

Anger Toolkit

We all feel angry at times, and we all know angry people who are very hard to live with. Anger is generally not a comfortable emotion, but it is a normal, healthy emotion. We often get angry after we feel hurt or vulnerable. Anger gives us some power to strike back. When hurt or vulnerability becomes anger we don't feel as helpless. Anger helps us respond to threats. It allows us to lash out and to defend ourselves when we are attacked. Anger becomes a problem when we act on the anger in ways that are destructive to others.

What Are the Dangers of Suppressed Anger? Suppressed anger can be an underlying cause of anxiety and depression. Anger that is not appropriately expressed can disrupt relationships, affect thinking and behavior patterns, and create a variety of physical problems. Chronic (long-term) anger has been linked to health issues such as high blood pressure, heart problems, headaches, skin disorders and digestive problems. In addition, anger can be linked to problems such as crime, emotional and physical abuse, and other violent behavior. While it is natural to strike out when we feel angry, this striking out involves a choice to act on the anger.

Here are some more effective ways to manage anger; some techniques, some ways to manage emotions, and finally some “do’s and don’ts by some best selling authors on the subject of anger management.

Four Proven Techniques for Managing Anger

1. The first step towards managing anger in our personal relationships appropriately is the identification of the mistaken attitudes and convictions that predispose us to being excessively angry in the first place! Once these mistakes have been corrected, we will be less likely to fly off the handle than we were in the past.
2. The second step is the identification of those factors from our childhood that prevents us from expressing our anger as appropriately as we otherwise might. These factors include fear, denial, and ignorance and so on. These impediments to the effective and appropriate management of our anger towards others can be removed so that our suppressed anger will NOT compound itself inside of us as it has been doing for years.
3. The third step is learning the appropriate modes of expressing our "legitimate" anger at others so that we can begin to cope more effectively with anger provoking situations as they arise in our personal relationships. When we are anxious or depressed in our relationships, we are often experiencing the consequences of our suppressed anger. The problem is that we have suppressed our anger so deeply that we succeeded in concealing it from our own selves! All

we are left with is the residual evidence of it, our anxiety or our depression. When we are depressed, very often we are also angry at our self without realizing it. Learning to appropriately manage our anger at ourselves is the antidote to much of alcoholism and drug abuse. But the management of our anger does not end in learning these new and more appropriate ways to express it. There remains one last step.

Many of us cannot forgive those who have trespassed against us. Something below the level of our conscious awareness prevents us from relieving our residual anger by forgiving the other person and we then carry a grudge in our hearts for thirty years! This unresolved anger poisons our relationship with our friends and loved ones. It even spoils our relationship with ourselves! We make our own lives mean and miserable instead of happy and full. Very often the feeling is, "Why should I forgive them? What they did was WRONG!" But, is forgiveness for those who only do us right? Most people have a hard time forgiving others simply because they have a wrong understanding of what forgiveness is! When you forgive someone, it does not mean that you condone or are legitimizing their behavior toward you. To forgive them means that you refuse to carry painful and debilitating grudges around with you for the rest of your life! You are "refusing" to cling to the resentment of them having done you wrong. You are giving yourself some immediate relief from your OWN anger!

To forgive, then, is an act that we do on our OWN behalf. It has nothing to do with "lifting" the other person's sin! You are not doing it for their sake. You are doing it for yourself. This is a choice you are making on your OWN terms in order to relieve your OWN pent-up emotions.

4. The fourth step in the Anger Management process is to bind up the wounds that may have been left by the potentially devastating emotional impact of anger. "Anger wounds" left in us against those who have wronged us. If we do not complete this mopping up step, we will cling to the resentment of having been done wrong and will carry the festering residue of our anger and rage in our hearts forever. One of the most effective means of giving ourselves immediate relief from anger in our personal relationships is to forgive others.

There are several ways to manage problematic anger:

Relaxation Techniques - Calming down the autonomic nervous system can help calm down anger. Techniques to try include:

- Breath work technique is a quick relaxation technique
- Meditation - such as the relaxation response or mindfulness meditation.

- Even counting to ten before acting can help you to respond with less aggression rather than simply reacting

Cognitive Techniques that help you change your beliefs and expectations can also help. When you're angry, your thinking can become exaggerated and extreme. Try replacing the extreme thoughts with more reasonable ones. Instead of thinking "This situation is awful, it's terrible" tell yourself, "it's frustrating, it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but I can choose how to act on my anger."

