

We all feel angry at times; 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 can be essential to 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 well-being.

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.

"I get this bubble of rage. I go wild. I feel like crying because I don't know how to control myself. It happens too quickly."

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 we are in danger, we feel afraid. If we feel we have been wronged, we feel angry. 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.

How do our bodies respond to anger?

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 well-being.

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."

Reasons for getting angry 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.

If we think someone has wronged us on purpose, this can make us angrier. If we're having a bad day and are in a state of constant tension, we're more likely to snap when something else goes wrong, even if it's something that wouldn't usually bother us.

We may feel angry immediately or only feel angry later when we go back over a situation. Anger can surface years later that has its roots in abuse or neglect long ago. Sometimes anger stays locked inside us for decades because it wasn't dealt with sufficiently at the time.

How do people behave when they are angry?

"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."

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 they aren't. Anger is an emotional state and aggression is just one of the ways that people behave when they are angry. 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
- Exaggerate the impact on them of someone else's action.

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

Some people internalize 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 internalize their anger may self-harm when they are angry as a way of coping with intense feelings they can't express another way. This may give temporary relief from the angry feelings, but it doesn't solve the problems in the long-term.

What kind of problems can be linked to anger?

Anger in itself is neither good nor bad; 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, such as:

- high blood pressure
- colds and flu
- coronary heart disease
- stroke
- cancer
- Gastro-intestinal problems.
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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. 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?

Buy time

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. 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.
 - 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 - channeling 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.

Be assertive

Being assertive is a healthy way to express anger. Take ownership of the situation and 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".
- 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.

Know yourself

"Now I can control it. I just think 'For goodness sake'. I recognize the situation for what it is."

In the 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.

- 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 behavior?
- 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?

Protect your mental health

People in good mental health are better able to cope when things go wrong; feeling stressed makes it harder for us to cope with problems. The following are some of the things known to be good for our mental health.

- 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.

"Now I play the drums. It's a very good way of dealing with my anger. Then 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."

Based on original content developed by The Mental Health Foundation. You can find more information at <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>.