

Keeping Your Cool – Understanding and Dealing with Anger

Is my anger a problem?

Feeling angry can be a natural response under certain circumstances eg

- if we feel hurt or threatened emotionally or physically
- if we feel we have been treated unfairly

It may be healthy and helpful to defend or protect ourselves or others. What matters is whether we use or express our anger in an appropriate way or a destructive or violent way. If we lose control of our anger or cause damage to others, ourselves or others' property there may be unpleasant consequences for us.

Some people have learnt to ignore or bury angry feelings eg

- because they were taught when young it was not OK to be angry
- because they have experienced aggressive or violent anger in others and found it too shocking

The danger here is that any anger goes underground and may explode when enough pressure builds up or it may be kept in and turn into depression, stress and low self-esteem.

Others may also take advantage of the fact that you will not react to being treated badly.

For many people anger is not a problem. They feel angry, express it or deal with it safely and appropriately, then move on when their system has returned to normal.

So it's not being angry which is necessarily the problem

The problem *can* be

- **what you do with your anger**
- **how you act on it**
- **or how you express it.**

I lose control of my anger – and it's getting me into trouble

Step 1

Becoming aware

The first step in tackling your anger is to realise that you're not in control of it and something needs to change. The way you handle anger is probably a pattern which got established over a long time and ingrained habits are hard to break but it can be done with hard work!

Step 2

Recognise your triggers

We very often have personal triggers which wind us up, set us off and make us angry. Identifying these is a good start because you can then recognise situations which are dangerous for you and take steps either to avoid them or to manage danger situations better.

Eg

- people being rude or abusing you, your family or your friends
- people treating you (or others) unfairly
- bullying
- being criticised (or being criticised in public)
- people not showing you the respect you feel you deserve
- when people don't listen to you
- when you have to do something you don't want to do

etc

Learn to spot trigger situations as early as possible. Avoid them if you can. If not, see below for further strategies.

Step 3

Learn to recognise your personal signs of anger

If you are trying to deal with anger differently, it will help the earlier you can spot the first signs of anger beginning to build up. Many people find this hard to do –you may feel you go from 0 to 60 on the anger scale very quickly indeed, but there are usually early warning signs which you can get better at spotting!

These are different for different people but may include:

Eg

- Feeling hot
- Heart racing or pounding
- Hands start to sweat
- Finding it difficult to stay still (eg wanting to move, run, lash out)
- Body feeling tense
- Hands going into fists
- Mouth going dry
- Feeling panicked

Etc

The problem may come if you act on this violently (eg with verbal abuse or physical violence) – because it feels better afterwards. You may be able to find an alternative way to release pent-up anger and so feel better without causing damage.

Step 4

Strategies to interrupt or defuse the build-up of anger

Have a strategy (or more than one) to use when you feel the anger rising. Different things work for different people and different situations may call for different responses. Below are a few strategies you can try – there are many more. Don't expect to be perfect at them

at first – it may take practice and several tries before you manage to tackle an old anger habit and replace it with a new, less dangerous pattern.

- Take 'Time Out' before speaking or reacting.
- Talk yourself into feeling calm (and not allowing a situation or someone else to provoke you into losing control).
- Breathe slowly and deeply (calms the body's 'stress reaction' and gives you something else to focus on).
- Walk away from the incident (you can choose whether to explain that you need some time).
- Consciously relax tense or clenched muscles.
- Listen to music (can relax/distract you and help you to switch off).
- If you can, burn up the 'anger chemicals' in the body eg adrenalin by taking exercise eg run/work out/go out for a brisk walk/dance to music.
- Create your own personal catchphrase to use to yourself eg I can handle this/I am in control/I can keep calm etc

Step 5

Work out if there's anyone you can rely on to help or support you – and use them (with their agreement!).

Step 6

Identify what (or who) might stop you/get in the way of you gaining more control over your anger and think about how you can reduce or change its (his/her) effect.

I've tried all of that and I'm still losing my temper/getting angry

If this is the situation it may help to think about some of the possibilities below

- Would it help to recruit a 'coach' to help you? – it's often hard to succeed in changing things on your own. Perhaps a trusted friend or family member can help you work on the steps above. You could also work with a Counsellor – they will keep what you tell them confidential (with very rare possible exceptions eg if there is a real threat of serious harm to you or someone else); they will offer you respect and will try to work on what you want to work on!
- Remember to be realistic – it can take time and effort to change the habits of a lifetime. You may need to learn new skills and that may be a gradual process with the occasional setback (like learning to ride a bike – you may fall off once or twice and be pretty wobbly at the new skills for a while!).
- You will probably still get angry – most of us do from time to time. The aim here is to gain more control over your anger and deal with it in ways which cause less harmful damage – to you and/or others!
- Sometimes anger is a reaction to things or people which have hurt us or to living under stressful conditions and it might be important to think about that underlying hurt or stress and whether it needs to be dealt with first – one option could be to work with someone (eg a counsellor) to try and sort this out first.

Why do I find it so hard to keep anger under control?

There's no single answer to this – it might be unique to you and your situation. Some possibilities include:

- You may have learnt from or absorbed the example of how others around you have handled anger
- The after-effects of a shocking/traumatic experience
- Being over-tired eg due to lack of sleep
- Living with a stressful situation
- Feeling ill or in pain
- Hormonal changes – the ups and downs of chemical changes in the body (which can sometimes last for a long period of time) eg adolescence, the menopause or pregnancy – also the after-effects of childbirth, miscarriage or abortion.
- Hunger
- Effects of alcohol or some drugs – or craving for/withdrawal from these

However – it is possible to break an old habit and learn new ones – although it can be hard work. If you are living with difficult circumstances which it is hard to change, it might be possible to manage those circumstances a little differently.

Where can I find further information and/or help?

- www.patient.co.uk/showdoc/27001309 – A Self-Help Guide: Controlling Anger.
- www.supportline.org.uk/problems/angerManagement.php
Information and advice on anger management offered by SupportLine for children, young adults and adults as well as other problems
Also telephone helpline: 020 8554 9004.
- www.videojug.com/tag/anger-management Video Guide by Anger Management expert
- www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/How+to+deal+with+anger.htm
MIND: offer information and leaflets on a wide range of issues and difficulties including anger management.
- Email jo@samaritans.org – the Samaritans offer support by confidential email service.
Also telephone helpline: 08457 90 90 90.
- **Your GP** may have useful information including any local groups or classes in Anger Management. It may be worth checking with a doctor that there is no illness or condition which is making it more difficult to deal with anger or which is causing you to feel more angry than usual.
- **The college counsellors** may be able to help you in dealing more successfully with your anger, whilst respecting you and your circumstances. You can book an appointment by:

Email counsellors@s-cheshire.ac.uk
Telephone 01270 654654 Ext 307

You can also make an appointment by putting your initials in the counselling diary outside the counselling room (Counselling & Welfare) on Student Street in the tower block.
Or Drop-in – if we are free we will always talk to you!