Techniques like cognitive restructuring can help. Repressed anger can cause problems down the road, but that does not mean that it's good to simply express anger. A balanced approach that includes acknowledging anger and choosing how to act seems to work for many people. Anger can be a motivator helping you get things done, or it can become a problem, getting you in trouble. However angry you feel, remember that you can choose how you act on the feeling.

What Steps Can I Take to Help Manage My Anger?

- When you start feeling angry, try deep breathing, positive self-talk, or stopping your angry thoughts. Breathe deeply from your diaphragm. Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax" or "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply until the anger subsides.
- Although expressing anger is better than keeping it in, anger should be expressed in an appropriate way. Frequent outbursts of anger are often counter-productive and cause problems in relationships with others. Anger outbursts are also stressful to your nervous and cardiovascular systems and can make health problems worse. Learning how to use assertiveness is the healthy way to express your feelings, needs and preferences. Being assertive can be used in place of using anger in these situations.
- Seek out the support of others that will not "feed" your anger, but help you get control of your behavior. Talk through your feelings and try to work on changing your behaviors.
- If you have trouble realizing when you are having angry thoughts, keep a log of when you feel angry.
- Try to gain a different perspective by putting yourself in another's place.
- Learn how to laugh at yourself and see humor in situations.
- Practice good listening skills. Listening can help improve communication and can facilitate trusting feelings between people. This trust can help you deal with potentially hostile emotions.

- Learn to assert yourself, expressing your *feelings* calmly and directly without becoming defensive, hostile or emotionally charged up.

What Else Can I Do to Deal With My Anger in a Healthy Way? If you believe that your anger is out of control and is having a negative affect on your life and relationships, seek to develop techniques for changing your thinking and your behavior to deal with your anger in an appropriate way. Learn anger management and assertiveness skills.

Anger is a perfectly normal, healthy emotion -- and a warning that we should pay attention to. It can indicate that we're being harmed, that our needs aren't being met, that we're compromising too much of our own values in a relationship, that our rights are being trampled on, or that we're giving too much at the expense of ourselves. It may also signal that other people are doing so much for us that it's interfering with our own growth. Anger can tell us when we need to say "no" to maintain our own integrity.

But when anger gets out of control, it can be destructive. Studies show that frequent, excessive bouts of anger can often lead to depression. Consider the results of a remarkable study conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. The researchers collected questionnaires filled out by more than 1,100 medical students from 1948 to 1964. Among other things, the students described how they respond to stressful situations. By comparing the results with health records over the next 30 to 40 years, the researchers concluded that hotheaded students were twice as likely as others to eventually sink into depression. They were also about two and a half times more likely to suffer a heart attack.

If anger is a healthy warning signal, why were the hotheaded students most likely to become depressed? The answer may lie in the way they -- and many of us -- express anger.

The Myth of "Venting" There's a myth that simply "venting" your anger will always make you feel better. In reality, it often makes you feel worse. When you feel a rage coming on, a better tactic might be to take a breather and ask yourself what you're really angry about, what the problem is, and how you can communicate your anger without being hostile and attacking.

Simply venting your anger doesn't solve the problem; in fact, it will usually reinforce tired old patterns in a relationship and maintain the status quo, according to psychologist Harriet Lerner. Sometimes it helps to just vent some anger (without being abusive), but it usually guarantees that nothing will change. As Lerner points out in *The Dance of Anger*, "Feelings of depression, low self-esteem, self-betrayal, and even self-hatred are inevitable when we fight but continue to submit to unfair circumstances, when we complain but live in a way that betrays our hopes, values and potentials, or when we find ourselves *fulfilling society's stereotype* of the nagging, bitter, destructive person."

And rage doesn't necessarily disappear when depression sets in. In fact, mood disorders may just add fuel to the fire. According to a recent report in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, about one in three depressed people are also openly hostile. Often, the hostility is accompanied by guilt, anxiety, suspiciousness, and worries about health. In addition, many depressed people have "anger attacks." The slightest annoyance can cause a racing heart beat, sweating, hot flashes, and tightness in the chest.

The mix of anger and depression can be explosive. More than 60 percent of depressed patients who have anger attacks say they have physically or verbally attacked others during their fits of rage. Even more worrisome, a study published in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology found that when the severity of depression increased by 20 percent, the odds of being "severely aggressive" to a spouse jumped 74 percent.

"Angry people keep others at bay," says psychologist Matthew McKay in his book when Anger Hurts. "But in doing so, they experience less support, less enjoyment, and a greater sense of loneliness than their non-hostile counterparts. For many people, the price of anger is isolation. Friendships are distant, love relationships severed."

