing to help you (or the person you're angry with) resolve the situation.

It's best to find out what it is that triggers your anger, and then develop strategies to keep those triggers from toppling you over the edge.

Do You Need Counseling?

If you feel that your anger is really out of control, if it is having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, you might consider counseling to learn how to handle it better. A psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can work with you in developing a range of techniques for changing your thinking and your behaviors.

When you talk to a prospective therapist, tell her or him that you have problems with anger that you want to work on, and ask about his or her approach to anger management. Make sure this isn't only a course of action designed to help you 'get in touch with your feelings and express them' That may be precisely your problem.

With counseling, psychologists say, a highly angry person can move closer to a middle range of anger in about 8 to 10 weeks, depending on the circumstances and the counseling techniques used.

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