



Managing Anger

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

In my practice as a psychologist, I've worked with many people who were experiencing problems with anger. When angry, they'd do things that would frighten or upset others around them, things they would later regret.

Most often they would criticize harshly and use name-calling. Sometimes they would become physical with their anger, pushing or hitting someone or something, throwing things, or just threatening to do so. When anger moves from words to actions, the risk of danger increases as well.

These problems would occur when anger was inadequately controlled. So what is anger?

First, it's important to know that anger is a basic human emotion. It's a normal reaction when we feel frustrated, blocked, hurt or cheated. Everyone gets angry, at least sometimes. Feeling angry is normal and by itself it is not a problem.

Anger, like other emotions, can be described as having three components. They are the feeling component, the physical component, and the thinking component.

We are all familiar with what anger feels like. It's that hot, explosive, energy that is usually directed outward, away from ourselves. The physical component includes the bodily sensations such as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, reddening of the face, and over-energized muscles that result in tremors in the hands.

Finally there is the thinking component. This includes our memory of how we have acted in similar situations. We may re-play in our mind the same painful situation, over and over. Unfortunately this serves to perpetuate our anger rather than to calm it. Or we may re-play the same situation in our mind, but imagine ourselves acting differently. This can help us develop a better response to the same situation in the future.

We are all going to feel angry now and then. What is important is not the sensation of anger, but what we do with it. If we let the feeling, thinking, and physical components of anger overwhelm us, we may act in a destructive and aggressive way.

When we're angry, we have many options for how to act. Anger is a powerful motivator. It can help us to confront uncomfortable situations, get us to organize ourselves in the face of stress or pressure, or energize us to take on difficult tasks.

But anger, when uncontrolled, can cause us to go the other way. We can get heated and maybe over-react. We may find ourselves attacking the problem (tearing up the homework or kicking the car), or we may start attacking the person that we feel is causing the problem (yelling at him or her, screaming, punishing or hitting). This is when our anger can get us in trouble. After this kind of angry outburst we often feel embarrassed or guilty.

Now for the good news... We can change how we react to our anger. We can learn new ways to deal with anger when it arises.

Methods that Relieve Anger

Walk away – When angry, there’s probably nothing more important than taking a few minutes alone before doing anything. Getting away from the problem can be highly effective. So put some space between you and the source of your frustration. Plan to go back and work on solving the problem later, after you've calmed down.

Delay - Count to ten before acting or speaking. If you’re very angry, count to a hundred.

Reason with yourself – One of the most effective strategies for managing anger is to be aware of the thoughts that accompany anger, and redirect your thinking away from those thoughts. Ask yourself, "Is this situation worth it?" If the answer is NO, allow yourself to calm down. You can use some of these other techniques to help with that. If the answer is YES, plan an appropriate and non-aggressive response to the situation and then follow your plan.

Breathe – When angry, we tend to hyperventilate. We tend to take short, shallow breaths. But we can actually change how we feel by changing how we breathe. By taking deep, rhythmic breaths, we begin to feel calm.

Exercise – Exercise helps to reduce anger. It burns off the excess energy. Whatever you do for exercise—working out with weights, marshal arts, yoga, running, swimming, walking—do it whenever you feel anger starting to rise.

Talk to someone you trust – By talking about your problems, you can reduce their emotional impact. Just getting some of your problems off your chest can be a relief. But also, the act of describing problems helps your mind to get a perspective on them and to start finding solutions. Of course it’s enlightening to hear someone else’s perspective too.

Use humor – Humor can stop anger in its tracks. When anger begins to escalate, think of anything that will make you laugh. The laughter can immediately change the way you feel.

According to Andy Mark, M.Ed., a psychotherapist at Upper Bay Counseling, and co-facilitator of Upper Bay’s Anger Management Group for Men, “People who have problems managing anger can help themselves by developing an anger control plan. First they need to recognize their anger and, when it starts to escalate, they need to act. At that point they need to use some method to bring the anger down, and do it quickly. Many methods work but different methods work for different people.” The methods listed above can help. Try them and see which ones work for you.

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