

Manage Anger for a Healthy Life

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This NebGuide discusses the causes of anger and how to manage anger and conflict effectively.

What is Anger?

Anger is a normal, human emotion that can be intense. Everyone gets angry on occasion. The trick is to manage anger in such a way that positive, not negative, actions are mobilized. Typically, anger is a response to one of many specific things. However, most responses to anger can be placed in two basic categories:

- Not getting what we want or need.
- Feeling that others do not respect us or care how we feel.

What makes you feel angry: Busy schedules? Financial worries? Work? Unruly children? Difficult relationships? It is important to recognize what triggers anger and remember that we usually take out our anger on those we love the most.

Anger against unfairness and cruelty toward children or animals can result in positive actions. People often try to change laws and actions that are unfair by passing better laws, doing volunteer work and helping those in need. These are positive reactions to anger. However, anger frequently leads to conflict with others. As people learn to control and manage anger, conflict lessens and is managed more effectively.

Anger is intensely personal. What makes one person angry may not affect another. Much of the time anger comes from within. People are angry with themselves for a great many reasons — they can't keep their house clean, they feel unattractive, or no one seems to like them. Anger with oneself can be especially dangerous. It is important that we learn what anger is and also learn effective and healthy ways to handle conflict and anger. People who are easily angered have a low tolerance for frustration, meaning they simply feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience, or annoyance. They cannot take things in stride. They are particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust: for example, being corrected for a minor mistake.

Effects of Anger on the Body

Anger affects your body both physically and psychologically. When you get angry, your body releases stress hormones — *adrenaline and cortisol* — into your bloodstream. These hormones can increase heart rate and blood pressure, which can damage arteries and accelerate development of arteriosclerosis. Anger can suppress your immune system, making you more susceptible to illness, and can weaken your heart, which can result in chest pains or sometimes heart attacks.

Anger also has a number of harmful psychological effects that may take their toll on your physical health. Various studies have suggested that hostility may be associated with poor marital satisfaction, difficult relationships with other family members, and greater problems at work.

Chronic anger drives friends and family away and may contribute to social isolation, which is itself a predictor of poor health and reduced longevity. Cynical, hostile people also tend to take more risks with their health, and are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, use other drugs, and overeat. All these take a toll on one's health.

Recognize that anger is part of some families' culture. Some children have been inappropriately raised to choose intense, negative displays of anger to make decisions and manage family life. Parents are the most effective role model for teaching anger management to their children, but in some cases, professional counseling may be needed to deal with feelings of intense anger or anger that may be disruptive and hurtful. Some children and adults may need to be under a physician's care for medication to help control emotions, including anger.

Another physiologic response is the "fight or flight" response, which is your body's primitive, automatic, inborn response that prepares the body to "fight" or "flee" from perceived attack, harm, or threat to your survival. When you face very real dangers to your physical survival, the fight or flight response is invaluable. Today, however, most of the anger you encounter is not a threat to your physical survival. It often consists of missing a deadline, bouncing a check, waiting in a check-out line or having an argument with your boss or spouse, etc. However, these trigger the activation of

your fight or flight system as if your physical survival is being threatened. On a daily basis, toxic stress hormones flow into your body for events that pose no real threat to your physical survival.

Damage Control Strategies

Although anger may seem like an automatic response to people or situations, strategies can be used to help control and manage it.

- **Reason with yourself.** Though at first anger may not feel like an emotion that responds well to logic, you can use your reasoning powers to keep from reacting *automatically* ... and from flying into a rage. When you feel yourself getting annoyed, stop and ask yourself three questions before you react:
 - Is this issue important to me?
 - Is my anger justified?
 - Is there anything that anger can do to fix the situation?

If you answer “yes” to all three questions, your anger is probably worth acting on. Instead of losing your temper, being assertive might be a strategy to try. Describe the specific behavior that’s bothering you and tell yourself what you want. Be specific about the behavior you want changed and make the request calmly. If necessary, take a few deep breaths before speaking.

If you answer “no” to at least one of the three questions, consider these suggestions: Instead of trying to change the situation that made you angry, it may be more appropriate to change your *internal response*. The key is to try to talk yourself out of it. Recognize that you cannot change another person’s behavior or the situation that has irritated you. You can only change yourself. Remember the damage that anger is doing to your body. Remind yourself that if you remain angry, it’s your own health and well-being that will suffer most.

- **Practice talking yourself out of anger.** Most angry people are highly cynical, so it will take time before they accept the power of anti-anger messages. With practice, these anti-anger messages will start to make more sense.
- **Empathize.** When people do something annoying, try to find a reasonable explanation for their behavior. Seeing a situation through another person’s eyes often can short-circuit impatience or irritation before it erupts into rage. Ask yourself: If you were this person how would you feel or like to be treated?
- **Use the thought-stopping technique.** This strategy may sound so simple that it couldn’t possibly work, but it has been used for years by cognitive therapists with great success. If you’ve determined that a particular angry thought is unjustified or ineffective, the moment you become aware of it, say the word *Stop!* to yourself and, if necessary, walk away. In a sense,

thought-stopping is an extension of reasoning with yourself but with an emotional punch that can make the difference when logic isn’t convincing.

- **Walk away.** When you become extremely angry, it sometimes becomes necessary to leave the situation. An example would be if you are having a verbal battle (shouting match) with your child. The best solution at that moment would be to turn and walk away. It may seem like you are surrendering, but in the long run it is an opportunity to cool down and avoid saying or doing something you would later regret. It is important to briefly explain to your child *why* you are walking away. “I will not continue this shouting match with you. After I calm down, we can continue this discussion.”
- **Distract yourself.** Your mind can’t focus on two things at once. When you feel angry, scan your environment for something else to occupy your mind. For example: If you’re annoyed by a slow supermarket check-out line, pick up a magazine and bury yourself in an interesting article. If your environment fails to offer a suitable distraction, make up one. Vividly imagine yourself in a favorite setting, plan the menu for an upcoming meal, or daydream.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help calm down angry feelings. There are books and courses that can teach you relaxation techniques, and once you learn the techniques, you can call upon them in any situation. Some simple steps to try:
 - Breathe deeply, from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest won’t relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your “gut.”
 - Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as “relax” or “take it easy.” Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
 - Use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination.
 - Non-strenuous, slow, yoga-like exercises can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer.

Practice these techniques each day. Learn to use them automatically when you are in a tense situation.

Other anger-reducing strategies might include:

- **Reduce artificial stimulants.** Cut back on or eliminate nicotine, caffeine, sweets, and other substances that stimulate the nervous and cardiovascular systems.
- **Be physically active.** Physical activity can help to reduce anger. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- **Work on your relationships.** Angry people tend to be on the lookout for mistreatment by others — and their distrust is sometimes enough to create that very behavior. Look for ways to develop a spirit of greater trust and cooperation. Suggestions:

- Become a better listener. Instead of interrupting while someone else is speaking, look that person straight in the eye and reflect on what you're hearing. Avoid being judgmental — or jumping in with advice.
- Find ways to care for others. Adopt a pet or regularly perform community service.
- Confide in a friend or family member.
- Laugh at yourself. When you feel angry, take your annoyances to a ridiculous extreme until you laugh at their absurdity. Laughter not only banishes negative emotions, it's relaxing.

Managing anger can be challenging and takes mental discipline, but the rewards are worth the effort.

Resources

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