

how to



deal with anger

How to deal with anger

Many people have trouble managing their anger. This is for anyone who wants to learn how to deal with it in a constructive and healthy way. It is also for anyone with a friend or family member who has problems with anger.

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What is anger?

Feeling angry is part of being human. It is a natural response to being attacked, insulted, deceived or frustrated. Sometimes, excessive anger can also be a symptom of some mental health problems.

Anger can be useful, but it can also be frightening. When something makes you angry, adrenaline causes your body to prepare for 'fight or flight', giving you energy and making you feel tense. Releasing this energy and tension is good for you, but it can be difficult to do so in ways that are constructive. In most situations, fighting back or running away ('fight or flight') isn't helpful and anger can often lead to responses that make things worse rather than better.

Being angry isn't a problem in itself. It's how you deal with it.

When is anger a problem?

Anger becomes a problem when it harms you or people around you. This can depend on whether you express your anger, and how you express it.

Often if you feel angry, it's about something that is happening to you at the time. This is usually something that is over quickly, for example, sounding your horn if another driver causes you to brake suddenly. Something happens that makes you angry, you express your anger and then move on.

When you don't express your anger, or express it at inappropriate times or in unsafe ways, this is when it can damage your health and your relationships.

This is especially so, if something has made you angry in the past and you didn't express your anger at the time – because you felt you couldn't or didn't want to – then that anger can get 'bottled up' or 'suppressed'. This

can have negative consequences in the longer term – you may find that when something happens to annoy or upset you in the future, you feel extremely angry and respond more aggressively than is appropriate to the new situation.

Trying to suppress your anger may also lead to other types of behaviour, such as responding in a 'passive aggressive' way e.g. being sarcastic or unhelpful, or refusing to speak to someone. Or you may find that you are getting angry too quickly or too often, sometimes over quite small things. You may feel you are unable to let go of your anger.

If you can't express your anger in a safe or constructive way, this can be bad for your emotional, mental and physical health.

It might lead to:

- depression or anxiety
- sleep problems
- alcohol or drug addictions
- eating disorders
- compulsive behaviour e.g. excessive cleaning, overworking
- self-harm.

It might also affect your:

- digestion – contributing to the development of heartburn, ulcers, colitis, gastritis or irritable bowel syndrome
- heart and circulatory system
- blood pressure – driving it too high.

Violence and aggression

Angry feelings can sometimes turn to rage and lead to destructive and violent behaviour. If you express your anger through aggression or violence it can be very frightening and damaging for the people around you – especially children. This could damage your relationships and mean that people stop listening to you. It could lose you your job or get you into trouble with the law.

●● *My anger is so out of control, I'm ashamed to say that I've hit a few people, but my anger is mainly directed at objects [which] I've broken in a fit of rage. I hate it, because when I'm in an angry moment it feels like I'm not in control, and that's a scary thing, because I never know what I'll do next...* ●●

Why do I get angry?

●● *My anger arises when I feel misunderstood or when a situation seems unjust. Since I was wrongly restrained by a nurse on a psychiatric ward, I have been afraid of my own anger. In my attempt to not show it, it usually goes inward and I get hurt. I have learned ways to release it – to let off steam in appropriate ways.* ●●

You will have your own triggers for feeling angry (also see p.8). It may be when you are being threatened or assaulted, or being discriminated against or treated unfairly. It could be that you feel powerless or frustrated, or are just fed up with being stuck in traffic. You may also have to look back at what has happened in your past, to recognise what is triggering angry feelings you are experiencing now.

Past experiences

It is likely that the way you were brought up, and your cultural background, will influence how you feel about expressing anger.

Many people are, as children, given messages about anger that may make it harder to manage as an adult.

You may have been brought up to believe that it is always okay to act out your anger, however aggressively or violently, and not taught how to understand and manage it. This could mean you have angry outbursts any time you don't like the way someone is behaving or you are in a situation you don't like.

However, if you have witnessed your parents' or other adults' anger when it was out of control, you may see it as something that is destructive and terrifying.

Or you may have been brought up to believe that you shouldn't complain but should just put up with things, and may have been punished for expressing anger as a child.

Experiences like these can mean that you suppress your anger and it becomes a long-term problem, where you react inappropriately to new situations you're not comfortable with.

👤👤 *I spent half of my life with uncontrollable anger. For me it was 'bottle up then burst' where so much hurt and fear was crushed into a corner in my mind for the sake of a so called 'quiet life'.* 👤👤

How does anger lead to violence?

Anger can give a large surge of energy that makes you react in ways that you normally wouldn't. When it gets out of control it turns into rage that can have very negative consequences for you and those around you.

If you are experiencing powerful emotions, this can also trigger violent feelings. These emotions can be made worse, and are more likely to lead to violence, if you drink too much or abuse drugs.

The consequences of letting your anger turn into violence make it even more important for you to maintain control and get help with managing your feelings.

What can I do to manage my anger?

