



MANAGING ANGER

People become angry in response to either external or internal events. For example, we may feel anger in response to the behaviour of a specific person, such as a spouse or a co-worker; or in response to an incident, such as being stuck in traffic or waiting in line at a checkout counter; or as a result of our own thoughts and feelings — things such as worry, fear, hurt, or the memory of upsetting events. Some experts say that anger is a secondary emotion that is triggered by another emotion such as hurt, fear, or frustration. Thus, to resolve the feelings of anger, it is necessary to identify and express the primary emotions that lie beneath the anger.

Feelings of anger are neither good nor bad. The important thing to realize is that we have the ability to choose our responses to our feelings. Our way of dealing with angry feelings can be either negative or positive, leading to either a destructive or constructive outcome for ourselves or those around us.

How is Anger Harmful?

Psychologists have long disagreed about the value of venting feelings. Recent research shows that expressing anger often results in more irritation and tension, rather than in feeling more calm. Giving vent to anger can produce the following harmful effects: The problem causing the anger becomes worse rather than better. The person venting the anger seems negative and intimidating, driving others away. People who are frequently angry tend to develop more physical problems, particularly in the areas of heart and blood pressure, stomach and intestines, and the nervous system.

Why do People Become Angry?

Many times we feel anger to avoid feeling some other emotion, such as anxiety or hurt, or when we are frustrated because we want something and can't have it. Sometimes, feeling angry is a way of mobilizing ourselves in the face of a threat.

Anger may also be a response to stressful situations, such as being in a hurry, feeling overwhelmed or overworked, feeling attacked, feeling out of control. For example, you may have been rushing all day in your home office to meet an impossible deadline. Your daughter bounces in after school and gives you a big hug as you furiously type on your computer. You snap, "Not now! Can't you see I'm busy!"

Alternatives to Becoming Angry

There are constructive things we can do to deal with stress instead of becoming angry. Here are a few examples: Do relaxation exercises. Practice deep breathing. Exercise: take a walk or play a sport; beat a pillow. Listen to your favourite music. Make a joke of the situation; play a game. Take a nap. Talk to someone about the situation.

Anger Prevention

An angry response often results when we are unhappy with someone else's behaviour. Here are some other responses we can choose instead:

- **Set limits.** Let's say a friend hasn't returned a book you lent her. Now she wants to borrow another one. You could say, "I'm not going to be able to lend you this book until you return the first one."
- **Don't wait.** When you realize that you're feeling annoyed by a situation, speak up. Don't wait until your annoyance escalates to anger.

- **Be assertive.** Say what you want from the other person in a positive way. For example, say, “Please call me when you get home,” rather than “Would you mind giving me a call when you get home?”

How to Stop the Anger Spiral

Once we begin to feel angry, there are several things we can do to stop the process of spiralling out of control. Here are a few ideas:

- **Call a time-out.** This is an effective technique for breaking the sequence of behaviour that leads to a conflict. Both people need to agree to use it. Either person in an interaction can initiate a time-out. It is mutually understood that both parties will return at a later time to resolve the issues.
- **Check it out.** If anger is a response to personal pain, ask the other person, “What’s bothering you?” or “What do you need right now?”
- **Make positive statements.** Memorize a few positive statements to say to ourselves when our anger is triggered. These statements can be a reminder that we can choose our behaviour instead of reacting in a knee-jerk manner. For example, we might say: “I can take care of my own needs.” “Her needs are just as important as mine.” “I am able to make good choices.”

Families are places where unmanaged anger can cause profound distress. IFL therapists can be a valuable resource when help is needed for learning skills to manage anger and to resolve conflicts creatively.

For Further Reading:

Carter, Les. and Minirth, Frank. *The Anger Workbook*. Thomas Nelson Pub., 1992.
 Lerner, Harriet. *The Dance of Anger*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985; 1997.
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 Rosellini, Gayle and Worden, Mark. *Of Course You’re Angry*. 2nd ed. Center City, MN: Hazelden Foundation, 1997.



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