

Controlling Anger

What is it like to be angry?

- Jim is travelling to work along a busy street, when a car stops in front of his bus. Some time goes by and the traffic lights turn from red to green and back again. Still nothing happens and Jim starts to feel tension rising and a tight feeling in his stomach. He begins to curse the driver in his mind “Stupid, lazy, selfishly holding everyone up, he’ll make me late”. The feeling builds up, he begins to feel hot. Someone brushes against him by accident, he turns on them, swears and pushes them away roughly.
- Michelle is feeling tired and she has a headache so she sends the children outdoors to play, telling them not to disturb her. After half an hour, she hears a loud noise and shouting so she goes out to see what is happening. The youngest child is sitting on the path and crying with a small cut on her chin and the older ones are just looking on and doing nothing. She feels relief that nothing more serious appears wrong, and then a sudden surge of fury takes hold. She thinks “Why can’t they do as they are told?” and “Why do they always let me down?” She gets more angry and feels a pounding in her head, her legs start to tremble, and things seem to look misty or unreal, as though a curtain has come down. All she can think about is grabbing the nearest of the older children. She thinks: “I’ll teach you not to do that again”.
- After work, you go to pick up a newspaper from your local shop. You’re waiting to pay when a couple push in front of you as though you weren’t there. You try and keep your temper and not say anything, telling yourself it’s not worth getting upset about. They take their time, finally as they reach the door, one of them looks back and catches your eye for a few seconds. Then she turns around and says something to her friend and they both laugh as they leave the shop. You feel angry and think: “They’ve made a fool of me”, the rest of your day is spoilt, you can’t relax and you feel irritable.

You may have been in situations like these and had some thoughts which are described. Everyone feels angry at times and this is often due to life stresses such as money or housing problems or difficulties in relationships. For some people the problem becomes much worse and gets in the way of normal life.

Anger becomes a **problem** when it becomes **too strong**, happens **too often**, lasts **too long**, **spoils relationships** or **work** and if in particular it leads to **violence** or **aggression**.

How Can This Guide Help Me?

You may feel that you can do little to control your anger – but there are things that you can do to make a difference.

This guide aims to help you cope with anger.

Understanding Anger and Its Causes

Anger affects the way we **feel, think and behave**. It causes a number of symptoms in our body. It can be caused by our **reactions** to things happening around us or by our **own thoughts and worries**. If you have a problem with anger you probably already know it, but these are some of the signs that you may have difficulty controlling anger.

How you feel:

- Anger or rage
- Irritable at the slightest thing
- Restless, on edge, uptight
- Flashes of rage

How you think:

- Poor concentration – mind goes blank when angry
- Everything seems like a big problem
- Thinking the worse of people
- Others seem unfair to you

Common thoughts:

- “You / they have ruined everything”
- “You have made a fool of me”
- “If I don’t do something I’ll explode”
- “You / they deserve this”
- “I can’t trust anyone”
- “You are never there for me”

What happens to your body:

- Heart pounds, races, skips a beat
- Chest feels tight
- Stomach churns
- Legs go weak
- Tense muscles
- Go very hot
- Having to go to the toilet
- Sweating
- Head buzzing, pounding

What you might do:

- Snappy and irritable behaviour
- Shout and argue
- Hit out
- Leave the situation
- Throw / hit an object / slam door
- Attack someone
- Say something unkind
- Cry
- Push someone
- Do nothing, bottle it up
- Get drunk / smoke / take drugs
- Hurt yourself

If you are regular experiencing some or all of these signs you may have difficulty with anger control. The following section may help you to tackle this problem.

What is Anger?