Whether your anger is about what is happening now or something that happened in the past, it can make you do things that you will regret later. Therefore, it is important to learn to understand your anger and also some techniques to limit the chances of it coming out in a way that is damaging.

Learn your triggers

●● *I get angry when people try to tell me what to do, especially when I know they are right.* ●●

To start recognising your triggers you might find it helpful to keep a diary or notes about the times you have felt angry. Think about the last time this happened:

- What were the circumstances?
- Did someone say or do something to trigger your anger?
- How did you feel?
- How did you behave?
- How did you feel afterwards?

If you do this for a period of time, you will probably start to see patterns emerging. For example, you may be getting angry every time a senior male colleague tells you to do something. This could be because you had an unpleasant experience in the past with another male authority figure e.g. your father, or a previous boss. Or it may be you get angry each time you're in a situation you have no control over.

Just recognising what is making you angry can sometimes be enough to help, and you may feel that it's something you can then work out for yourself. However, if you are finding it difficult to recognise your triggers, you may want to try talking to someone who is trained to help you understand your feelings and the reasons for them – see 'Talking treatments' on p.12.

Look out for warning signs

It also helps if you learn to recognise the physical warning signs of anger.

You might feel:

- the adrenaline rush in your body
- your heart is beating faster
- you are breathing more quickly
- your body is becoming tense
- your feet are tapping
- you are clenching your fists.

Recognising these signs gives you the chance to think about how you want to react to a situation before doing anything. This can be very difficult if you feel angry, but it is possible to train yourself to pause before expressing your feelings.

It can be a good idea to ask yourself, "Am I so angry I can't think?", and, "Do I want to lash out and hit someone?". If the answer to either of these is yes, then it may be best to walk away from a difficult situation and go away somewhere to calm down. This might allow you to let out the anger in a constructive way, for example through exercise, and somewhere where it will not alarm anyone or mean that you regret your actions later.

Try some calming techniques

🌀🌀 *I lock myself away, count one elephant, two elephants up to four in my head whilst breathing in; hold my breath and do the same counting out. I also use this technique outside and it works wonders – no more losing my temper in shops or at work. I don't think of anything but my breathing.* 🌀🌀

How to deal with anger

There are many ways to relax and calm down, depending on what suits you and what's convenient at the time you are angry. Some might be:

- **Breathing slowly** – one technique is to breathe out for longer than you breathe in, and then relax as you breathe out.
- **Counting to 10 before you react** – this gives you time to calm down so you can think more clearly.
- **Doing something creative** – this can channel your energy and focus towards something else.
- **Listening to calming music** – this can help change your mood and slow your physical and emotional reactions down.
- **Using a relaxation technique** such as yoga or meditation.

See Mind's booklet *How to manage stress* for more tips on how to relax.

Learn to be assertive

It's important to remember that **being excessively angry and aggressive can get in the way of communicating what you are angry about**. People stop listening to you and focus on your anger instead.

On the other hand, if you are able to express your anger by talking in an 'assertive' way about what has made you angry, this will produce better results for you. Being assertive means standing up for yourself, while still respecting other people and their opinions.

Talking about your anger assertively:

- makes communication easier
- stops tense situations getting out of control
- benefits your relationships and self-esteem
- helps to keep you physically and mentally well.

If you are used to hiding your feelings, it will take time and effort to get into the habit of expressing anger in a non-aggressive way that explains why you are annoyed.

Tips for expressing yourself assertively

If you decide that you want to tell someone that a situation is making you angry, thinking about how you are going to do it might make this easier.

Here are some things you could try:

- Think through beforehand what it is that you are angry about. Ask yourself what you want to happen. Is it enough just to explain what you are angry about or do you want something to change?
- Breathe steadily – this will help you to keep calm.
- Be specific. For example, say “I feel angry with you because...”. Using ‘I’ avoids blaming anyone, and the other person is less likely to feel attacked.
- Listen to the other person's response, and try to understand their point of view.
- Treat the other person with courtesy.
- Be prepared for the conversation to go wrong and try to spot when this is happening. If you feel yourself getting angry, you might want to come back to the conversation another time.

Following these tips won't mean you never get angry, but it should help you express your anger constructively and feel better about yourself.

Assertiveness training classes may be available in your local area, either privately or run by your local council or adult education institution. Details of these and other classes should be available online or at your local library and there are several websites with more tips on them.

Look at your lifestyle

You may find that an improved diet or taking more exercise helps to reduce angry feelings.

Lack of certain nutrients can make you feel irritable and weak, and so a healthy diet is likely to help you feel more in control of your feelings. See the ‘Food and Mood’ pages on Mind’s website for more information.

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Exercise can increase your self-esteem, releases ‘feel good’ hormones, and is a good way to let out any tension that is building up. It is more likely to be beneficial if it’s something you enjoy doing. If you can do something outdoors, even better – just getting out into the fresh air for a walk can provide you with a sense of perspective and make you feel more grounded.

