



Controlling Anger – Before it Controls You

We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it, whether as a fleeting annoyance or as a full-fledged rage.

Anger is a completely normal, and usually healthy, human emotion. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems: problems at work, in your personal relationships, and in the overall quality of your life. And it can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of an unpredictable and powerful emotion.

What is Anger?

Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. Like other emotions, it is accompanied by physiological and biological changes. When you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up and so does the level of your energy hormones, adrenalin and noradrenalin.

Anger can be caused by external or internal events. You could be angry at a specific person (such as a coworker or supervisor) or event (a traffic jam, a canceled flight), or your anger could be caused by worrying or brooding about your personal problems. Memories of traumatic or enraging events also can trigger angry feelings.

Expressing Anger

The instinctive, natural way to express anger is to respond aggressively. Anger is a natural, adaptive response to threats. It inspires powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors that allow us to fight and defend ourselves when we are attacked. A certain amount of anger, therefore, is necessary to our survival.

On the other hand, we can't physically lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us. Laws, social norms and common sense place limits on how far we should let our anger take us.

People use a variety of conscious and unconscious processes to deal with their angry feelings. The three main approaches are expressing, suppressing and calming.

Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive – not aggressive – manner is the healthiest way to express anger. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are, and how to get them met, without hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding. It means being respectful of yourself and others.

Another approach is to suppress anger and then convert or redirect it. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it and focus on something positive to do instead. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behavior. The danger in this type of response is that if your anger isn't allowed outward expression, it can turn inward – on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure or depression.

Unexpressed anger can create other problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger such as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly, without telling them why, rather than confronting them head-on), or a perpetually cynical and hostile attitude. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything and making cynical comments haven't learned how to express their anger constructively. Not surprisingly, they aren't likely to have many successful relationships.

Finally, you can calm yourself down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior, but also controlling your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate, calm yourself down and let the feelings subside.

continued on Page 2

Anger Management

The goal of anger management is to reduce both your emotional feelings and the physiological arousal that anger causes. You can't get rid of or avoid the things or people that enrage you, nor can you change them; but you can learn to control your reactions.

Are You Too Angry?

There are psychological tests that measure the intensity of angry feelings, how prone to anger you are, and how well you handle it. But chances are good that if you do have a problem with anger, you already know it. If you find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, you might need help finding better ways to deal with this emotion.

Why are Some People More Angry Than Others?

Some people are really more "hotheaded" than others. They get angry more easily and more intensely than the average person. There also are those who don't show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don't always curse and throw things. Sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk or get physically ill.

People who are easily angered generally have what some psychologists call a low tolerance for frustration, meaning simply that they feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience or annoyance. They can't take things in stride, and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust: for example, when they are corrected for a minor mistake.

What makes these people this way? A number of things. One cause may be genetic or physiological. There is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another may be how we're taught to deal with anger. Anger often is regarded as negative. Many of us are taught that it's all right to express anxiety, depression or other emotions, but not to express anger. As a result, we don't learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

Research has also found that family background plays a role. Typically, people who are easily angered come from families that are disruptive, chaotic and not skilled at emotional communication.

Is It Good to 'Let It All Hang Out'?

Psychologists now say that this is a dangerous myth. Some people use this theory as a license to hurt others. Research has found that 'letting it rip' with anger actually escalates anger and aggression and does nothing to help you (or the person you're angry with) resolve the situation.

It's best to find out what it is that triggers your anger, and then develop strategies to keep those triggers from toppling you over the edge.

Do You Need Counseling?

If you feel that your anger is really out of control; if it is having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, you might consider counseling to learn how to handle it better. A psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can work with you in developing a range of techniques for changing your thinking and your behaviors.

When you talk to a prospective therapist, tell her or him that you have problems with anger that you want to work on, and ask about his or her approach to anger management. Make sure this isn't only a course of action designed to help you get in touch with your feelings and express them. That may be precisely your problem.

With counseling, psychologists say, a highly angry person can move closer to a middle range of anger in about eight to 10 weeks, depending on the circumstances and the counseling techniques used.

By © American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

Handling Angry People

Handling angry people is an important skill in today's world of increasing stress and pressure. It is not unusual to encounter angry customers, coworkers, family members and even strangers who lash out at us. It is important to be able to handle these attacks in a way that prevents escalation of the angry behavior.

Anger in the workplace is becoming increasingly common. It can adversely affect the ability of employees to work together in a positive, productive manner. In addition, it undermines morale and causes increased stress and tension among coworkers. If anger is not handled constructively by managers and employees, it can escalate to more aggressive, threatening and potentially violent behaviors.

