

Coping with Anger

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To talk about “coping with anger” implies that it is somehow bad or unnatural. But anger is a normal feeling. In fact, as with most other feelings it is some degree built into the human brain. Some parts of the brain appear to be constructed so as to cause this emotion, and other parts seem to be designed to control it. If a person tried to suppress all of their anger, they would be trying to defeat their own biology. Even to talk about “controlling” anger implies that in itself it is bad or evil, and once anger becomes a forbidden feeling in the personality, new problems can arise. For most persons, it is more appropriate to talk about the importance of “channeling” anger than simply “controlling” it. For the majority of individuals, anger needs to be directed in the same way that our other feelings and impulses are. We direct and channel our appetite for food, our desire for sex, and our desire to have fun and enjoy life. All of these feelings and activities have to stay in balance with the rest of our personality. They can all be useful and helpful emotions and give zest to life, but they need to be expressed in appropriate ways. Any aspect of human life can get out of hand, and there are some persons who must truly learn to control their anger because of the harmful ways that they have habitually expressed it.

The end goal of anger is neither to suppress it nor to use it to hurt others. It can be integrated into our personality to help us take constructive action. For example, in life or death situations, it can mobilize us to protect ourselves, our family, or others. It can also motivate us to set limits on other people and solve problems that we are facing. In this way, it can help insure that our basic needs are being met.

When anger is used appropriately, it can help us to be assertive. It can energize us to draw boundaries in our relationships with others, and say, "Beyond this point you cannot go." Assertiveness says to others that you will not allow them to hurt you or to take advantage of you. You will not allow them to take things that rightfully belong to you.

On the other hand, chronic anger can have a variety of negative outcomes. Research suggests that it is physically harmful when dealt with in unhealthy ways. Hostile individuals have more day to day stresses, more problems at home, and more problems at work. In addition, their blood pressure is more reactive under stress and becomes higher than for non-hostile individuals. Hostility is related to higher rates of heart disease and higher overall mortality rates in general. Even though anger is a normal human emotion, some ways of expressing it and dealing with it are healthier for our state of mind and physical well being. For example, some research indicates that a tendency towards physical aggression is related to coronary heart disease (CHD) for men. In one study, men with the highest levels of anger were three times more likely to develop heart disease than men with the lowest levels. Angioplasty in men (repair of arteries to the heart) is more likely to have to be repeated when there are high levels of anger. Stroke also has been associated with excessive levels of anger in men. Women, however, appear to have other

maladaptive ways of handling anger. The risk of CHD in women appears to increase to the degree that they express their anger by being cynical, mistrustful, disagreeable, and manipulative.

People who release their anger in an aggressive manner tend to have higher levels of serum cholesterol. They also tend to have higher ratios of the “bad” LDL (low density lipoprotein) compared to the “good” HDL (high density lipoprotein). On the other hand, when anger is expressed in a socially assertive manner, then the tendency is to have not only lower serum cholesterol but also less LDL and a lower LDL/HDL ratio.

The “Type A” personality has been widely written about in the popular press. It is the person who is very driven, always under time pressure, impatient, and full of tension. Initial studies suggested that these persons were more prone to heart disease. However, more recent research has indicated that it is not time pressure but cynicism and hostility that most likely cause the increase in heart problems and the higher mortality in such persons. Individuals high in cynicism (that is, persons who doubt that others might act out of good or positive motives) tend to be more prone to heart related problems, with higher levels of both heart disease and coronary related deaths. They also experience greater cardiovascular reactivity (changes in blood pressure and heart rate) in response to stress.

So what is the solution? To suppress all feelings of anger? No. There is no simple advice which can be given regarding dealing with anger. Simply “letting it all hang out” or “stuffing” it down are equally bad solutions. But before we proceed on to talk about how to cope with anger, it is important to understand the meanings of different words and concepts.

Let’s Take a Minute to Clarify Our Terms

Because there are a variety of words with similar yet different meanings, it can be confusing when trying to talk about anger. Words such as “assertiveness” and “aggression” sound as if they are describing the same thing, but in reality can actually mean very different things.

Anger--This is a feeling generated by the brain. It is also a state of physical arousal in the body which prepares it to take action. It is one of the primary feeling states which is built into us.

Resentment--Anger naturally tends to build, stay for awhile, and then go away. Unless the triggering offense is staggering in its severity, anger normally tends to die down at some point. Resentment, however, tends to stay alive. How does it continue? Oftentimes, it appears to be because of the determination of an individual to hold on to it. By giving up anger, they may feel that another person would be “getting away” with something. If anger is like a fire, resentment is like the coals of a fire after it has burned out. These coals can be kept glowing for quite a while by fanning them. But resentment has very negative effects on the personality. It drains energy away from more positive feelings and pursuits. In a way, when we hold onto resentment, we are giving the other person a certain degree of power over us. It also tends to hurt us and not them, because they are not usually aware of the feelings we are having.

Blame--This is a way of thinking about how people are the cause of problems. It generally assumes that difficulties are brought about by people being bad or evil. The opposite of blame is assuming that people can make legitimate mistakes, or that problems can arise without anyone doing any intentional act at all. Blame can be turned towards the self or towards others. When you blame others, you are likely to feel angry. When you blame yourself, you are likely to feel guilty. An attitude of **Contempt** is related to blaming. Feelings of contempt for others involve devaluing them and seeing them as less than you or even less than human. Contempt fosters more anger and sometimes violence.

Hostility--This is related to blaming others. Hostility tends to be a long term way of dealing with people, not just a momentary blaming of one individual. It generally is more than just an internal feeling and often manifests itself in our outward behavior. It is often purposefully used as a weapon or a tool to intimidate others. The hostile person may enjoy his ability to get things done and to get "stupid" people to shape up or out of his way by his intimidating behavior.