Lack of sleep can make you irritable and less able to contain your anger, so making sure you get enough of it to be able to think and function clearly is really important. See *How to cope with sleep problems* for some tips.

If you are finding the stresses of daily life are causing or worsening your anger, it might help you to look at ways of dealing with the causes of this in the long term. See Mind’s booklet *How to manage stress*.

What help is available?

If your anger is associated with a mental health condition or diagnosis, this is something that you might discuss with your doctor or one of the mental health professionals involved in your treatment or care.

The types of help described below are available to people with or without a mental health condition or diagnosis.

Talking treatments

👁️👁️ *I was shouting at my daughter and could not stop. It was like I was standing outside of myself watching myself yelling at her and I was completely unable to calm myself down. I tried bottling everything up, and I tried just letting it all go... neither helped, I was always ashamed of being angry. Since talking with my therapist I have realised that anger is part of life, and it is ok to be angry, just not ok to be out of control.* 👁️👁️

Talking treatments are usually some form of counselling or psychotherapy. **A counsellor or psychotherapist can help you explore the causes of your anger.** Talking to them will help you work through your feelings and monitor and improve your responses to situations that make you angry. Counselling tends to look at current problems, while psychotherapy tends to go deeper into past experiences.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a particularly practical approach to dealing with your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It focuses on how you think about the things going on in your life and how this affects the way you behave and deal with emotional problems. It then looks at how you can change any patterns of thinking or behaviour that may be causing you difficulties.

You may be able to get a talking treatment on the NHS, by being referred by your GP. If you can afford it, you can also look for a therapist privately using one of the organisations listed in 'Useful contacts'. For more information, on the different types of therapy available and how to choose a therapist, see Mind's booklets *Making sense of talking treatments* and *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy*.

Anger management programmes

Anger management programmes often involve working in a group, but may involve one-to-one sessions. They may use a mixture of counselling and CBT techniques (see above). If an anger management programme is available in your area, your GP may be able to refer you. Also see BAAM under 'Useful contacts'.

Domestic violence programmes

If you are violent at home, there are a number of organisations across the country that run programmes that can help you to change your behaviour (see 'Useful contacts' on pp.16-17).

What can friends and family do to help?

This section is for friends and family of someone who is experiencing problems with anger.

👁️👁️ *I heard him kick off in the kitchen, throwing things and shouting, and I just froze in fear. He has said before that I should not worry, because he would never harm a person. But at the point when he is doing irrational things, breaking stuff and even causing harm to himself in the process, it is clear he has lost control and so anything can happen. If only he would talk about his feelings before they build up and boil over.* 🗨️🗨️

It can be very difficult if someone you care about is experiencing problems with anger. It can be particularly hard if this results in them being violent.

You might want to show the person that you care about them, but might also want them to be able to manage their anger. Supporting the person in trying to resolve their anger is important but, ultimately, it is up to them to find a solution.

If they do get angry, it is probably best to give them some time and space to calm down.

When the person is calm, it may be useful to talk about the triggers that cause them to become angry (see p.8) and what you should do when this happens. (Mind has produced a DVD *Fired Up* that can be useful to discuss anger with someone.)

You could encourage them to seek help from a counsellor or psychotherapist (see pp. 12-13).

If someone becomes violent, the most important thing is to make sure that you are safe before doing anything to try and help them. You may want to put in place a 'safety plan'. This could include keeping a list of phone numbers of people or organisations/services you can call if you are scared; arranging to 'hole up' in a friend's or neighbour's house until things are calm; having a bag prepared to leave in an emergency.

You may feel worried about asking for help when a friend or family member is violent. An option could be to approach your GP or talk to one of the organisations listed on pp.16-17. They are specially trained for dealing with this type of situation and usually have very strict confidentiality rules in place to prioritise your safety, including several ways you can contact them.

If the person you are concerned about has a mental health problem, this is likely to make supporting them more difficult and you need to ensure that you get support for yourself. This may be by talking to your GP or a counsellor. Also see Mind's booklet *How to cope as a carer*.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

Alcoholics Anonymous

tel: 0845 769 7555
web: alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
National network of local support groups.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304
web: babcp.com
Full directory of CBT therapists available online.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300
web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk
For local practitioners.

British Association of Anger Management (BAAM)

tel: 0345 1300 286
web: angermanage.co.uk
Support, programmes and training for the general public and organisations.

Depression Alliance

web: depressionalliance.org
Information and support for anyone affected by depression.

Everyman Project

tel: 020 7263 8884
web: everymanproject.co.uk
Counselling and other help for men who want to stop their violence.

Refuge

tel: 0808 2000 247

web: refuge.org.uk

24-hour domestic violence helpline
and a network of safe houses.

Respect Phoneline

tel: 0808 802 4040

web: respectphoneline.org.uk

Help for domestic violence
perpetrators and victims.

Women's Aid

tel: 0808 2000 247

email: helpline@womensaid.org.uk

web: womensaid.org.uk

24-hour domestic violence helpline.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

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