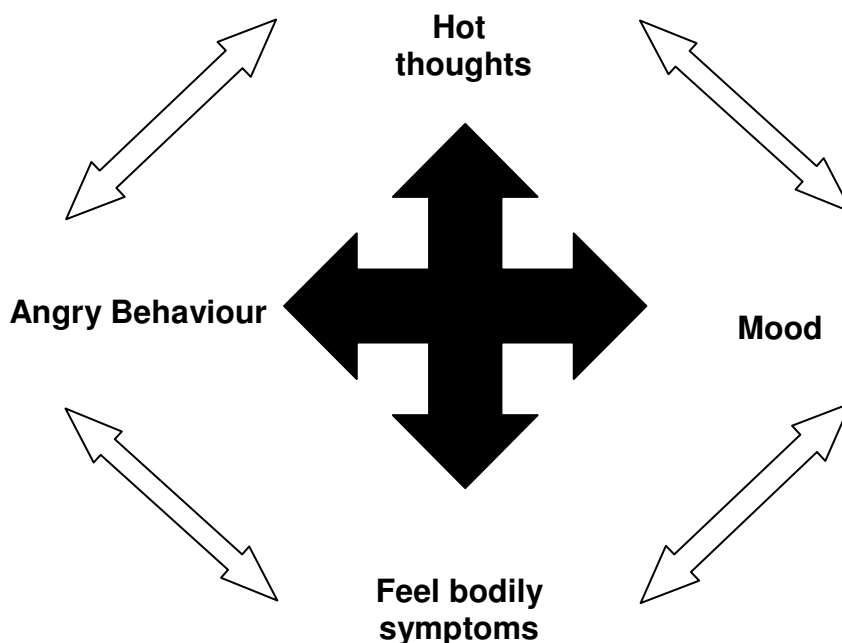
Often when we are angry, the main thing that we are aware of is our angry mood. Our mood can vary in strength from a mild irritation to a white hot rage. When it reaches it strongest, it is unlikely we will be aware of much else. However, when we look for causes of our anger, we most often direct our attention outwards, to events or people in our immediate world or surroundings. For instance, the lazy motorist holding up traffic in the first example at the beginning of this leaflet, the careless children in the second, or the rude behaviour of the people in the shop.

Vicious Circle of Anger

Outside World

- Problems with Others
- Debts and practical problems
- Frustrating events or situations
- Stress – no time for yourself

Inner World



All of these parts of anger can affect each other and anger can spiral out of control. Angry behaviour can cause an angry response from others. Bodily signs of anger can lead us to feel out of control and this can make our mood worse. Angry 'hot' thoughts can make us feel more enraged.

What Causes Anger?

Anger can vary from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. As with all emotion, bodily changes go with it – heart rate goes up, blood pressure goes up as our body is prepared for fight or flight (to get away). It can be caused by reacting to things outside us such as people or events or by worrying over our personal problems. Upsetting memories from the past can lead to angry thoughts and feelings. It is not people or events that make you angry it is your reaction to them that makes you angry.

Some people tend to be more angry than others. They can't take things in their stride. It may be that some people are naturally like this from birth but also that they have not learned to handle anger to and to express their feelings in other ways.

Getting angry is never helpful and the belief that you can feel better is not true. Being angry means you do not learn to handle the situation. It is best to begin to understand your anger and gain control over it.

Controlling Anger

We have seen that thoughts can make us feel angry but often people who have a problem with anger do not notice these angry thoughts. It is important in trying to gain control over anger, that we begin to recognise and challenge those thoughts. Hot thoughts are angry thoughts that flash in your mind and make you feel worse. People tend to have similar thoughts happening again and again; "He is so stupid", "I hate this place". These hot thoughts are often backed up by negative thinking. It may help you to decide if you are making any of the following thinking errors.

- ***Taking things personally***

People who are angry often take things personally and feel hurt by it. They look for and expect criticism from other people. If for example someone doesn't speak to them in a shop they may feel that the person doesn't like them, when in fact they could be shy or worried.

- ***Ignoring the positive***

People who get angry tend to focus their thinking on negative or bad events and ignore positive or good events. In the examples at the beginning of the leaflet Michelle thought about one small accident and not about the half an hour quiet play before it. This is often a problem for people who get angry with those close to them.

- **Perfectionism**

People who become angry often expect too much from themselves or those around them. If these standards are not met then they feel badly let down and hurt. This hurt becomes anger.

For example: Suzy had a friend who had agreed to go on holiday with her but let her down at the last minute. Suzy felt the friend had failed her and decided that she did not want to see her again. This was despite the fact that the friend was good to her on many other occasions.

Black and White thinking

Thinking in black and white, all or nothing, is common in people who get very angry.

If you find yourself making thinking errors it can help to try and think more balanced thoughts. One way of doing this is to write two columns, one for angry thoughts and one for balanced thoughts.

Angry Thoughts

- “He is looking over here at me and thinks I’m stupid”
- “They always let me down”
- “She doesn’t care about me, she is selfish”

Balanced Thoughts

- “He is looking over here but I don’t know what he is really thinking”
- “They sometimes behave badly but at times they are really OK”
- “I know she let me down but she does care, she usually tries to be kind”

Beliefs about anger that can be unhelpful

Some people hold beliefs that makes it harder for them to bring their anger under control. The beliefs sometimes excuse anger or make it seem its their only response. The beliefs are sometimes held because of life experiences or personal values. People may have lived with these beliefs for so long that they can accept them without question, but it is important to question them to help overcome anger.