Cynicism-- This type of attitude makes assumptions about the selfish motives of other people. It assumes that it is a "dog eat dog" world and that each person has to be constantly on guard, fighting his or her way to the top. This is a negative attitude which inevitably leads to anger.

Assertiveness--This is the process of setting limits on what other people can and can't do to us. It may be stimulated by anger, but it can be done in a totally calm manner without any angry feelings at all. Another way of describing assertiveness is "boundary setting." Assertiveness is more than just a moderation in our feelings of anger. It involves purposefully standing up for ourselves or others and making it clear that we will resist others acting irresponsibly or harmfully.

Aggression—This is behavior towards others which aims to hurt them in some way. Aggression is always aimed at being destructive, although sometimes it is for defensive purposes, such as trying to protect one's self or one's family. There is both verbal aggression and physical aggression. In verbal aggression, we are trying to hurt another person's self-esteem or reputation. It can also be used to frighten and intimidate another person. In physical aggression, we are trying to inflict pain or injury. **Violence** is severe physical aggression towards another. Only in times of war or when being victimized in a crime is aggression an acceptable expression of anger. One way that violent behavior is acquired is through one's environment, such as witnessing it or experiencing it in childhood. However, there are likely to be biological causes of aggression as well, since it appears to be related to levels of testosterone.

Rage--This is a loss of control over feelings of anger. In fact, the person might be said to be past anger. Conscious thought processing has diminished. There may be changes in consciousness so severe that the person does not remember what they did in the midst of the rage. Behavior may be totally irrational. Some persons describe an experience of "tunnel vision" during a rage episode in which everything except the person they are focusing on seems to fade away, out of

their field of vision and out of their awareness.

Does Anger Have Value?

We have already seen that anger can have a negative effect on our health. So can anger have any value at all? This is a very complex question, but it would appear that anger can be useful in certain ways and at certain times:

- It can energize us and provide us with stamina.
- It can lead us to express our feelings to others and thus help resolve disputes.
- It can enable us to assertively take charge of a situation.
- It can help us to survive, for example, if someone is trying to attack our family. This can also include going to war to protect our society.
- It can help to change unjust social structures. For example, anger can fuel civil disobedience which can lead to social change.
- It can communicate our outrage over a situation and let people know we are serious about something. In other words, when people see that we are angry, they may not continue to provoke further confrontation. They may not continue to "test" us.
- It can motivate us to take action over situations that are important to us and thus help to get our needs met.
- Feeling angry can be a coping tool against the emotions of anxiety, depression, and helplessness.

Spotlight on...the positive use of anger

An example of the positive use of anger is the development of M.A.D.D., Mothers Against Drunk Driving. This group developed in response to the death of Candy Lightner's 13-year-old daughter, Cari Lightner. She was struck and killed by a repeat-offender drunken driver. In her search for justice, Candy Lightner found that the judicial system glossed over the problem and provided no real remedy or justice. She turned her anger into efforts to create an organization which would change the laws about drunken driving. The organization has now grown to over 400 chapters and has lobbied for stiffer penalties for such crimes. It has succeeded in raising the level of awareness in the public and government about the problems of drunken driving.

Actor Carroll O'Connor who played Archie Bunker on TV has also turned anger into action. Following the death of his son due to cocaine bought from a local drug dealer, O'Connor has actively lobbied for better drug laws. He has succeeded in convincing three states to create statutes allowing victims of drug dealers to sue them for their assets.

On the other hand, there are negative effects of anger, too. Here are ways that it tends to create

more difficulties for us:

- when it is our immediate response to every frustrating situation
- when it interferes with our ability to rationally and to solve problems
- when it leads to aggression towards others or towards ourselves
- when it becomes part of an overall blaming attitude toward others
- when it keeps us constantly resentful towards others
- when it makes others fearful of us and makes them want to avoid us
- when we become extremely upset over matters that are in reality minor
- when it keeps constantly tense and physiologically aroused

Getting Personal

There are thoughts and attitudes which make people afraid of their anger. These in turn cause them to try to avoid such feelings. Which of these attitudes, if any describe you?

--Anger is dangerous.

Actually, anger is not dangerous for the average person. It is no more risky than driving or using a power tool. It's not the activity which is dangerous but how we use it.

--Anger shouldn't be expressed.

This belief is perhaps more prevalent in women than in men. Anger can be communicated in many different ways--some of which are constructive and some of which aren't.

--It is risky for me to express anger because people will be upset with me.

Life sometimes involves risk. Moreover, it is impossible to escape the fact that people will sometimes be displeased with us.

--Anger is bad.

As we have seen, this simply is not true. Anger is a natural feeling.

--Anger is a sin. Most religions do not believe this. It is usually not anger which religions condemn but the immoderate expression of it and aggression.

Angry Feelings Can Trigger Even More Anger

Modern psychology sees emotions and thoughts as intertwined. Thoughts, memories, and

feelings are linked so that each one can activate the others. As an emotional state, anger is associated with blaming thoughts and with memories of times when others hurt or abused us. When a person feels angry, thoughts connected with the feeling are brought into mind. We are more likely to think of old hurts from the past. These in turn prolong or strengthen the feelings of anger. As the person dwells on the thoughts, feelings, and memories, they are likely to activate even more thoughts, feelings, and memories. This process can build until a person loses control and acts out in some way. In fact, for some people, the process can bring on a state of rage. Persons may become aggressive so that someone--a family member or even an officer of the law--has to come in and stop the cycle. For others, extreme states of anger lead to harming themselves in some way.

