

Anger - how it affects people

Anger is a powerful emotion. If it isn't handled appropriately, it may have destructive results for both you and your loved ones. Uncontrolled anger can lead to arguments, physical fights, physical abuse, assault and self-harm. On the other hand, well-managed anger can be a useful emotion that motivates you to make positive changes.

The physical effects

Anger triggers the body's 'fight or flight' response. Other emotions that trigger this response include fear, excitement and anxiety. The adrenal glands flood the body with stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. The brain shunts blood away from the gut and towards the muscles, in preparation for physical exertion. Heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increase, the body temperature rises and the skin perspires. The mind is sharpened and focused.

Health problems

The constant flood of stress chemicals and associated metabolic changes that accompany recurrent unmanaged anger can eventually cause harm to many different systems of the body. Some of the short and long-term health problems that have been linked to unmanaged anger include:

- Headache
- Digestion problems, such as abdominal pain
- Insomnia
- Increased anxiety
- Depression
- High blood pressure
- Skin problems, such as eczema
- Heart attack
- Stroke.

Unhelpful ways to deal with anger

Many people express their anger in inappropriate and harmful ways, including:

- **Anger explosions** – some people have very little control over their anger and tend to explode in rages. Raging anger may lead to physical abuse or violence. A person who doesn't control their temper can isolate themselves from family and friends. Some people who fly into rages have low self-esteem, and use their anger as a way to manipulate others and feel powerful.
- **Anger repression** – some people consider that anger is an inappropriate or 'bad' emotion, and choose to suppress it. However, bottled anger often turns into depression and anxiety. Some people vent their bottled anger at innocent parties, such as children or pets.

Expressing anger in healthy ways

Suggestions on how to express your anger in healthy ways include:

- If you feel out of control, walk away from the situation temporarily, until you cool down.
- Recognise and accept the emotion as normal and part of life.
- Try to pinpoint the exact reasons why you feel angry.
- Once you have identified the problem, consider coming up with different strategies on how to remedy the situation.

- Do something physical, such as going for a run or playing sport.

Suggestions for long-term anger management

The way you typically express anger may take some time to modify. Suggestions include:

- Keep a diary of your anger outbursts, to try and understand how and why you get mad.
- Consider assertiveness training, or learning about techniques of conflict resolution.
- Learn relaxation techniques, such as meditation or yoga.
- See a counsellor or psychologist if you still feel angry about events that occurred in your past.
- Take regular exercise.

The benefits of regular exercise in mood management

People who are stressed are more likely to experience anger. Numerous worldwide studies have documented that regular exercise can improve mood and reduce stress levels. The effect may be twofold: physical exertion burns up stress chemicals, and it also boosts production of mood-regulating neurotransmitters in the brain, including endorphins and catecholamines.

Teaching children how to express anger

Expressing anger appropriately is a learned behaviour. Suggestions on helping your child to deal with strong feelings include:

- Lead by example.
- Let them know that anger is natural and should be expressed.
- Treat your child's feelings with respect.
- Teach practical problem-solving skills.
- Encourage open and honest communication in the home.
- Allow them to express their anger in appropriate ways.
- Explain the difference between aggression and anger.
- Punish aggression or violence, but not appropriately expressed anger.
- Teach your child different ways of calming and soothing themselves.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Counsellor

Things to remember

- The long-term physical effects of uncontrolled anger include increased anxiety, high blood pressure and headache.
- Anger is a positive and useful emotion, if it is expressed appropriately.
- Long-term strategies for anger management include regular physical exercise, learning relaxation techniques and counselling.

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Reach Out

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