The first step in dealing with an angry person is to disengage oneself emotionally from the disruptive behavior by separating the behavior from the person. While the angry behavior may be inappropriate and must be addressed as inappropriate, it also is important to validate the real emotional discomfort and pain the individual is experiencing. Treating the angry person with respect is a powerful tool to reduce the emotional intensity the person is feeling.

continued on Page 3

Handling angry, aggressive behavior with assertive communication techniques can have a positive impact on the angry person and the situation in a number of ways:

- You help the person define the specifics of the problem;
- You explain the limitations of what you can do; and
- You limit emotional and aggressive behavior.

The following assertive communication techniques are very effective in dealing with angry people.

Define the Specifics of the Problem

The first assertive strategy in handling a complaint or an upset person is to help the person specifically define the problem. This requires selective listening that cuts through the emotional and irrelevant issues and focuses on the facts of the central issue.

Assertive strategies include:

Attentive Listening

Let the person fully state the issues and get his/her feelings off their chest. Let them know you want to understand.

Be Specific

Help the person focus on the main facts by asking for more specific information with questions like, "Please tell me specifically what happened."

Paraphrase

Paraphrase the content of what the person said. Ask if she or he agrees with your understanding. A good way to frame the paraphrase is, "Let me see if I understand correctly. (State the person's issues in your own words.) Would you agree that this is correct?"

Empathic Reflection

Aggressive, angry communication and behavior are often indirect expressions of wants and needs. Acknowledging feelings helps the person feel understood and may help to reduce the emotional level. Examples of empathic reflection are:

- "I can see that you are irritated;"
- "I understand that this is upsetting for you;" and
- "This has been a difficult and frustrating process for you."

Simply acknowledge the feelings in a nonjudgmental way.

Explain the Limitations of What You Can and Cannot Do

Once you and the person agree on the source of the problem, clarify what you can and cannot do. A concise statement of how you can help will establish the



parameters for cooperative problem-solving. Or, you may refer the person to someone who is in a better position to handle the problem.

Limit Emotional and Aggressive Behavior

Dealing with an angry person who will not remain focused and who continues to vent in an angry, aggressive manner requires a strong, assertive stance.

Assertive strategies include:

Ignoring

Ignore the aggressive and personally-directed negative comments and stick to your goals of clarifying the issue and maintaining the limits of what you can and cannot do. Listen for and respond to only the elements that are relevant to your goals. Here is an example:

A consultant was hired to help sales managers brainstorm ideas on how to improve personal service. During the first meeting, where the consultant was wearing slacks and a blazer and the sales managers were in suits and ties, one manager stood up and pointed his finger at the consultant.

- **Manager:** "I know one way to improve services. I think we need a different consultant who wears a suit and tie and has his hair cut; someone managers can relate to."
- **Consultant:** "So, your suggestion is to hire a new consultant who wears a suit and tie and has his hair cut."
- **Manager:** "Right."
- **Consultant:** "OK, that's another suggestion."

The consultant wrote this on the board and continued the brainstorming process. He chose not to respond to the manager's angry manner or the personal assault. He remained focused on the goal of brainstorming.

Dismiss and Redirect

This assertive strategy denies the relevance of a put-down or irrelevant comment and redirects the discussion to the main issue. For example: "The way another employee was treated in a similar circumstance is something I cannot help" (dismiss). "However, I can try to help you with your problem if you will give me more specific information on exactly what happened to you that you believe was unfair" (redirect).



Broken Record

The broken record technique is useful when you must say "no," or deal with a person who will not accept what you have to say. It has three steps:

- Phrase your message in a short, specific, unemotional statement. Offer no excuses or apologies.
- Calmly and firmly repeat your statement after each person's response. Do not allow yourself to be thrown off track. It may be necessary to repeat your assertive statement many times before the other person acknowledges your message.
- Briefly acknowledge the person's feelings or wishes, using paraphrase or empathetic reflection, before returning to your broken-record statement. For example:

Caller: "I want to speak to your boss now."

You: "May I have your name?"

Caller: You don't need my name."

You: "I cannot call my supervisor unless I know your name and the reason for your call."

Caller: "This place is so screwed up I can't believe it!"

You: "Please give me your name and the reason for your call, and I will see how I can help you."

Caller: "You're just as worthless as the rest. I have talked to seven idiots before you, and no one knows anything. I want to speak to the boss."

You: "I understand you are feeling frustrated. Please give me your name and the reason for your call and I will see how I can help you."

Direct Negative Feedback

By providing direct negative feedback, you let the person know how the behavior is preventing a resolution to the problem. "When you continue to yell and interrupt and use profanity, I am unable to work with you to get to the root of the problem. Please call back when you are calmer so I can find a way to help you."