The Problem of Ricocheting Anger

Simply letting loose with a verbal flood of words and feelings can often lead people to feel worse. However, there is another issue which also needs to be considered and that is the effect such venting has on the level of emotion in the family. You may feel better but what about everybody else? Even if you are one of those persons who feels relieved after venting, you might want to consider that you are not really getting rid of anger--you may be passing it on to your partner and your children. Now other people in the family may be mad and upset. When anger is expressed in a very strong or uncontrolled way, it can ricochet between members of the family for awhile. What if your spouse then becomes angry and vents her feelings on you, on the kids, and so on. What if the kids then act up, triggering you to feel angry again? By dealing with your anger in a straightforward, constructive way, you may prevent further problems for yourself.

Is It Ever Important to Get in Touch with Anger?

Some people have considerable anger but are out of touch with it until it is too late. Even while it is building inside of them, they may be unaware of what is happening. Then when one more stress occurs, they are pushed over the edge and become very angry or aggressive. It is better to be in touch with feelings in an ongoing basis than to let them accumulate underneath the surface. That way, stresses can be dealt with as they occur. This prevents excessive buildup of tension and anger.

Getting Personal

Think of some times when your anger has been helpful to you or others.

When has it created problems for you or others or harmed someone?

Do Situations Make Us Angry or Do We Make Ourselves Angry?

It is often said that no one can make us feel a particular way but rather that we are responsible for the emotions that we have, including being mad and upset. On the other hand, many persons believe that all of their anger is directly caused by what people do to them. Which is the more accurate view? It is probably true that some situations do cause anger automatically. If someone hits us and we feel considerable pain, then angry emotions are likely to occur. In most other situations, however, the emotion of anger is less likely to be an automatic reflex. How we feel about a situation usually results from our experiences in the past and our way of thinking about it in the present. An internal dialog with ourselves begins which can create more and more anger. Another way to say this is that in many situations, our anger is not a direct result of the physical reality of the situation but of the social reality--what we make of it and believe about it.

Let's say that a woman is waiting to be picked up by her date. He's late. First, he's half an hour late and then a full hour late. She might be very mad and say to herself, "How dare he do this to me; he's treating me very poorly; he shouldn't be allowed to get away with this." This type of internal dialog is likely make her very angry. On the other hand, another possible way of talking to herself about the situation might be, "I don't know why he hasn't shown up, but if he's a disorganized person or inconsiderate person, I might as well find out up front; I can quit dating him before I get involved." This line of thinking might lead more to detachment than to anger. If he shows up and she finds out that he had just received a call that his grandmother died, then she would probably not feel angry at all. Why? Because the social reality of the situation would have changed. The physical reality of him being late would be the same, but the reason in her mind for him not showing up on time would now be different.

Oftentimes, we simply do not have all the information we need at first to decide whether to become upset or not. Consider the following situation that occurred to one client. After sitting at a red light for awhile, their light finally turned green. Nevertheless, the car in front of them continued merely to sit at the intersection. The client presumed that the driver in front wasn't paying attention, and they honked their horn. However, soon they saw that an emergency vehicle

was passing by in front of the other car. They had not been able to see it or hear it. Their feelings about the car sitting still in front of the green light immediately changed. This type of situation probably occurs in life more often than we realize. There are often reasons why things are the way they are. By not immediately reacting with anger, we prevent ourselves from looking foolish in the future. More importantly, it points out that how we think about a situation really does determine how we feel about it.



Points to Ponder

One client who had problems with anger stated, "Using anger to run my life has certainly contributed to my being very self-absorbed. I spend so much time with internal speech, I hardly hear anyone else."

Our Anger is Linked to Our Style of Relating to Others

How we feel about other people and how we generally relate to them also has a strong effect on our feelings of anger. In general, persons who have secure relationships have less anger. These persons have friendships or bonds with others which they see as warm and stable and providing them with a satisfying level of closeness. Persons with distancing styles and persons who tend to be anxious and unsure of their relationships with significant others tend to experience more anger. When they are angry, secure persons tend to focus such feelings more on accomplishing constructive goals and less on simply lashing out or trying to hurt another other person. Secure persons also tend to expect that something positive can result from their expression of anger. Moreover, even though they are mad at times about what others do, they are less likely to view others as actually having a hostile intent.

A good example of insecure attachment would be in jealousy. This feeling might be specific to a particular relationship or it might tend to occur over and over in life. When jealousy arises, we are feeling insecure about the bond between us and someone else. We don't know if this important person is going to continue to be there for us or not. We don't know how much of their attention we may continue to have in the future. In this kind of situation, people are often likely to become somewhat angry, and some persons with high levels of jealousy develop extreme anger. In general, when we are not sure if we can count on the important people around us and when we think that they may be trying to hurt us or undermine us, that is when we are most likely to become angry and to do so in a hurtful, unproductive way.

Getting Personal: Looking at Your Childhood

Styles of attachment to others are generally thought to start in childhood. Think over how your early experiences could have affected the way you express your anger.

How did your parents and siblings deal with anger when you were a child?

Did you witness violence or verbal abuse in the home, and how did that make you feel about expressing anger?

If your parents divorced, were you exposed to ongoing and bitter conflict during or after the divorce?

What kind of a role model did they set for you for expressing anger?

How did you express anger when you were very small? When you were a teenager? In early adulthood? Did you mature in how you expressed anger?

Were you encouraged or discouraged from expressing feelings? Was it permissible in your family for people to be angry?

If you became angry at your parents, how did they react? Did they withdraw from you, punish you, or withdraw love?

When you were a child and anger was directed toward you, what did you think, feel, and do?

What do you think, feel, and do now when anger is directed toward you? Has this changed since you were a child?



Points to Ponder

Some people believe that anger is the opposite of love. However, other people disagree. In your opinion, what attitude or emotion would be the opposite of anger? What attitude or emotion would be the opposite of love?

