

Anger Management

Often in my practice, and especially when working with couples, I see anger that is out of control. In relationships, this can quickly spiral into verbal or physical abuse. While anger is a normal emotion, it needs to be expressed in healthy ways and regulated. Traditional anger management techniques have focused on beating a pillow or yelling when you are alone, but we all need help to develop a deeper understanding of this emotion and effective ways of managing it.

Anger is basically just too much stress or distress – from memories, what’s going on around you, or what’s said to you. It is a complex emotion that signals we are feeling threatened, wronged, afraid. It is however, a normal emotion and can have its uses when expressed appropriately and within safe limits.

When anger isn’t regulated it can accelerate into criticism, name calling, shouting, throwing things, and at worst, threatening or hurting another person physically. This is when anger turns into abuse and violence, and it is never acceptable. Remember that you can never trust your own judgement when you are angry.

Anger is at its core, part of our fight or flight stress response that enabled us to get away or deal with danger and threat. As infants, it also helps us get our needs met, for example if we aren’t getting fed or picked up and cuddled when we want to. The ability to develop self-control, however, is one of the things that separates humans as a species. Our brain has the capacity to process what is going on, regulate strong emotions and then rationalize our response, but anger inhibits that activity. As we mature we learn to subdue our impulses in order to evaluate our options and consider the best course of behavior to get what we want. If you grew up in an angry family, or struggled to get your needs met, then maybe you didn’t learn good impulse control habits, but it is never too late.

Anger is a signal, it is telling us that we need to calm down, review what is pushing our buttons and take control of our behavior. When we don’t we can find our work, our relationships and our self-image begin to suffer. Nobody likes to be around someone who is quick to flare up and display their temper on a frequent basis.

So, if you find yourself losing control to anger, here are some tips to help:

1. **Become aware of how your body feels when you are starting to get angry.** Do you feel your heartrate or blood pressure rising, do you feel hot, does your voice change or do you stop talking, do you feel any muscles tensing, is your thinking becoming less clear or more negative, are you ruminating on the other person’s faults or thinking about revenge, are you becoming cranky with those around you? Whatever your signals are, start to pay more attention to when they are happening and then tune into your inner thermostat...
2. **Tune in to your body and your inner thermostat.** High arousal produces stress hormones that agitate the brain and body, and can quickly flare to anger. Set an inner scale or thermostat of 1-10 for yourself where 10 is volcanic eruption where you have lost control, and 1 is a state of calm. Constantly check in to where you are on the scale. If you are already around 5-6 and know you are quick to flare up, then you need to put yourself in a time-out, remove yourself from the stressful stimulus and focus on your breathing. Breathe slowly while counting to yourself, breathe in through your nose for 2 seconds, and breathe out through your mouth for 2. Keep doing that until you feel your thermostat resetting closer to 1. If necessary, go for a walk and talk to yourself calmly, tell yourself it isn’t worth it and recall a memory of a calm and happy time.

3. **Make some form of relaxation or stress management part of your daily routine.** This will help to keep your stress levels lower in general, while helping you to become more aware of when stress hormones and anger are building.
4. **Think about what your hot button topics are.** By that I mean think about what often causes your anger to flare and work to manage the stimulus. For example, if you know tend to over-react to other drivers, then think about what you can do to change your behavior when you are behind the wheel. Take control, don't be at the mercy of your emotions or other people's behaviors.
5. **Don't try to justify your anger.** There is always a better way of dealing with a situation. We can always be more effective in our problem-solving, our communication and our compassion for those around us.
6. **Consider having some cognitive-behavioral therapy** or reading some self-help books on thinking patterns and how we can change them. Often people who are angry a lot are also rigid in their thinking, or they think in very black and white, all or nothing patterns. The other person is right or wrong, friend or enemy. Once we can start to do better with our rational response, we can reduce our stress levels.
7. **Remember that anger is a stop sign,** and when we feel our anger accelerating we need to take responsibility for exiting the stressful situation and calming ourselves down. We also need to let others leave if they are afraid or anxious around us, and resist the impulse to follow them or demand a continuation of the fight.
8. Finally, **use the anger as an opportunity for growth and development.** If you find yourself getting angry a lot then it can be a sign that there are things in your life you need to address, or maybe there are wounds from the past that need to be healed. Don't ignore the symptoms, take control, and consider working with a therapist to resolve your issues.