Contrasts

The contrast between your own calm and reasonable manner and the other person's aggression may make the person aware of his/her inappropriate behavior. The more agitated the other person, the more you must control any reflection of irritation or frustration in your manner.

There are a number of ways to help yourself remain calm:

- **Keep a professional distance.** Do not take the anger or comments personally. Do not allow yourself to be drawn into the person's anger.
- **Be aware of what triggers your emotional responses.** Tension in your body, shallow breathing, quickening heart rate, etc. are among the signs that you have been emotionally drawn in. Take a mental time-out to calm down and think.
- **Breathe deeply and slowly.** When under pressure, there is a tendency to take fast, shallow breaths which only increases the tense feelings.
- **Slow down.** We often talk faster when faced with aggression and conflict. Slowing down gives you an increased sense of calm and more time to appropriately respond to the person.
- **Keep it short.** Respond to aggressive behavior in short sentences. Make your statement and then be quiet and wait for the person's response. Do not fall into the trap of filling in silences with more than you intended to say.
- **Deepen your voice.** Stress can tighten vocal cords and cause your voice to sound higher than normal. A high pitch will sound as if you are emotionally vulnerable. A firm tone of voice enhances your assertive message and reflects authority. It reinforces the limits you place on the aggressive behavior.

Treating an angry person with respect and using assertive communication skills to find the best way to help can often turn a negative situation around and lead to a cooperative, problem-solving process. It can improve customer relations, increase workplace productivity through increased cooperation and enhance personal relationships. It is important to keep in mind that, like any other skill, to become an effective assertive communicator, it takes conscious effort and practice, practice, practice. The rewards will be great when you master these skills.

By © liveandworkwell.com. All rights reserved.

If You and Your Partner Fight, Do It Right

One of the most important ingredients for a happy, committed relationship is good communication. While it's natural to disagree occasionally or have different points of view, relationship problems can result from arguments when couples don't fight fairly to resolve issues.

To avoid hurt feelings and strengthen communication in your relationship, try these techniques the next time you have a heated debate with your spouse or partner.

Be clear – Communicate your issues well, and ask questions to understand your partner correctly. You may think your wife is upset that you forgot to stop for groceries, when what really upsets her is a pattern of not pitching in on errands. Before explaining or defending yourself, repeat back what you believe she is saying so that any misunderstanding can be cleared up first.

Don't get personal or mean – Nothing can escalate a disagreement more than insults, sarcasm or personal attacks. Use "I" statements to stay focused on how you feel about the issue rather than criticizing your partner's beliefs, opinions or behavior.

Focus – Stick to the issue at hand. Dragging in other perceived slights or past mistakes makes resolution more difficult to achieve.

Avoid accusations and blame – Avoid statements that begin with "You always" or "You never." Try to stick to comments that begin with "I feel" or "I think."

Don't interrupt – This shows a lack of respect because you aren't really listening to what your partner is trying to say. Once he has finished sharing his feelings or opinions, repeat back in your own words your understanding of what you heard. Be open to his corrections and clarifications.

Stay calm – Talk in a relaxed, respectful voice. Ranting and raving accomplishes nothing and only escalates the argument.

Listen – Be willing to hear the other's point of view. You can't reach a satisfying resolution without really understanding your spouse. Don't judge your partner, or call her "silly" or "stupid" for thinking or feeling a certain way. Everyone has a right to personal beliefs and feelings.

Compromise – Avoid the temptation to have to always be right. Marriage is about working together and finding the best solution as a couple.

A fair argument can improve a marriage and help you reach new levels of understanding of each other. Fight for your marriage or committed relationship, not to win.

By © liveandworkwell.com. All rights reserved.



**OHIO EMPLOYEE
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM**

Your employee assistance program offers confidential help for personal problems

and concerns. Concerned about a troubled family member who won't get help? Feel tired and exhausted, but don't know if it's burnout, loss of motivation, depression or all three? Late for work too often? Has the use of alcohol or drugs created a crisis you are facing right now? The bottom line, never wonder if your concern is appropriate to contact OEAP. So, if you've been putting off taking action to solve a serious issue that is weighing on you, give OEAP a call today.

30 E. Broad St., 27th Floor
Columbus, OH 43215

800-221-6327/614-644-8545

www.ohio.gov/eap

Robert Blair, Director
Ohio Department of Administrative Services

Debora Branham, *Assistant Benefits Administrator*

Andy Bensing, *OEAP Benefits Manager*

Carrie McKean, *Administrative Professional*

OhioAS
Service · Support · Solutions

Department of Administrative Services