A Continuum of Responses to Anger

To some degree, the expression of anger can be thought of as a spectrum that can go from totally holding it in to letting it all out in an uncontrolled or even destructive way. In between are many different forms of expressing it. Each method of dealing with anger can be thought of as a type of coping response. Some of these types of coping are healthy, and other types only create more problems for the person. In the chart below, the middle zone includes the most adaptive and

healthy ways of expressing anger.

Response to Anger	
Repression (total lack of awareness of feelings)	Problem Zone
Turning Anger Inward Towards Self	
Constantly Suppressing Feelings	
Selectively Suppressing Anger at Times	Adaptive Zone
Expressing Feelings Verbally	
Expressing Feelings Verbally and With a Display of Angry Emotion	
Distraction (e.g., going to a movie)	
Physical Exercise & Competitive Sports	
Taking Action to Change the Situation that is Producing Anger	
Assertiveness	
Losing Temper (e.g., yelling)	Danger Zone
Displaced Aggression (e.g., punching walls, tearing up pictures, kicking the dog)	
Verbal Aggression (e.g., belittling the other person)	
Physical Aggression (e.g., violence); Rage	

Repression involves shoving anger so far away that you totally lose any awareness of it. It is still present in your mind but only at an unconscious level. As a result, it may be present in your life and come out from time to time, but you are unable to steer it or direct it because you are unaware of it. Repressed anger can sometimes cause physical symptoms and discomfort.

Other people turn their anger inwards towards themselves. They may have been taught that it is not “nice” or “good” to be angry. They consider it okay to be angry at themselves but not at others, and for that reason the anger can be turned inward against the self. In some cases, this may result in depression.

Suppression is different from repression in that the person knows that they are angry--they simply

choose to always keep their feelings inside and not let them out. This strategy for dealing with anger is likely to result in a lack of assertiveness and in the person not getting their interpersonal needs met. Selectively suppressing anger at times, however, can be a strength. If the person uses this selectively, it can allow them to show their feelings to others at times when it will be useful and helpful, and to ignore such feelings when it would be socially inappropriate or unproductive.

Expressing feelings verbally involves talking out your feelings. Expressing them through words rather than actions is a positive human quality. It can prevent or end conflict. It can be part of assertiveness and lead to important changes in relationships or even in society. It can help a person to feel better by discharging angry feelings yet without any lasting damage to relationships.

Sometimes the verbal expression of anger can be done in a fairly straightforward way without a great deal of nonverbal display of anger. At other times, it is important and even helpful to show how we are feeling to others to let them know that we are serious. Words may not always be enough. Sometimes we need to let people see how angry we are. For that reason, "expressing feelings verbally with a display of angry emotion" is treated as a separate category from simply talking about feelings.

Distraction (e.g., going to a movie) can be helpful if used from time to time. It is not helpful to constantly dwell on anger, and there are times when it is important to let your mind and body calm down.

Physical exercise and competitive sports act as a distraction, but they also provide other types of relief from feelings of anger. They do not accomplish anything about remedying the problem situation, but they do help discharge feelings of anger and physical feelings of tension in a healthy way.

Taking action to change the situation that is producing anger has the advantage that it both tends to reduce feelings of anger and changes the situation causing it at the same time. If a shady business has taken you for a ride, using your anger to propel you into action is very constructive. If your child has kept you up late worrying where they were and you were both scared and angry, then finding new ways to set limits on them not only relieves some anger but decreases the chances that this will continue to be a problem.

Assertiveness also involves taking action on a problem, generally by confronting someone and expressing how you feel about a situation. It sets boundaries on people so that they cannot take advantage of you. It can include expression of anger, with or without a display of emotion. In general, people who are appropriately assertive tend to have less depression and to feel more confident than people who are not. For more information on assertiveness, see chapter/handout #4, "You Can Assert Yourself."

There are a variety of unhealthy ways of expressing anger. Yelling, hitting people or things, and

demeaning others, all tend to destroy relationships. They not only belittle others, but they also diminish the person doing them. They tend to weaken or break the interpersonal bonds so important in marriage and between a parent and child. Even outside of the family, such extreme expressions of anger often create a boomerang effect so that the person eventually suffers negative consequences from their actions. By belittling or hurting others, we may create enemies who will retaliate against us in the future. Violent verbal or physical behavior is generally appropriate only in situations of protecting ourselves or our families against crime.

In general, it is impulsive expressions of anger which are most likely to cause trouble for ourselves and others. When we take time to deliberate about what we are going to say and do, we are more likely to express anger in a constructive way. Some persons have problems with impulsivity in general. For example, individuals with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder often react to situations in an automatic fashion without thinking about the consequences. To some degree, this type of impulsivity may be a result of a person's underlying brain structure and function. However, with effort all individuals can learn to slow down their reactions and to act in a more deliberate and reasoned manner.

FAQ: Frequently asked questions

Isn't it a sin to be angry?

In most religions, anger is not considered sinful in and of itself. Rather, it is aggression and the harming of other people which is considered to be bad. Anger is not the same as aggression. In fact, the Bible has many instances where people were angry and were not condemned for it.

Dealing Constructively with Your Anger

Overcome Anger by Working on Negative Thinking

Studies have shown that dwelling on negative, blaming thoughts about others will increase feelings of anger. While some situations causing such feelings are very significant and have a major impact on our lives, others are relatively minor, such as someone cutting us off in traffic or making a rude comment. Much of the time our anger is not directly caused by what happens around us but by how we think about the event. In that way, people may simply set the stage for our anger. Our thoughts have to do the rest. If someone keeps us waiting, for example, we may become frustrated, and we may even become angry. But the feeling is the result of the combination of the event and thoughts. We actively or passively participate in the process. For example, suppose that a child has not done his chores and that this is part of a repetitive pattern. A parent might think the following:

Here we go again. He is doing this on purpose just to upset me. He's just like his father, my ex-husband. My husband was a slob, and now my son's going to turn out to be that way, too. I can't stand it. When I remind him of his chores, he ignores what I say and never listens. He treats me like I'm not even there.

