

Anger Management

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Everybody Gets Angry

Anger is a natural emotion and not necessarily bad. It can give you information about situations and it can make you feel strong. It is the behavior that follows anger that often gets people into trouble. Reacting to being cut off in traffic by provoking an altercation with the other driver can get you into trouble. Screaming at your roommate at the top of your lungs can get you into trouble. Telling your parents that they are jerks, ditto. All of these reactions to anger will probably lead to a negative outcome. And while we can't always control our feelings, our behavior is something over which we have some control. And learning to control our behavior when we are angry is a goal that is attainable.

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Identifying Your Anger

The first step in learning to control your anger is to know when you are angry. This may not be as easy as it sounds. It is not unusual for people to feel a certain emotion without realizing what they are feeling. A quick way to help determine if you are holding angry feelings without realizing it is to do a body scan. Are your fists clenched? Are you frowning? Are your muscles tensed in general? These are often signs of anger.

In addition, monitor your thinking. If thoughts like, "I hate that jerk!" or "That's unfair," or "I'm gonna get that guy!" are in your head, that's a sure sign you are feeling angry. It may be helpful to write down some of your thoughts and feelings when you are feeling upset. Besides providing a way to vent, this can help you figure out if you are feeling angry or sad or something else.

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Trigger Thoughts

Trigger thoughts are thoughts that automatically enter your head and trigger certain emotions. This can happen with any emotion, but anger is particularly vulnerable to triggering. For example, if you see people across the room laughing and looking in your direction, you may think, "Those people are ridiculing me!" This could lead to angry feelings, which could lead to retaliatory behavior, such as starting a fight with the people. It is important to remind yourself that trigger thoughts may or may not be based on accurate

perceptions. In the example above, the people across the room may or may not have actually been ridiculing you. They may have been laughing at something else entirely.

Trigger thoughts fall into two categories:

- 1) The belief that you've been harmed, ridiculed or victimized.
- 2) The belief that the other person means to do you harm.

The key point about trigger thoughts is that they may escalate an angry situation without any basis in reality. It is important that we try to recognize our trigger thoughts, so that we can step back and assess how accurate they are. In this way we can halt any escalating event that may lead to intense feelings that are difficult to control. Again, keeping a record or journal of our thoughts when we get angry is a first step towards changing patterns of anger.

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Alternative Behaviors

The next step after identifying your anger and the cognitions that perpetuate it is to find alternative behaviors to express anger. This means substituting behaviors that will help the situation for behaviors that will make the situation worse. For example, if a roommate wakes you up at 4 a.m., a counter-productive behavior would be screaming at your roommate. The result of this action would be to escalate your own anger, make your roommate defensive and angry and perhaps wake up others in the residence hall. A more productive response would be to assertively state to your roommate that you do not appreciate being woken up at 4 a.m., and that the two of you need to work out a plan so that it doesn't happen again. Of course, it is not easy to be so rational when you are upset. The key is practice. Practicing alternative behaviors to angry situations that may arise is the best way of helping yourself be in control of what you do. It may sound silly, but actually making a list of and then acting out possible productive behaviors helps keep you in control of how you act.

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Assertive vs. Aggressive Behavior

Using assertive behavior results in positive outcomes. This is true in most situations, but especially ones involving anger. It is important to distinguish between assertive behavior and aggressive behavior. **Assertive behavior** involves standing up for personal rights and expressing yourself in direct ways that do not violate another person's rights. The goal of assertive behavior is communication with mutuality. **Aggressive behavior** involves standing up for personal rights as well, but in a manner that is indirect and in violation of the rights of others. Its goal tends to be domination and "winning." Some of the components of each are listed below:

Assertive Style

- uses "I" statements and takes responsibility for one's feelings

- negotiates clearly for what is wanted
- cites specific problem behaviors and what changes are desired
- avoids exaggerating with words such as always and never
- repeats appropriate requests in a calm manner

Aggressive Style

- uses “you” statements to blame or intimidate
- uses threats, put-downs and name-calling
- sets up “win-lose” situations instead of negotiating
- does not listen to the other side
- tries to use power to manipulate others

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Where Does Anger Come From?

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, anger is a natural emotion and is not necessarily “bad.” It can let you know when things are not right. Everybody feels anger sometimes. Do some people experience it more often than others? Maybe. Do people tend to express it differently? Definitely. There are many theories as to why this is, but it does seem true that people can learn patterns of emotional expression from their family, while growing up. Recognizing this can give us a better understanding of why we express anger (or any emotion) the way we do.

You can think about this for yourself by asking yourself the following questions:

- How was anger expressed by my parents?
- How did my family react when I expressed anger? Was it acceptable?
- Were there subtle messages controlling how anger was expressed?
- Was anger quickly forgotten, or did it linger on?

Looking at your answers to these questions, you may be able to better understand your own feelings about anger and how you let others know that you are angry.

Sometimes, excessive irritability and anger is a symptom of depression or anxiety. If you are also having difficulty with sleep, mood, appetite or other emotional difficulties, consult with a mental health professional to assess this possibility.

For More Information

More information about anger and aggression is available at [Mental Health Net](#).

In addition, [Controlling Anger Before It Controls You](#) is an excellent online brochure from the American Psychological Association