

Notice:

This information is given for informational and educational purposes only and is not intended to be treatment or counseling advice.

Anger Management

Angry feelings vs. angry behaviour

The first thing to understand is that **anger is not the problem**. We are built to get angry when we are threatened and anger is part of our survival system. Without it, the human race wouldn't have had much of a history. Anger achieves many good things; it gives us energy to defend ourselves, to fight for justice and a better world and to stand up to oppression and tyranny on both personal and public levels. It is not a particularly comfortable emotion: it makes us feel restless and agitated, but in itself it is not dangerous to our welfare.

The problem lies in the **behaviour** that we exhibit when we are angry. Angry feelings may cause us to shout or become violent, to sulk, to seek revenge, to break off relationships, to use sarcasm or be verbally cruel, to retreat into resentful silence, to physically hurt ourselves or damage objects. It is the anti-social behaviour that is the problem, not the feeling which prompts it.

It is important to understand this distinction. It would be a hopeless task to try to stop feeling angry; anger is too instinctual and intrinsic to our human nature for that. Might as well try to stop your heart beating. But you can, if you wish, stop behaving angrily or indeed, if called for, behave more angrily. In other words, you have a choice about your behaviour. Equally, you can blame someone else for making you feel angry, but you can blame no-one but yourself for your angry behaviour.

Anger management may be an issue for you if you behave too angrily, can't behave angrily or you are the victim of someone's angry behaviour.

Too much angry behaviour

Manifestations: violence, shouting, smashing things, bullying, frequent sulking, planning and executing revenge, complaining, sarcasm, cruel remarks or jokes, talking behind people's backs, fostering prejudice, self harm, such as cutting or burning, suicide attempts.

Possible effects: few friends, unhappy or broken relationships, making enemies, damaged possessions/ environment, poor self-esteem, being feared and avoided by others, being mistrusted, being lied to, being misunderstood and misjudged, punishment, exclusion.

Causes: The causes of **angry feelings** are manifold – being hurt, abused or betrayed in some way by people who matter to you or by people who don't, being the victim of prejudice or injustice, experiencing painful life events, such as bereavement, change or illness. Fear is often a big cause of anger; we feel angry when our comfort or security is threatened. Sexual jealousy and loneliness can also fuel the flames, as can the frustrations of a physical or learning disability. Low self-esteem is another cause. Poor communication skills or low confidence in your ability to communicate can lead to frustration.

The causes of **angry behaviour** are different. They include:

- Alcohol and certain drugs.
- Withdrawal from drugs, including nicotine
- Being exposed to a lot of angry behaviour or talk in care-givers when a child
- Infantile anger not well-managed by care-givers e.g. indulging toddler tantrums
- Inconsistent treatment in childhood by care-givers
- A family or neighbourhood culture which tolerates and expects angry behaviour
- Watching television, where angry behaviour is often presented as the norm

What to do about it

- Do not rubbish or ignore your angry feelings. Try to work out what has caused, or is causing, them, which will help you to feel more rational and in control.
- Do take responsibility for your behaviour. Other people may make you feel angry, but only you choose to behave as you do.
- Recognise that you already can and do keep control (unless you kill someone every time you lose it!). If you already control yourself up to a point, you can extend this control.
- If your angry behaviour is associated with alcohol or drugs, admit the connection and moderate your intake, or stop altogether, before you really hurt others or yourself.
- Be honest with yourself. Teasing, joking at the expense of another or 'winding someone up' are all types of angry behaviour. Try to work out why you're feeling so aggressive towards the person you're treating this way and talk to them about it seriously, or, if you don't know them very well, keep out of their way.
- Be honest to others about your angry feelings, expressing them in a controlled way.
- If you're prone to 'go off on one' or to lash out physically at people or property, count to 10 before you lose it. Use that little pause to think do you really want to do this? and what will be the consequences? Make yourself do this – you can, if you want to - every time. You will still be angry, but you will be in control.
- Find safe ways to express your anger. Talking about your angry feelings is a good, safe way to let them out. You can also work off some frustration by pummelling a cushion or pacing up and down, or by taking vigorous exercise.
- Give yourself a cool-down period. Don't be embarrassed to say that you're too worked up to continue with a conversation and you will come back to it later.
- Never use a text message or an e-mail to say what you wouldn't say to someone's face. You may feel detached from the message, but the person on the receiving end won't. Rude, aggressive texts and e-mails are abusive and bullying. If you've got an issue with someone tell them about it face to face and give them a chance to explain.
- Don't feed your anger with prejudice. Think through your opinions and make sure you have sound evidence for them.
- Remember that you don't own anyone other than yourself. Other people may hurt and offend you by their behaviour, but that doesn't give you the right to control them. Talk to them about your feelings. If you get nowhere, just leave and stay away.
- If you know that you feel irritated by, or in strong disagreement with, someone else, avoid them as much as possible and when you can't, remember that it takes all sorts to make a world and you can agree to disagree.
- Know your vulnerable times –stress, fatigue, PMT, and watch it!
- Keep saying to yourself –'it's not that other people are annoying, it's that I get annoyed'.
- Much can be remedied by a heartfelt apology.

