

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The Counseling Center

Understanding and Working Through Anger

- **What is anger?** As is true with all of our emotions, anger tells us something important about ourselves and our lives. Anger is what we feel when we feel attacked, hurt, threatened, frustrated, disrespected, or insulted, and perhaps for other reasons as well. Anger is a normal human emotion. We all experience anger.

- Anger can be caused by such triggers as our needs, desires, or goals not being met (we get frustrated first, then we get angry). It can be caused by our perception that someone has hurt, disrespected, or insulted us, or by the feeling that someone is otherwise treating us poorly.

- The important thing to understand about anger is that it is a *reaction* to some other feeling – hurt, attacked, threatened, frustrated, disrespected, insulted, etc. – and that it is most often the *externalization* of that or those other feeling(s). If I have an appointment with someone, and that person does not show up, I might first feel disrespected or frustrated (I needed to meet with him/her), but I feel those things internally – within myself. Anger is when I turn that initial feeling outward, towards the other person.

- Often, our feelings of anger are “justified” or “realistic.” If I set aside an hour of my busy schedule for an appointment, and the other person does not show up, my feelings of disrespect and anger make sense; they fit the situation. They are proportionate to the situation.

- On the other hand, if I am running 30 minutes early to my soccer practice, and I hit a red light, it is not realistic for me to throw a tantrum, punch the steering wheel of my car, flip off the guy in the car next to me, and scream profanities. My reaction is not realistic, and does not fit the situation. It is an overreaction, and it is not proportionate to the situation (of being stopped at a red light, even though I still have plenty of time to get to practice).

- Our anger can be beneficial at times, as it can motivate us to take some corrective action, or to get out of some destructive situation. Anger becomes unhealthy when it becomes a primary or dominant emotion in our feeling landscape, or when it leads to the emotion of hostility or to aggressive behaviors.

- **What is aggression?** Aggression is an action that we take when we become angry or frustrated. Very often aggression is intended to harm someone, either ourselves or someone else. Aggression can take the form of verbal behavior (insults, hurtful words, threats, demeaning comments, or sarcasm), or it can take the form of physical violence or intimidation. Control-oriented behavior is also experienced by most people as aggressive.

- **What is hostility?** Hostility is a state of chronic anger that can lead to aggression in its various forms. Hostility affects both the hostile person (in the form of physical illness and the loss or damage to significant relationships), but it also affects those who come into contact with the hostile person.

When Does Anger Become a Problem?

Anger becomes a problem when it leads to severe negative consequences that may be physiological, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal and legal.

- Physiological consequences may include illnesses such as hypertension, stroke, heart disease, gastrointestinal problems, muscle aches, skin breakouts, and chronic headaches.
- Emotional consequences may include depression, anxiety, difficulty with intimacy, chronic irritability, and road rage.
- Behavioral consequences may include substance abuse, domestic violence, punching walls, physical altercations, and other impulsive destructive behavior.
- Interpersonal consequences include the loss of friendships, isolation, and the loss of intimate relationships.
- Legal consequences can include expulsion from academic institutions, arrest, prosecution, and incarceration that accrue from engaging in threatening and violent behavior.

What are the Goals of Anger Management?

- First and foremost, to identify feelings *other than anger* that precede anger, and that feed anger over time. These might include hurt, frustration, disrespect, loss, or control, among others.
- To learn to express your feelings – all of them – because the best way to avoid anger is to acknowledge and express your other feelings (e.g., hurt) before they ever turn into anger.
- To clearly recognize your own early warning signs that you are becoming angry.
- To make a commitment to expressing anger in a way that does not hurt you or others.
- To express your anger clearly and directly in ways that do not destroy relationships that are important to you or lead to other negative consequences. Focus on the feelings that lie underneath your anger. When we express anger directly (rather than the other feelings), people get defensive and might feel attacked. It is human nature to attack back when we feel attacked.
- To learn specific strategies for managing anger and developing self-control, such as relaxation techniques, examining and changing your irrational beliefs and inflammatory thinking, developing better communications skills and recognizing the inevitable consequences of anger that is out of control.

What are the Warning Signs of Anger?

- Muscle tension, sweating, nervousness, racing heartbeat, physical pain or other physical symptoms.
- Restlessness, anxiety, irritability, poor memory, excessive preoccupation with the angering situation, confusion, racing thoughts.
- Outbursts of emotions, feeling on edge or hyper-vigilant, feeling guilty or fearful.

How Can You Cope With Anger?

- Realize that intense anger can be dangerous. If you are close to losing control of your anger, get help right away.
- If you are in an angry altercation with someone else and you are in fear of losing control, take a time-out by removing yourself physically from the situation.
- Use physical exercise, such as taking a walk, running or going to the gym as a healthy way of releasing anger.

- Use relaxation strategies, such as taking deep breaths, listening to music or visualizing yourself at a beach or another pleasant environment as a way of diffusing anger.
- Ask yourself whether the negative consequences of behaving aggressively are really worth it.
- Talk to a friend, family member or counselor about your anger. Talking to someone else can change your interpretation of a situation and offer a new perspective. This can help you feel less preoccupied by anger, and you will be less likely to behave aggressively.
- When you feel calmer and more in control of your anger, express your feelings in words clearly and directly. When you are in control of your anger, you can discuss your feelings with another in a way that is constructive and that can change the situation for the better.

When Should You Get Professional Help For Yourself Or A Friend?

If you are concerned about angry feelings that you are experiencing, or about a friend who you believe is losing control of his or her anger, it is time to get professional help. There are resources on campus that can help you to understand your angry feelings, and can teach you strategies for managing those feelings, such as relaxation techniques, communication and conflict resolution skills, and changing your inflammatory thoughts and beliefs. You do not have to deal with anger on your own.