

# **LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR ANGER**

**Gladeana McMahon**

Anger is one of those emotions that is much misunderstood. There is nothing wrong with feeling angry as anger is one of the key driving forces behind change. How many times have you heard about a new law being passed due to the efforts of a group of people who felt anger over some kind of injustice? You may even be able to think about situations in your own life where change has come about because you felt angry and that anger motivated you to do or say something.

Anger is an energy force and like all personal emotions we have a choice as to whether we use it healthily and productively or healthily and destructively.

Anger is an emotion just like happiness and sadness. Some people fear feeling and suppress it while others use it all the time in the most inappropriate way.

It is not anger itself that causes the problem but rather how people act when they are angry. The following tips will help you get the best from anger in a way that respects yourself and others.

Research had demonstrated that there is a strong link between excessive anger and coronary heart disease. Anger is like any other emotion; it has a place and when used appropriately can produce a sense of energy and determination. Used inappropriately, it damages.

### **Where does our anger come from?**

The emotion of anger is one that is biologically programmed into each one of us. Some people may be more biologically prone towards feeling anger than others – just look at how some babies seem placid while others cannot settle.

However, most of our attitude towards anger and the way we use it is gained through what is called ‘learnt behaviour’. For example, if your parents are quite calm and deal with conflict in a measured way, being slow to anger, it is likely you will learn to do the same thing. If, however, there is a lot of screaming and shouting over the most minor of incidents then this is what you are likely to think of as normal behaviour.

Sometimes parents tell their children to do thing while their actions tell

the child to act in the opposite way. The old saying that “actions speak louder than words” covers this one.

Your attitude towards anger is likely to be coloured by your personal experiences. You are more likely to think of anger as a dangerous emotion if you were exposed to violence and aggression when you were young. This type of reaction is a very common for children who are witnesses or victims of abuse. It is not just the fear of other people’s anger but also fear that they might not be able to control their own angry feelings that can cause people to bottle up their anger. There is also a group of people whose early exposure to anger has led them to believe that such violence is normal and this group will be the one that expresses anger in an inappropriate way.

Alcohol and other substances can also cause a problem as such substances, even in small amounts, can make it more difficult to maintain control.

Excessive anger can also be a symptom of another condition. People who are stressed or who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may become uncharacteristically irritable or aggressive. When this happens, it is important the person gets the right kind of psychological help such as

counselling.

### **Check your Anger**

If you answer *Yes* to any of the following you are probably experiencing unhealthy anger and would benefit from seeking professional help.

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<b>SYMPTOM</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Experiencing feeling of anger for no reason		
Acting out your anger on other people		
Fantasising about taking revenge		
Having dreams or nightmares about revenge		
Hitting objects (e.g. tables, chairs, walls)		
Other people have expressed concern about your anger		
Tension, jaw clenching		

The likelihood of feeling anger may well to be increased when you believe you (or the people you love) are not treated well or that you were

let down by someone. In many instances, though, these feelings of anger simply subside with the passage of time. Anger can also drain confidence because like any strong emotion that is not being used wisely it tends to take over.

The following is a list of coping strategies, which can be employed if you are unhappy about your anger and wish to gain control of your feelings:

### **Challenge your angry thinking style**

People whose lives are ruled by too many *shoulds* and *musts* about how life should be or how other people should behave tend to get angry more easily than those who take the position that no one is perfect. When faced with someone who has made a mistake for the first time, do you:

- (a) Think you should act in an angry manner so he or she will know not to do it again?
- (b) Tend to think that the person may not have realised what he or she was doing?

Those of you who thought (a) was the right reaction are more likely to suffer from a case of “shoulditis”, seeing life in very “all or nothing”

terms and believing that people “should” treat you a certain way. You are probably quite an irritable type of person. If this is the case then challenge your thinking – “*why should people do what you think is right?*” “*is there any law that says just because you want something to be a certain way it must be?*” Try and develop a more “three strikes and you are out” attitude to life – you will feel much better for it.

If you answered (b) you are more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt and your interactions with people are likely to be productive. You are not a pushover as if someone does something again after you have told them then you would think it a deliberate act and become more assertive in what you say.

The more you can develop a flexible thinking style the less likely you are to experience the unhelpful side effects of anger.

### **Walk Away, Count to 10 and breathe**

When you first start to try and change your angry pattern of behaviour you will need some techniques that you can use to give yourself what could be called “cooling off time”.

Some people will say that they get angry so quickly that they act before they have time to think. If you are one of these people then begin to think about your anger manifests itself. For example, perhaps your very first experience of your anger is when your tummy feels tight, then perhaps your breathing gets faster and then your voice gets louder. The more you monitor yourself the more you are able to recognise what we could call your “early warning” signs. It takes time but you will be able to do it if you monitor yourself.

For example, if you find it too hard to control your anger at the beginning then start by walking away from the situation, taking time to calm down. If you find your tummy tightening then breathe slowly and deeply three or four times and visualise something that makes you feel safe and happy. These strategies have an impact on your biological responses by calming them. Some people find that counting down from 10 in their head also helps, as this is a way of avoiding an instant reaction. Assertiveness training classes can be really helpful too. For people who are scared of allowing anger to show, such classes can help you develop a way of gaining confidence that you can be angry in an appropriate way. For those where anger is a problem these classes will provide you with additional strategies so you too can use your anger wisely.

## **Keep an Anger Diary**

You may find it useful to keep what is called an “anger diary”. Your diary can be used to monitor any behaviour you wish to change and is used as a way of recording the details of:

- When you become angry
- The triggers for your anger
- How much anger you feel (using the 0= no anger to 8 = rageful scale)
- What thoughts were going through your mind at the time and what you did

Keeping a diary where you make entries at least once a day for three weeks or more can help you identify any patterns to your feelings and behaviours and the types of situations that trigger your anger. The diary also gives you the opportunity to monitor how well you are dealing with your anger.

## **Change your lifestyle**

Sometimes our lifestyle makes it harder to manage our anger so the more you can develop a healthy lifestyle the more control you will get.

Exercise helps prevent the accumulation of tension and offers a chance to get away from everyday stresses. Relaxation exercises such as yoga and meditation have been shown to lower tension and change brainwaves.

Make sure you make time to relax and make your environment as comfortable as possible as lack of sleep because you have an uncomfortable bed is likely to be a continual source of aggravation.

## **USEFUL READING**

*Calm Down*, Dr Paul Hauck, Sheldon Press £4.99.

*Managing Anger*, Gael Lindenfield, Thorsons, £6.99

*Overcoming Anger*, Windy Dryden, Sheldon Press, £7.99