Not behaving angrily enough

For some, the problem is not failing to keep their temper but not ever being able to protest when they feel they are getting a raw deal. Such people are a lot less likely to get into trouble or to do harm to others or the environment, but they may do enormous harm to themselves and their relationships.

Causes of not behaving angrily - even when it's appropriate:

- Exposure to out-of-control angry behaviour when small, leading to great fear of manifest anger and its consequences
- Lack of manifest anger in childhood role models, so that you literally don't know what to do or say to show anger
- Social conditioning e.g. it's not ladylike to be cross
- A strong preference for being the victim rather than the perpetrator
- Feeling powerless in a relationship and afraid to show anger
- Feeling responsible for another person, so disguising your anger in case it upsets them
- Not wanting to 'ruffle the surface', 'upset the apple-cart' etc
- Believing that your needs don't matter
- Fearing that you will cause offence and lose friends
- Fearing that if you start behaving angrily, you won't know where to stop

Possible Effects: you may be abused, neglected, put upon, misunderstood, overlooked; others may feel guilty; others may be kept in ignorance when they'd prefer to know; you may feel bitter and badly done to; your anger may build to a point where it can't be appeased so that you end friendships and relationships; you may become ill as a way of expressing your feelings; you may avoid others because the strain of 'keeping them sweet' is too much.

What to do about it

- Be honest with yourself – admit to feeling angry and practice positive ways of expressing your feelings. (If you really don't feel angry when you have just cause, i.e. someone betrays or mistreats you, then ask yourself what's going on.)
- Recognise that no-one is going to be grateful or love you better because you swallow your anger; they just won't know that you're angry.
- Beware the accumulation of unspoken grievances, which will definitely increase your angry feelings, and may eventually result in going to the other extreme of too much angry behaviour.
- This is a hard question, but ask yourself if you are accepting someone else's bad behaviour so that you can polish your halo? Might the other person behave a little less badly, if you behaved a little more angrily? (This does not mean taking responsibility for their behaviour; it means taking responsibility for yours by dealing honestly with your issues rather than letting someone else be at fault while you feel smug).
- Don't worry about how to do it. Few of us are dignified in our angry behaviour. Just have a go at expressing how you feel in the best way you can.
- Strike while the iron's hot. Use your angry feeling to give you the impetus to speak out. If you find that you've got it wrong, apologise.
- Remember that you can stay in control of your behaviour, so you need not be afraid of the feeling of anger. If you have witnessed others being out of control of their anger – it was the behaviour that was frightening to you, not the feeling itself.
- Get used to acknowledging your angry feelings to yourself, before you launch them on an unsuspecting public. Others may not give you too much encouragement, preferring you to 'put up and shut up', but in the longer term they will appreciate knowing where they stand.

- Sort out in your head that you will not become a bad person by feeling angry; it is the way you show it that is more or less harmful to others. Find positive ways of expressing your anger, which will not be oppressive to others.
- Watch out for hidden angry behaviour – talking about someone behind their back, teasing, joking. Would it be fairer and more honest to speak directly to the person you're annoyed with?
- Don't assume that someone else's welfare will be better protected if you bite your tongue. On the contrary they may be left with illusions about themselves or you.
- Don't get carried away – the point is not to exchange too little for too much angry behaviour, but to find a happy medium.

Coping with another person's angry behaviour

There's a good chance that you are looking at these web-pages not on your own behalf, but because you are on the receiving end of someone else's over-the-top angry behaviour. This other could be a partner, a teenager, a boss, a colleague, a neighbour.

It's not pleasant to be on the receiving end of angry behaviour and you may well wish to find out all you can and do anything within your power to put a stop to it. But the truth is, this is not your problem and you cannot resolve it. The owner of the angry behaviour has the problem and only they can resolve it.

This won't be much comfort if you're covered in bruises to your body or your ego from someone else's cruel behaviour and you may well feel that you do have the problem. You have every right to protect yourself, to walk away, to seek redress, to deal with the problem that the other person's angry behaviour is giving you. But you cannot control someone else's behaviour and nor are you responsible for it. They might try to imply that you are ('you wound me up'). Your behaviour may cause feelings of anger in someone else, but remember that, like the rest of us, that someone has choices about how to behave.

So, for instance, you flirt with someone else while out with your partner. Understandably the partner feels hurt and annoyed. S/he needs to deal with that. But that in no way makes it alright for him or her to beat you up when you both get home.

For instance again: you annoy your teenage son/daughter by refusing to lend them money until they tidy their room. That does not give them the right to trash your property and disappear into the night without saying where they will be.

In both cases there are other ways for the annoyed person to deal with their grievances.

Once you are clear about who has the problem, it should become easier for you to resolve the situation for yourself. If you believe you are in physical danger, then get to safety as quickly as possible and get help. If it's not quite as urgent as that, but someone is behaving towards you in an unreasonable way, keep your nerve and don't give in to the bullying behaviour. Say you'll discuss the matter later when the other person has calmed down, or point out that they are unlikely to get what they want by behaving in such a repellent way. Or ignore them. Put the phone down, walk away. It's really not your problem. If they need to discuss an issue with you, there are other ways, But be sure to respond to honest and reasonably expressed disclosures of anger, otherwise, **you** will be the unreasonable one.