

# anger coping strategies

## Anger and Problem Anger

Anger is a normal human emotion, and can range from mild irritation to an intense rage or fury.



Our handout 'What Is Anger?' provides more detail about the difference between normal anger and problem anger, and some questions to help you identify whether anger may be a problem for you.

This handout includes a number of tips which you may use to help you to cope better with your anger. You may wish to practice some of these on your own, or you may wish to combine them with individual or group therapy for extra support.

## Triggers and Early Warning Signs

One of the first steps in managing your anger is to identify what types of situations usually trigger your anger. Make a list of the things which usually set you off, for example:

- being cut off in traffic
- running late for an appointment
- other people running late
- your son/daughter leaving their schoolbag in the hall
- your partner not putting away the dishes
- a colleague falling behind on a project

Some of these situations you may be able to avoid, such as planning ahead to avoid running late. Other situations are less in your control, such as being cut off in traffic, but what you *can* control is your response.

Once you have finished listing your common trigger situations, make a separate list of the warning signs for your anger. What is it that usually happens in your body when you get angry? Becoming aware of your body's alarm bells helps you to spot anger early on, which gives you a better chance of putting other coping strategies into practice. Some common warnings are:

- tightness in chest
- feeling hot or flushed, sweating
- grinding teeth
- tense muscles or clenched fists
- pounding or racing heart
- biting your nails



## Why Am I Angry?

When you notice these warning signs, stop and ask yourself what it is that is making you angry. Often there will be something going on that is quite reasonable to feel angry about, so allow yourself to acknowledge this. But it is also important to be clear about the cause of our anger so that we don't respond in a way that is out of proportion (eg. staying angry all day about someone else using up the last of the milk) or take out the anger on the wrong person (eg. getting angry at family members when it is your boss you are angry with).

## Taking Out The Heat

When you notice yourself becoming angry, there are a number of techniques which you can use to 'take the heat out' of your anger. These include:

**Time Out:** This simply means removing yourself from the situation for a period of time, to give yourself a chance to 'cool down' and think things through before you act. For example, when you notice yourself becoming angry during an argument with your partner, say "I need to take time out, let's talk about this calmly when I get back" and then go for a walk.

**Distraction:** If you cannot change the situation, it can help to distract yourself from whatever is making you angry by counting to ten, listening to music, calling a friend to chat about something else, or doing housework. For example, if you are stuck in traffic and getting angry, put on the radio and try to find a song you like, or count the number of times the chorus is sung.

**Silly Humour:** While it is not always possible to just 'laugh your problems away,' you can often use humour to help you to take a step back from your anger. For example, if you are angry with a colleague and refer to them as 'a stupid clown,' think about what this means literally. Imagine or draw them dressed in a clown suit, with big shoes and a red nose. If you picture this image every time they do something which bothers you, it will be much easier to keep things in perspective.

**Relaxation:** Just as our bodies are strongly affected by our emotions, we can also influence our emotional state with our physical state. Relaxation techniques, such as taking slow deep breaths or progressively tensing and relaxing each of your muscle groups, can help to reduce anger.



## Self-Talk and Helpful Thinking

How you are thinking affects how you are feeling, so focussing on negative thoughts such as "this is so unfair" will maintain the angry feeling. Make a list of more balanced statements you can say to yourself before, during and after difficult situations. For example:

**Before:** *I know I can handle this, I have strategies to keep my anger under control and can take time out if I need to.*

**During:** *Remember to keep breathing and stay relaxed. There is no need to take this personally. I can manage this.*

**After:** *I handled that well. Even though I felt angry I didn't raise my voice too much and I think I got a better result*

## Assertiveness and Practice

Another key strategy in managing anger is to learn to be assertive. Assertiveness means expressing your point of view in a clear way, without becoming aggressive. You may wish to read other handouts about this topic. Finally, because anger is often an automatic response, all of these techniques require a lot of practice.