

Controlling Your Anger

SAMHSA

In the most general sense, anger is a feeling or emotion that ranges from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Anger is a natural response to those situations where we feel threatened, we believe harm will come to us, or we believe that another person has unnecessarily wronged us. We may also become angry when we feel another person, like a child or someone close to us, is being threatened or harmed. In addition, anger may result from frustration when our needs, desires, and goals are not being met.

When it is felt too intensely, too frequently or expressed inappropriately anger becomes a problem. The stress from anger on the body may produce many different health problems, such as hypertension, heart disease, and diminished immune system efficiency. Anger may also lead to violence or physical aggression, which can result in numerous negative consequences, such as being arrested or jailed, being physically injured, being retaliated against, losing loved ones, job loss, or feelings of guilt, shame, or regret.

Myths About Anger

Myth #1: Anger Is Inherited. Evidence from research studies indicate that people are not born with set, specific ways of expressing anger and because the expression of anger is learned behavior, more appropriate ways of expressing anger can also be learned.

Myth #2: Anger Automatically Leads to Aggression. It is a misconception that the only effective way to express anger is through aggression. It is commonly thought that anger is something that builds and escalates to the point of an aggressive outburst; however, it is possible to interrupt that escalation for a more positive outcome.

Myth #3: People Must Be Aggressive To Get What They Want. Many people confuse assertiveness with aggression. The goal of aggression is to dominate, intimidate, harm, or injure another person—to win at any cost.

Conversely, the goal of assertiveness is to express feelings of anger in a way that is respectful of other people. The basic message of assertiveness is that my feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are important, and that your feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are equally important.

From an anger management perspective, an episode of anger can be viewed as consisting of three phases that make up the aggression cycle:

Escalation - This phase is characterized by cues that indicate anger is building. These cues can be physical, behavioral, emotional, or cognitive (thoughts). Events, on the other hand, are situations that occur every day that may lead to escalations of anger if effective anger management strategies are not used. Red-flag events are types of situations that are unique to you and that you are especially sensitive to because of past events.

Explosion - If the escalation phase is allowed to continue, the explosion phase will follow. The explosion phase is marked by an uncontrollable discharge of anger displayed as verbal or physical aggression. This discharge, in turn, leads to negative consequences; it is synonymous with the number 10 on the anger meter.

Post-explosion - The final stage of the aggression cycle is the post-explosion phase. It is characterized by negative consequences resulting from the verbal or physical aggression displayed during the explosion phase. Most often, relationships are damaged by the resulting feelings of fear, distrust and resentment in those closest to the angry person.

Strategies for Controlling Anger

One technique that is helpful in increasing the awareness of anger is learning to monitor it. A simple way to monitor anger is to use the "anger meter." A "1" on the anger meter represents a complete lack of anger or a total state of calm, whereas a "10" represents a very angry and explosive loss of control that leads to negative consequences.

Not only is the expression of anger learned, but it can become a routine, familiar, and predictable response to a variety of situations. When anger is displayed frequently and aggressively, it can become a maladaptive habit. To break the anger habit, you must develop an awareness of the events, circumstances, and behaviors of others that "trigger" your anger.

An effective set of strategies for controlling anger should include both immediate and preventive strategies. Immediate strategies include taking a timeout, deep-breathing exercises, and thought stopping. Preventive strategies include developing an exercise program and changing your irrational beliefs.

Timeout - This use involves leaving a situation if you feel your anger is escalating out of control. For example, you may be a passenger on a crowded bus and become angry because you perceive that people are deliberately bumping into you. In this situation, you can simply get off the bus and wait for a less crowded bus.

Deep-breathing - This is a simple technique that requires you to close your eyes, focus upon and slow your breath while quieting your thoughts. Ideally done in a distraction-free place for at least a couple of minutes, this is a very effective technique.

Self-talk - As people become angry, they engage in an internal dialog, called "self-talk." Often it is not the events themselves that produce feelings such as anger, but our interpretations of and beliefs about the events. Beliefs underlying anger often take the form of "should" and "must." You may get angry, for example, when you start thinking, "I must always be in control. I must control every situation." Rather than continue with these beliefs, you can try to dispute them. You might tell yourself, "I have no power over things I cannot control," or "I have to accept what I cannot change." By disputing your irrational beliefs, you will

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most likely start to calm down and be able to control your anger more easily.

Thought-stopping – Tell yourself “STOP! Think about something else!” when you find yourself ruminating about an issue that is intensifying your anger. Actively finding a new topic to think about might be challenging to do, but can be crucial to helping de-escalate a potentially volatile situation.

The Conflict Resolution Model

The Conflict Resolution Model will outline the steps to resolve interpersonal conflicts without resorting to aggression.

1. Identify the problem that is causing the conflict. It is important to be specific when identifying the problem. “My co-worker is never ready when I come to pick her up in the morning for a ride to work.”

2. Identify the feelings that are associated with the conflict. It is rarely just, “I feel angry” but might be a more subtle combination of annoyance, frustration and feeling taken for granted, for example. “I feel irritated and cranky every time I have to wait and I know that I get a certain annoyed look on my face that everyone notices.”

3. Identify the impact of the problem that is causing the conflict, meaning the specific outcome that the problem had upon you. “It’s making me look bad when I can’t get to work on time.”

4. Decide whether to resolve the conflict. Meaning, ask yourself the following question, “Is the conflict important enough to bring up? If I do not try to resolve this issue, will it lead to feelings of anger and resentment?”

5. Work for resolution of the conflict. How would you like the problem to be resolved? Is a compromise needed?

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Arrange a time to talk that works for you both and then describe the conflict, your feelings, and the impact of the conflict and ask for a resolution. “I’m not sure if you knew this but it’s a pet peeve of mine to be late. I have always prided myself on my timeliness and lately when I’ve had to wait for you, it’s made me late as well! I don’t want a simple thing like going into work together to create problems between us so I wanted to talk to you to see if we can find a solution that works for the both of us.”

The Conflict Resolution Model is useful even when conflicts are not resolved. Many times, you will feel better about trying to resolve a conflict in an assertive manner rather than acting passively or aggressively. Specifically, you may feel that you have done all that you could do to resolve the conflict which may allow you to calmly and thoughtfully let the issue go, if need be.

With an increased awareness and these tools “under your belt”, it is hoped that

you can learn healthy and more adaptive habits that will have a positive effect upon all of the relationships in your life. If you feel that you would like some help with controlling your anger, call your Employee Assistance Program at 1-800-292-2780 to confidentially speak with one of our counselors at no charge.

This article was excerpted from “Anger Management for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Clients: A Cognitive Behavior Therapy Manual” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

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