As can be seen from this scenario, the angry person is participating a great deal in generating their own anger. They may think that someone else is fully responsible for making them angry, but at least in the above situation, that is not the case. The child certainly has a lot of responsibility for the situation, but in reality they are incapable of actually causing anger. In fact, on another day when the mother had something else on her mind or was in a better mood, she might not even be upset.

When you are angry, you are likely to have a variety of negative thoughts about the person who triggered your anger. (Note that we are saying "triggered" your anger. We are not saying "caused" your anger.) Chapter/handout #3, "Coping with Negative Thinking" discusses how negative thoughts can cause a variety of unpleasant emotions. That handout discussed particular types of irrational thoughts which people sometimes have. Here are the same types of thoughts but here they are discussed from the perspective of how they can cause anger.

1. Focusing on the negative parts of another person and ignoring their positive characteristics. An angry person may realistically recognize that their boss treated them unfairly, but at the same time they may neglect to remember that this is the same supervisor who has treated them well at other times. In anger, a kind of tunnel vision can take hold which focuses only on the negative. For that reason, the worker's feelings of anger are likely to be stronger than if they took into account the whole picture.

2. Overgeneralizing about other peoples' faults. A statement from an angry person about his wife might be, "She never does anything right." Such a statement ignores the positive and overgeneralizes the negative. She never does anything right? Statements that use words "always", "never", "ever", "everyone", etc., are very likely to be overgeneralizations. When used by an angry person, they are often put-downs of others:

"My children never shows me any respect."

"My co-workers are always goofing off and letting me do the hardest jobs."

"Everyone around here is being rude to me."

It is fairly obvious how these types of overgeneralizations could produce strong feelings of anger.

3. Mislabeling and exaggerating the behavior of others. Mislabeling involves using a "heavy duty" word to label a mistake or shortcoming of someone else. An example of this would be blowing up a minor situation and thinking "My neighbor's a jerk. He doesn't tie up his trash bags, and then his leaves blow on my lawn. He's really an @#%*." You can probably think of other "heavy duty" words which if you used them in your own mind for other people would escalate your anger.

4. Applying "should" statements to the behavior of others. Thoughts which use the words "should" and "ought" tend to produce guilt and anger. An example of a should thought would be, "My wife should be more considerate of me. She dumps all of her problems on me the moment I walk in the house after work. She should know that I need time to relax first." If someone offends us, we might think, "I shouldn't let them get away with this," which might lead us to actions that we would later regret.

5. All or nothing thinking--Expecting other people to be totally good. Sometimes persons conclude from a small event that another individual who has made a mistake or done something is a totally bad person. There are gray areas in life, and the more we get to know people, the more we will find that they have a mixture of good and bad in them. People can make mistakes and still be decent people. Our spouse is generally not the best spouse nor the worst spouse. Our neighbor is not the best neighbor or the worst neighbor. But when we get into all or nothing thinking, our spouse can make a mistake and we see them as the worst possible partner. Or our neighbor does something we don't like and in our minds, they become a terrible, despicable person.

6. Mindreading. This is "knowing" what another person is thinking. For example, in a restaurant, a woman thought that the waiter was rude. Her husband didn't see the situation in the same way. When she wanted to leave, he said he wanted to stay. She was mad because she assumed that her husband knew what was going on and that he didn't care that she was being insulted. Actually, he didn't understand what was happening and why she wanted to leave.

Another example of mindreading occurs when someone makes a neutral statement. For example, a husband might say to his wife, "Are we having spaghetti again tonight?" This could be meant in a totally neutral way, simply requesting information. However, the wife could hear it as a criticism, e.g., "You mean we're having spaghetti again? Can't you fix anything else? I'm sick of this!"

7. Fortune telling. This involves jumping to conclusions about the future. "My husband probably won't mow the lawn again this weekend. I'll have to beg and threaten. He'll just sit there in front of the TV. I'll probably end up doing it myself." This line of thinking is likely to lead to anger. As a result we become mad or upset and start arguments over things which have not yet happened and may never happen.

8. Personalization. The angry person may interpret some event as being relevant to them even when it has nothing to do with them. For example, imagine that you might see someone walking down the street and say something to them. They are an acquaintance, maybe even a friend. But the person just keeps walking and passes by. You think, "How rude. He's being really stuck up." We assume that the friend is aiming this particular behavior at us when in fact, he may be a very preoccupied or absent minded person who did not notice us and did not realize that our comment was meant for him. In this way, we may be quick to personalize events.

9. Blaming

Angry people tend to blame others whenever something goes wrong. In fact, sometimes, no one is to blame for a situation. Even if someone is responsible, it may do no good to dwell on thinking about who is to blame. It can be more useful to focus the same energy on trying to resolve the problem.



Points to Ponder

Don't I have a right to be angry if someone has offended me or hurt me in some way?

The issue being discussed in this chapter is not whether you have a right to be angry. People have a right to their feelings. The issue here is whether anger is helpful to you. If you have decided that your anger is not useful or healthy, this chapter/handout is intended to give you ways of handling your anger more constructively.

Using the Four Column Technique

Chapter/handout #3 outlined how to use the four column technique. Here is an example of how to use it to deal with angry feelings:

Objective Situation (The “Event”)	Automatic Negative Thoughts	Negative Consequences	Realistic, Logical Thoughts
Being cut off in traffic by another driver.	He could have killed me. He probably did that on purpose. He looks like a smart aleck kid. Somebody out to teach him a lesson.	Anger Speeding up Thinking of making threatening gestures	Everyone makes mistakes. It is mindreading to say that he was doing it on purpose. I have made mistakes, too, in driving. It won't teach him anything for me to make gestures. I'll only cause more trouble and embarrass myself.