Belief

- I cant control my anger, my father was angry, is it something I have inherited from him?
- If I don’t let my anger out I’ll explode.

Challenge to the belief

- This is an excuse for not controlling your anger. We should learn to tackle our anger when responding to events and people.
- It is a popular belief that emotions build up like steam in a pressure cooker and need some way out. If you hold this point of view losing your temper could be seen as healthy but people tend to feel much worse after losing control of anger.

Belief

- If you don't show anger you are either a saint or a wimp.
- My anger is something people fear and it stops them taking advantage of me.
- If I get angry it takes my anxiety away.
- I have good reason to be angry because of things other people have done to me.

Challenge to the belief

This is an example of black and white thinking. The best way to deal with situations is not to be angry and out of control but to be firm, sure and in control – be assertive.

Anger as a protector is dangerous. It may be correct at one particular time but if you continue it can cause problems. Good friendships are not based on fear and you are unlikely to have good friendships because of your angry behaviour. It is also likely to backfire on you and others who have problems with your anger may threaten you or possibly pick a fight with you.

This is often a belief of people who have been victims of violence or aggression. It is better to tackle your anxiety in other ways. Anxiety can be overcome by facing what you feel and finding ways of overcoming it.

Anger is a natural reaction when we have been mistreated or taken advantage of. If this anger continues into all areas of your life it will cause difficulties for you.

Controlling The Symptoms of Anger

Relaxing and calming methods can help to reduce angry feelings. You, and your partner if you have one, should learn to use the following approaches if you are in a difficult situation.

Symptom

- Reduce physical symptoms

Action

- Reduce the severity of the symptom by nipping it in the bud and recognising the early signs of tension and anger. Once you have noticed the early signs you can prevent anger becoming to severe. Try to relax through exercise or yoga, listening to music or a relaxation tape, reading a book or picturing a pleasant scene in your mind.

Symptom

- Control your breathing

Action

- It is common for changes in breathing to occur when someone becomes angry. They begin to gulp, think they are suffocating or breathe very quickly. This is called over-breathing and can cause dizziness and more tension. If you are doing this try and slow your breathing down. Get into a regular rhythm and soon your breathing will return to normal.

Controlling Angry Behaviours

If we challenge our angry thoughts and reduce the physical symptoms of anger we should not get to the point where we behave angrily. If we do not manage this then we need to tackle the angry behaviours we might normally show.

- **Stage 1**

Be very clear about what your angry behaviours are – what comes before them and what happens afterwards. It might help to keep a diary over a short period of time to help you understand this.

- **Stage 2**

Make a list of other things you can do instead of behaving angrily. When you have done this choose the best new approaches to try. For example, excuse yourself and leave the situation for a minute and return when you are calmer or take a deep breath and relax for a second or two.

- **Stage 3**

Try to adopt the new behaviour in a situation where you feel angry and keep a diary of how it went. Helpful ideas for changing angry behaviours can be; use a quick relaxation/breathing exercise, talk to people calmly, avoid situations that make you particularly angry, count to ten before responding.

Problem Solving

Sometimes real worries and stresses make us more irritable and angry. A problem solving approach may help with this.

- Write down your problem and describe it as clearly as you can, trying not to be too vague.
- Next write down as many possible solutions as you can no matter how silly you think they are. Think about how you have solved a similar problem in the past. Think to yourself what you might advise a friend to do if they had the same problem.

- Choose what seems to be the best solution and write down all the steps it would take to achieve this solution; who might help, what might go wrong, what's the worst thing that could happen?
- If you think of a plan to cope your anxiety might reduce. If you are trying to come up with a plan to tackle a problem that has been worrying you for some time, it is often helpful to discuss this with a friend, GP or even your care co-ordinator.

Life is stressful and it is easy for pressures to build up. We cannot always control stress from outside but we can reduce the pressure we put on ourselves. Try and identify situation that you find stressful and take steps to tackle these situations. Make sure you have time for the things you enjoy or take up a relaxing hobby. Always try to get enough sleep, eat a well-balanced diet and take regular exercise.

Remember: Slow down and listen to other people and don't rush in and say the first thing in your head. Don't jump to conclusions about what another person is saying or doing. Don't fight back but try and understand the feelings of others. Try and keep calm.

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