

Managing Anger for Better Health and Relationships

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The key to managing anger is recognizing our own emotional and physical reactions when we become angry and then learning how to respond in a way that is healthy for ourselves and will not harm others. This guide will discuss the emotion of anger, how it affects us mentally and physically, and ideas for managing anger.

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AS HUMAN BEINGS WE EXPERIENCE A WIDE

range of emotions such as happiness, hope, pride, anger, anxiety, guilt and compassion. Emotions affect our mental and physical health. Positive emotions such as happiness and hope help us to have a better sense of ourselves and more positive interactions with others. Physically, we are also affected by emotions. For positive emotions such as happiness, the tension in our body increases and then it is released in the form of laughter and excitement. Negative emotions tend to build up inside of us and are stored rather than released. Often, we use negative self talk or other means to build up the negative emotions which is not good for our mental health.

Of the many emotions we experience, anger is the one that most negatively affects our health. Fear is the “flight” emotion where anger is the “fight” emotion. Anger is stress that explodes outward, often with negative consequences. Yet anger is a valid emotion and at times can motivate us in both positive and negative ways. The key to managing anger is recognizing our own emotional and physical reactions when we become angry, and then learning how to respond in a way that is healthy for ourselves and will not harm others.

Causes of Anger

Why do we get angry? Generally it is because we feel we have been wronged by someone or something. We want to fight back and have the “wrong” corrected. However, anger may erupt after a buildup of stressful situations over time. Perhaps deadlines at work have you stressed and then a snowstorm causes bad roads so you are worried about being late. The final straw, when your anger erupts, is because your daughter is taking her time getting ready for school. Although the stress started with work, it came out as anger toward your daughter.

Anger in Relationships

Research finds that anger rears up more in our intimate relationships – our marriages, with significant others, with our children, and relatives. Couples who use verbal aggression in their communication often have lower marital satisfaction. All couples have arguments. It is how they argue that makes a difference in relationship satisfaction. Those who manage their anger in positive ways have higher relationship satisfaction.

Anger is a part of stress. Couples who have better coping skills can regulate their anger and verbal aggression during times of moderate stress. Those without good coping skills do not do as well. However, when stress levels with a couple are very high, both partners tend to have greater challenges in managing their anger. This research gives us good insight into managing anger. First, we need to manage our stress. Second, we need to develop good coping skills to handle stress. Finally, we need to recognize that high levels of stress are difficult to manage even with good coping skills. When under extreme stress it may be time to reach out for help. If this occurs, couples may want to consider counseling with a licensed therapist.

Another situation where anger is prevalent is in work-related settings. Our anger can spill over from work to home and vice versa. Why do we display more anger at home and at work? This may be related to the fact that we spend so much of our time in those two settings. Another is that, with our family at least, we feel as though we can let down our guard and express emotions that we keep in check when we are in public settings. The problem is that chronic and uncontrolled anger can lead to a breakdown in our relationships. Physical aggression, often a response to high stress and a display of anger, is highly related to relationship break-ups.

Anger and Physical Health

Anger does not simply affect our attitude. The emotion impacts our physical health as well. There are several physical responses to anger that affect our entire body including our muscles and heart.

Our muscles have two states – constricted and relaxed. People with chronic anger may suffer from muscles constantly being constricted. Without relaxation the stress and anger continues to exist, resulting in pain and other health problems. Recent research finds emotional distress to be strongly related to the risk of back pain.

Gastrointestinal disorders are common when people are stressed and angry. These disorders have a direct link to strong negative emotions. A chronically angry person will secrete more enzymes and hydrochloric acid, eventually breaking the stomach membrane, resulting in ulcers.

Cardiovascular problems have also been associated with stress and anger. Hypertension or high blood pressure has been related to chronic stress and resulting anger. The heart overworks when one is chronically stressed and angry thus leading to these physical problems.

Individuals who have problems controlling their anger have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. The hormone delays the physical healing process. Clearly, for our health it is important that we are able to effectively cope with anger.

Expressing Anger

Anger is displayed through one of three ways: by turning inward toward oneself, which can lead to anxiety and depression; turning outward and placed on others; or expressed through coping or management. The first two ways of expressing anger are not good for our health or relationships.