Rid Yourself of Contempt for Others

Angry persons sometimes are actually dealing with feelings of contempt which they have for others. They see others as stupid or inferior, making “dumb” mistakes and so on. Oftentimes, this contemptuous attitude is coupled with the idea that “someone ought to teach this person a lesson.” This attitude or thought can easily lead to a strong outburst of angry feelings in order to put the person in their place and teach them the much needed lesson. Of course, this can often lead to severe arguments, and even physical fights. The thought that we need to teach someone else a lesson can be quite a dangerous thought.

Actually, however, when we take a closer look at the exact meaning of this phrase, then there actually is some value in “teaching someone a lesson.” Take, for example, a child that runs into the street after a ball without looking. Or a spouse that humiliates you or makes fun of you in public. They clearly do need to be taught a lesson. But what is the lesson? And what is the best way to teach it? If we simply let loose with our feelings and start an argument or fight, has the other person really learned any lesson at all? Perhaps this kind of fight only teaches them that the angry person is unpredictable and vengeful. Perhaps it also teaches the other person to be defensive. But does it really teach them not to mistreat us? If our spouse embarrasses us in

public, dressing them down in private may be teaching them the wrong lesson, since we are merely demonstrating how best to humiliate someone. How much better it would be to let them know how embarrassed you were and how you will be leaving the party and going home by yourself the next time it happens.

Becoming angry with a child for running into a street is a normal reaction to our fear when that happens. But will our anger teach them not to run into the street? Or will they learn better if we sit them down and talk with them for awhile about what they did, what could happen, and other ways of retrieving their ball? So, if you just can't shake the desire to teach the other person a lesson, ask yourself what you will be teaching them, what they need to learn, and what the best way is for them to learn it.

Things to Do: When Angry, Take a Self Inventory

When you get angry, make a self-assessment by asking yourself the following questions.

Is my anger directed at the right target? *Am I really angry at this person, or am I angry at someone else but taking it out on them?*

How much am I assuming about the person I am angry at? *Am I assuming the worst? Do I know exactly what happened, or am I filling in the gaps by imagining? Do I know that they had a mean, hostile intention? By checking out your assumptions, you can prevent the feeling of "hating yourself in the morning." That is, by not making mistakes about what happened and why, you can prevent yourself from feeling foolish afterwards.*

Is my anger proportional to the situation? *Is the strength of my angry reaction appropriate to the provocation? Sometimes when a person is overreacting to a situation, it is because it is tapping into old, unresolved feelings of anger about something else. These need to be acknowledged and addressed.*

Is my anger directed towards constructive change? *Am I using my anger to push for problem solving and correction of a situation?*

How will my anger affect the other person? *Am I expressing my feelings just to hurt, offend, or diminish someone? Will I frighten them? Will the relationship be maintained after my expression of anger? Do I want it to be maintained?*

Am I overly afraid of the other person's reaction? *Am I holding back from talking about my feelings for fear that the other person will be displeased?*

Am I in control of my anger? *Am I able to channel it and control what I am saying? Or has my anger seemed to take on a life of its own?*

What is going on in my body? Am I in touch with my physical reactions of anger? Are my muscles tensing up? Am I clenching my teeth? Am I feeling hot? Am I beginning to experience a kind of tunnel vision? All of these reactions might indicate that you are becoming so physiologically aroused and activated that your body is beginning to take over and that you are beginning to lose control. These are indications that you need to engage immediately in self-calming strategies.

Overcoming Anger by Using Problem Solving

When people become upset, they sometimes act impulsively. It is as if their brain was shut down. It is important not to lose our ability to think and problem solve when we are angry. Oftentimes when we are confronted by a frustrating situation we are likely to become mad and upset. We are especially likely to lose our temper if we feel that we have exhausted all of our alternatives--that nothing we are doing is working. At that point, we are not just frustrated, we are exasperated. To avoid acting rashly, it is important to try to keep an attitude of problem solving. Our frustration needs to be directed as much as possible toward resolving the problem rather than on attacking or blaming another person

Children are especially likely to exasperate us at times, making us feel "at the end of our rope." We may feel that we are out of solutions. Consider the parent who feels that she has only a few alternatives in disciplining her child:

I can spank him.

I can send him to his room.

I can tell his father and let him take care of it.

Once the mother has tried all three of her normal solutions, she is probably going to be more upset because she is out of options. As a result, she may result to yelling or spanking harder, which is certainly not a good idea. Or on the other hand, she might just give up and feel depressed. In problem solving there is time for brain storming new solutions. If our child tends to present to us the same type of problem over and over (not calling home to let us know they will be late, for example), then it is helpful to plan ahead. We can work on developing a variety of alternatives to use when and if the situation occurs again. It is important to take time to sit down with paper and pencil when we are relaxed and calm. We can then think most clearly and creatively in order to come up with new possibilities. Sometimes, we may need the help of someone else to think of solutions if we feel stuck.

Once the solution is implemented, we are likely to find that it needs some adjustment. That's normal. Most solutions don't work entirely at first. They generally need some changes in order to work best.

Here is an example of an exasperated mother using the problem solving approach:

I. Identifying the problem - "My children are not minding me. They ignore me when I tell them to clean their rooms. They put me off and keep saying that they will do it 'later.'"