Like Lerner, McKay and his coauthors stress that the emotion doesn't have to exact this toll. In particular, they emphasize the importance of taking personal responsibility rather than seeing yourself as a victim of other people. The authors suggest stopping hostility before it starts by being aware of its "triggers" and of the physical signs and cues you feel just before anger strikes (such as an increased pulse rate, heavy breathing, a tightness in the gut, clenched fists, or tension in the jaw). React to these symptoms of stress by taking at least 10 deep breaths, massaging a tense part of your body, changing your posture and stretching, or leaving the room. To stop a fight from escalating, you and your partner can both agree to respect a call for some time off. Then, when you're ready to talk, try negotiating for what you need.

If that doesn't work, the authors suggest figuring out how to meet your own needs. If you're angry, say, because a close friend seemingly ignores you every time she develops a new love interest, the authors say, talk frankly about it and say that you feel discarded with each new relationship. Then suggest getting together once a week. Also, expand your circle by making plans with other good friends -- developing new sources of support and appreciation is better than making demands on someone unable or unwilling to give you what you want.

Managing anger effectively The answer isn't to hold all your anger inside. If you constantly "repress" your anger, it's more likely that it will build up, volcano-like, until you explode in a self-defeating rage or fight.

Other ineffective approaches to anger include blaming your partner (or someone else) or using silence and emotional distance to convey your hostility. This not only provokes unhealthy anger in return, but it makes it more likely that your feelings will be written off as unreasonable or even "crazy."

The "dos" and "don'ts" when you're feeling angry:

- **Speak up when an issue is important to you.** This doesn't mean that you have to make a case out of every minor irritation that comes your way, but that you take a stand on issues that would make you feel unhappy and resentful if you remain silent.
- **Take a time-out.** Sometimes a good fight clears the air, but more often it just reinforces old patterns. If you feel anger so intense your heart is pounding, ask for some time to sort things out before talking about it. Do this in another part of the house or go outside -- away from the person to whom you were directing your anger initially. Take as much time as you need to calm down completely before returning.
- **Figure out the cause of your anger.** Ask yourself what the real issue is, what about the situation is making you angry, what you think and feel, what you want to accomplish or change, who is responsible for what, and what the things are that you will and won't do.
- **Fight fair.** Don't blame, label, threaten, diagnose, preach, ridicule, order, or make ultimatums. No matter whether you grew up around these underhanded tactics, try to never use them in an argument. Most importantly, don't be contemptuous or put the other person down.
- **Incorporate "I" language.** Use the word "I" when expressing your feelings, as in "I feel this when you do X." This is less likely to make the other person defensive than blaming and criticizing ("You never do what you say you will," "You make me sick.") Lerner advises people to watch out for "pseudo-I's," as in "I think you are selfish and self-centered." Avoid labels as well ("You're so stingy") and try not to diagnose the other person and tell him what he or she should do or feel.
- **Be specific.** Vague requests like "I need you to be more sensitive to me" aren't helpful unless you give examples of what you mean. ("I just need you to listen to me; I'm not looking for advice.")
- **Allow for differences of opinion.** Don't fight about who knows the absolute truth; you can both agree to disagree. And you don't have to win every fight. If someone discounts your feelings, Lerner suggests saying something like, "Well, it may seem crazy to you, but this is how I feel."
- **Realize that each person is responsible for his or her own behavior.** If you're angry at your child or in-laws, don't rail at your spouse: It's up to you to find a way to address the situation.
- **Don't tell people how they "should" feel.** It may be tempting, but refrain, too, from criticizing or diagnosing someone's feelings. That doesn't mean you are to blame for those feelings, of course. If someone is angry at a decision you've made, Lerner suggests acknowledging the anger in the following way: "I understand that you're angry and I might feel the same in your shoes, but I've thought this over and this is my decision."

- **Don't channel your feelings through a third party.** Instead of telling your partner, "Our son was so upset when you worked late and missed his school play," say "I'm upset: You're important to me and I really wanted you to be there."
- **Remember that change takes time.** Don't expect quick results from a few confrontations: you'll get tested again and again. Be prepared for this and you won't be as likely to get riled up.

Managing your anger constructively means that you don't have to let your temper get the best of you. A couple of books book *Feeling Good*, by psychiatrist David D. Burns lays out a plan of action for change. Harriet Learner, Ph.D. and *The Dance of Anger* is another book worth reading and this one targets women's issues.