The first option, turning anger inward is not good for emotional or physical health. Anger directed inward can lead to anxiety and depression. Physically, one is in a chronic state of muscle tension and physical ailments as discussed previously can occur. Additionally, anger turned inward can be related to denial of a problem and passive-aggressive behavior. Both are detrimental to one's relationship with others.

Anger directed outward, the second option, is also not good for emotional or physical health. The physical health problems discussed in this guide can happen when one has directed anger outward. Relationships are harmed by yelling, berating and blaming others. These are not traits of a healthy relationship. Anger directed outward can lead to verbal abuse of those we love and can potentially lead to physical abuse.

The third method of expressing anger is to manage it. This is the best for overall health and relationships with others. This is accomplished when we learn to cope with stressful situations around us and recognize the triggers that cause our anger. Perhaps our triggers come from our job. The boss continually reminds you of deadlines. Maybe the policies for working with customers change weekly and you feel as though you can't meet their needs. Triggers may come from your family. Your spouse or partner doesn't call when he/she will be late coming home from work. Your teenager's room is in a constant state of chaos.

Triggers can also come from the environment around us. The traffic on the way to work is heavy and slow. A heavy snowstorm cancels your weekend plans. Your child has a conflict with a teacher at school. Next we will discuss ways to manage our anger when it is triggered.

Managing Anger

There are three main ways to positively manage anger: we can express our anger; suppress the anger for the moment and then redirect our emotions; and finally, use calming techniques. Most everyone has released anger by yelling at one time or another. However, expressing our anger by yelling and acting aggressively probably didn't get us far. There are ways to express our anger without harming others. Learn to be assertive rather than aggressive in getting your needs met. For example, your 10-year-old failed to clean up after making himself a snack. Rather than yelling, try saying, "I am very angry right now. I expect you to clean up the kitchen after you make a snack and you did not do that. I feel as though you don't appreciate that I try to keep a clean house. I want you to stop playing your video game now and come clean up the mess." Here you have let your child know you are angry but have done so without name calling, yelling or otherwise demeaning him. You have let him know why you are angry and what needs to be done to correct the situation.

A second way to manage anger is to suppress it for the moment. This is different, however, from turning anger inward. Suppressing it means taking a break to recognize your angry feelings and redirecting it by thinking of something positive, or putting your anger into perspective. For example, if you are stuck in slow traffic and that is a trigger for your anger, stop and think about the situation. Ask yourself, "What am I really angry about?" Everyone is most likely tense about the traffic situation. There are other issues that are much more important than being late because of traffic. Besides, this is a situation that is out of your control. Perhaps you can use that time to relax and listen to your favorite music while you are waiting.

The third way to manage anger is to use calming techniques. What strategies can you use to reduce your anger and stress? Think of ways to calm yourself that work for you. Having a variety of calming techniques is helpful as you may find yourself trying to manage your anger in a variety of situations. Here are some that may help:

Stop and think: The old rule of counting to 10 is still valid. Stop before reacting to a situation with anger. Think about what has happened and how you could respond in a more positive way.

Physical activity: Take a walk. Work out at a gym. Participate in a sport. Physical activity helps us mentally and physically.

Listen to music: Regardless of the genre, if you listen to music that is enjoyable, you will most likely dissipate your anger.

Reflect: If you believe in a higher power, use that support to provide you with strength to channel your anger appropriately. Or you may reflect on life and what is really important to you.

Talk to someone: Talking with a friend or family member may help you to put your anger into perspective. He or she may also help you think of ways to prevent angry outbursts and stress overload.

Soak in a hot bath: Some people enjoy relaxing in a hot bath where they can forget about the stresses of the day.

Seek professional help: If your anger is becoming out of control and you are not able to cope, seek help from a mental health professional.

Remember that anger is one of many emotions we experience in life. While it is not healthy to “stuff” the emotion and try to ignore it, it is equally unhealthy to lash out at others verbally or physically. Recognize what triggers your anger. Work to express your anger in appropriate ways. Learn ways to reduce or redirect your anger. Managing your anger will help you emotionally, physically, and in your relationships!

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