II. Generating alternatives

- A. I could link their allowances to whether they mind.
- B. I could send them to their rooms.
- C. I could prevent them from going out.
- D. I could simply stand there and tell them I'm not leaving until they do it.
- E. I could turn their video game off.
- F. I could give them a long lecture.
- G. I could praise them when they do respond quickly.
- H. I could get my husband (wife) involved so that we present a united front.
- I. I could tell them I'm going on strike and not cleaning their rooms until I get more help from them.
- J. I could point out that their friends seem to be very respectful and responsive to their parents.
- K. I could set up a cleaning day ahead of time and let them know that everyone, including me, will be cleaning for those hours.
- L. I could just close the doors to their rooms.
- M. I could take the things they have laying around the house and put them in the garage until they put them up.

III. Choosing a Solution. "First, I'll have a long talk with them. I'll explain why this is important--not just how it inconveniences me, but also how being responsible is necessary for growing up. I'll put it in a positive manner rather than a negative fashion. Then I'll explain that if they do not respond to specific requests within five minutes, I will turn off whatever they are doing--video, TV, and so on. I will also let them know how pleased I am if they do respond. In addition, I will set up a time on Saturday mornings when all of us are cleaning."

IV. Implementing a solution. The mother implements the solution for a week or two before reevaluating.

V. Evaluating the solution. The solution appears to be working. The kids know now that I will turn off what they are doing if they don't respond in a reasonable time. The Saturday morning cleanup isn't working because of all of their activities. I will change that to Sunday afternoon.



Time for Practice

Think of a situation which made you angry. Perhaps you felt out of options and became very upset. Or maybe you did nothing but still fumed and felt angry. Using the outline below, work out some alternatives you could have tried in that situation. Or on the other hand, you may want to use this form to deal with a current problem that you are facing:

I. Identify the problem:

II. Write down possible solutions

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

III. Solution(s) chosen

1.

2.

3.

IV. What has to be done to implement this solution?

V. (To be done later) How well did the solution work? What changes need to be made in it? How could you refine your solution and make it better?

Problem solving is not just a technique but a frame of mind. Keep your attention focused on what is really important, such as resolving the issue at hand. Positive statements which can help you to do this would include:

“I’m going to focus on the issues. I’m not going to get sidetracked by thinking too much about the past.”

“I’m just going to keep calm and look for a solution.”

“I’ll take time to listen to what the other person has to say. Maybe it will make a difference in how I feel and help me calm down.”

“I am responsible for my own feelings. No matter what the other person has done, I can be in control of myself if I choose to be.”

Dealing with Anger through Being Assertive

One of the advantages of being assertive is that it tends to correct problem situations. It is aimed at letting people know exactly what we need and also what we won’t allow from them. It is designed at being constructive rather than destructive. (More information on assertiveness can be found in Chapter/handout 4: “You Can Assert Yourself”.) A person does not need to feel guilty about being assertive. Whereas emotional blasts of anger can often lead people to feel guilty or even foolish afterwards, assertiveness is a socially appropriate response.

Coping With Anger By Lowering Your Physiological Arousal

Arousal is a scientific term meaning heightened alertness, emotional feelings, and physiological energy. When we are angry, all of these things occur. We become more aware of things which might be frustrating us; we feel things much more strongly; and our bodies are biochemically energized. We feel ready for action, and we are more likely to yell or hit something. To lower our arousal, we can use relaxation techniques. By practicing one of the many methods of relaxation, you can begin to calm yourself almost at will. For more information on relaxation, read Chapter/handout 5--Coping with Worry and Anxiety.

Getting Personal

What are your physical responses to anger? Which of these are your early warning signs

that your emotions may be getting out of control? That is, which physical symptoms may tend to occur early on before your anger begins to get out of hand? It is much easier to use anger control techniques when the emotion first starts to build. Once you are in a full outburst, it will be much more difficult.

Physical Ways of Responding to Anger, Tension, and Frustration

- relax
- stretch your muscles
- exercise
- become involved in physically demanding work
- become involved in games requiring physical exertion
- change your position
- have a quick massage of your neck, shoulders or lower back
- find a quiet place
- pause, close your eyes and breathe deeply
- slow down--sit down, move more slowly
- get a drink of water
- listen to music
- calm yourself with soothing or positive self- talk (“I can stay in control; things aren’t as bad as I’m making them out to be.”)

Overcoming Anger through Distraction

One important strategy for calming oneself is using distraction. By putting our minds onto something else, we can stop activating the emotional web of thoughts, memories, and feelings. Focusing our attention elsewhere will start to evoke other types of emotions. Does that mean that we should always distract ourselves from anger? No. As has already been emphasized, anger is a normal, healthy emotion. It can lead to positive change and to assertiveness. If distraction was a person’s only style of coping it could prevent them from taking action on important issues. On the other hand, there are clearly times when continuing to feel angry is not productive. For some people, there is a danger that they will act out and become aggressive or destructive. It may be important for them to start coping through distraction and other means of calming themselves as

soon as they start to feel the emotion. For people who normally do not allow themselves to be angry, distraction could be an unhealthy coping mechanism because they might never deal with the issues that need to be faced.

Coping with Anger By Developing Empathy

One way of diminishing our anger is to attempt to look at a situation from the standpoint of the person with whom we are angry. Empathy involves being able to take another person's perspective and understand how they are feeling. For example, a man who is angry with his wife for not keeping the house straight might see the situation differently if he tries to imagine all the chores and challenges that she faces during the day. These might include going to work, picking up children, taking them to practices and doctors appointments, buying groceries, and running errands. In fact, seeing the situation from her point of view might bring a greater appreciation in general for what she does for the family.

Coping with Anger by Developing a Sense of Humor

Laughter and humor relax us and reduce any tendencies toward aggressiveness. Looking for the funny side of a situation can make it seem less important and just plain human. One client talked about how his wife and kids were screaming at each other. He thought that if he said anything, it would only upset them more. With the house in chaos, he rolled himself up in toilet paper like a mummy. Everyone burst out laughing and the cycle of anger was broken.

It can be helpful to laugh at almost any circumstance that we may be in. A national talk show host talk related a series of embarrassing events which occurred to him. These had partly been caused by his wife and partly caused by his dog. Everybody in his studio was obviously enjoying a good laugh as were people across the nation. Why was he laughing about it? Obviously to get good ratings. But he could just as easily have been indignant about being knocked over by his dog while trying retrieve something behind the toilet. He might have been angry originally, but clearly, there was a humorous side to the situation. The very same circumstances can cause us to be angry can also cause us to laugh. This again points out that it is not always the situation which makes us angry but also how we look at it.

Getting Personal

You may be able to think of situations in your own life which made you angry at the time but now seem humorous. Think about some of the funniest stories that you can tell people about yourself. How angry did you feel at the time the events happened? Why not see if you can take things humorously without having to wait for time to pass?

Coping with Anger Through Letting Go and Forgiveness

Psychological research studies are demonstrating what has previously only been discussed in religious circles--that forgiveness has healing power. Despite using numerous coping strategies, there may still be anger which continues to eat away at them. Anger and even rage from childhood abuse can last a lifetime. Crimes committed against us or significant betrayals which we experience as adults can leave us feeling chronically resentful. Letting go and forgiving is a way of ridding yourself of anger which is harming you. Persons sometimes ask whether this means that they don't have a right to be angry. This is not an issue of whether a person has a right to be angry. If feelings of rage or resentment are eating away at you, then it is hurting you physically and mentally.



Points to Ponder

When you carry around resentments and refuse to let go of them, who do you hurt more by your anger--yourself or the other person?

The Value of Sublimation

“Sublimation” is an old term which is little used today, but it has a valuable meaning. It is the transforming of one type of emotional and mental energy into another. To sublimate anger is to take the energy from it and convert that into action which is constructive and purposeful. After Candy Lightner’s daughter was killed by a drunk driver, she eventually founded M.A.D.D., Mother’s Against Drunk Drivers. The actor Carroll Conner is an outspoken advocate for drug education which he initiated after his son died of a drug overdose. Both of these individuals were very angry about the people who contributed to their children’s deaths. It is possible to take anger and focus it toward a socially valuable goal.

Things to Do: Summary

You may want to make notes of things that help you calm down. Here is a list of ten strategies for dealing with anger. You can use this or make your own list and keep it in your purse or wallet. Then when you start to feel out of control and need help remembering what to do, pull it out.

- 1. Recognize your anger.** Realize that it’s okay to feel angry now and then. Brief periods of anger aren’t going to hurt you. Become aware of any physical aspects of anger, such as muscle tension, increased heart rate, or blood rushing to your face.
- 2. Use words to communicate rather than to hurt, belittle, or diminish other people.** Words are a wonderful thing. Without them, we would probably be back in the stone age

throwing rocks at each other. Use words rather than rocks. But don't use your words for aggression. Use them to communicate what the problem is and how it has made you feel.

3. Recognize and deal with any other feelings which lie behind your anger. Probe beneath the surface of the situation. Are you really mad because your son spilled milk on the table? Or were you already mad because the dog chewed up your shoe? Or because your boss gave you a hard time at work? Were you feeling anxious or afraid before you became angry?

4. Recognize any negative thinking which is fueling your anger. Was it really the situation that caused your anger, or was it your thinking about that situation that caused it? Use your rational thinking to figure out how long it would be logical to stay mad about something like this. If there is a more positive way of viewing the situation, try thinking in those terms about it. Use constructive self-statements as outlined above.

5. Pause. You might try using the thought stopping technique of saying, "Stop!" You can say this out loud or under your breath to give you time to calm down and think about your anger. Interrupt your anger cycle so that you can think over what is happening. If you are arguing with another person, take time out if you need it.

6. Don't continue to argue or respond to another person if the argument or your emotional reactions are getting out of hand. If you are about to lose control, remove yourself from the people around you. Let others know: "I need to take some time to think this over before we go on."

7. After you are out of the situation take time to relax or meditate. Distract yourself. Let go of some of your tension. This will help you think more clearly.

8. Try to empathize with the person with whom you are angry. Even if your position and feelings are justified, take a moment to think about the situation from the other person's point of view. What could be happening in their life which led to their behavior? Is there any chance that in their situation, you would have done the same thing? How might they be feeling? What kind of tensions might have produced their actions? You are not the center of the universe. Other people have stresses and circumstances which you don't know about.

9. Use assertiveness or problem solving to deal with the situation causing your anger. Create a plan to alleviate or change situations. It can help people to feel better and calmer when they know that they have taken action.

10. Realize that it's okay to let go of your anger and to forgive. You don't have to prove anything to anybody. You can choose to let go of your upset. You have the right to not be burdened with it the rest of the day.

Other chapters which you may find helpful and are relevant to coping with anger include:

- Chapter 2 What is Stress and What is Coping?
- Chapter 3 Coping with Negative Thoughts
- Chapter 4 You Can Assert Yourself
- Chapter 11 Coping with Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Chapter 14 Coping with Relationship Problems
- Chapter 16 Coping with Perfectionism

Further Reading for Clients

- Bilodeau, L. (1992). The anger workbook. Center City: Minn: Hazeldon Educational Materials.
- Ellis, A. (1992). Anger: How to live with and without it. Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group.
- Tavris, C. (1982). Anger: The misunderstood emotion. New York: Touchstone.
- Weisinger, H. (1985). Dr. Weisinger's anger work out book: Step by step methods for greater productivity, better relationships, healthier life. New York: William Morrow Co.
- Williams, R., & Williams, V. (1993). Anger kills: 17 strategies for controlling the hostility that can harm your health. New York: Times Books.

Further Reading for Therapists

- Beck, A. (1999). Prisoners of hate: The cognitive basis of anger, hostility, and violence. New York: HarperCollins.