

Coping with anger

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Introduction

What is anger?

Anger is a perfectly healthy human emotion and one that we need to manage threatening situations. Everyone experiences anger in different ways depending on individual differences, life experiences and their personal beliefs and world view. Some people find that their anger has caused them serious problems as they feel unable to control it or behave in an aggressive manner.

Why do I get angry?

In life there are various things that irritate or annoy us, other peoples behaviours can cost us either financially or emotionally or rules are broken (actual or personal) that can lead to us feeling angry or irritated. For the majority of people they are able to manage these feelings of anger so that their response is relevant to the situation. In some cases however the anger becomes a problem as it is too strong, happens too often, lasts too long or in extreme cases leads to aggression and violence. It is important for people to recognise what things make them angry so that they can either avoid these things or plan to respond to them in a different way.

Note: Anger can be a positive emotion as it can motivate us to do things, makes us feel alert and also informs others if their behaviour has affected you in a negative way.

Can I control my anger?

Many people experiencing anger problems feel that they have no control over it. Control is possible and this manual can show you techniques to gain more control however the individual must CHOOSE to use the skills and practice them until they become second nature. Even people who have anger problems display control for the majority of the time as they are not angry 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The fact that you are reading this workbook suggests you would like to take control, read on to learn how to do this.

Self checklist

Do you have problems with anger?

If you have a problem with anger you probably already know it, but these are some of the signs that you may have difficulty controlling anger. Place a tick next to those you experience regularly:

How you feel

- Anger or rage
- Irritable at the slightest thing
- Restless, on edge, uptight
- Flashes of rage

How you think

- Poor concentration.
- Mind goes 'blank' when angry
- Thinking the worst of people
- Everything seems like a big problem
- Others seem unfair to you

Common Thoughts.

- "You/they have ruined everything"
- "You/they have made a fool of me"
- "If you don't do something I'll explode"
- "You/they deserve this"
- "You/they let me down"
- "I can't trust anyone"
- "You are never there for me"

What happens to your body

- Heart pounds, races, or skips a beat,
- Chest feels tight.
- Stomach churns,
- Legs go weak,
- Tense muscles,
- Go very hot,
- Having to go to the toilet.
- Sweating.
- Head buzzing, pounding.

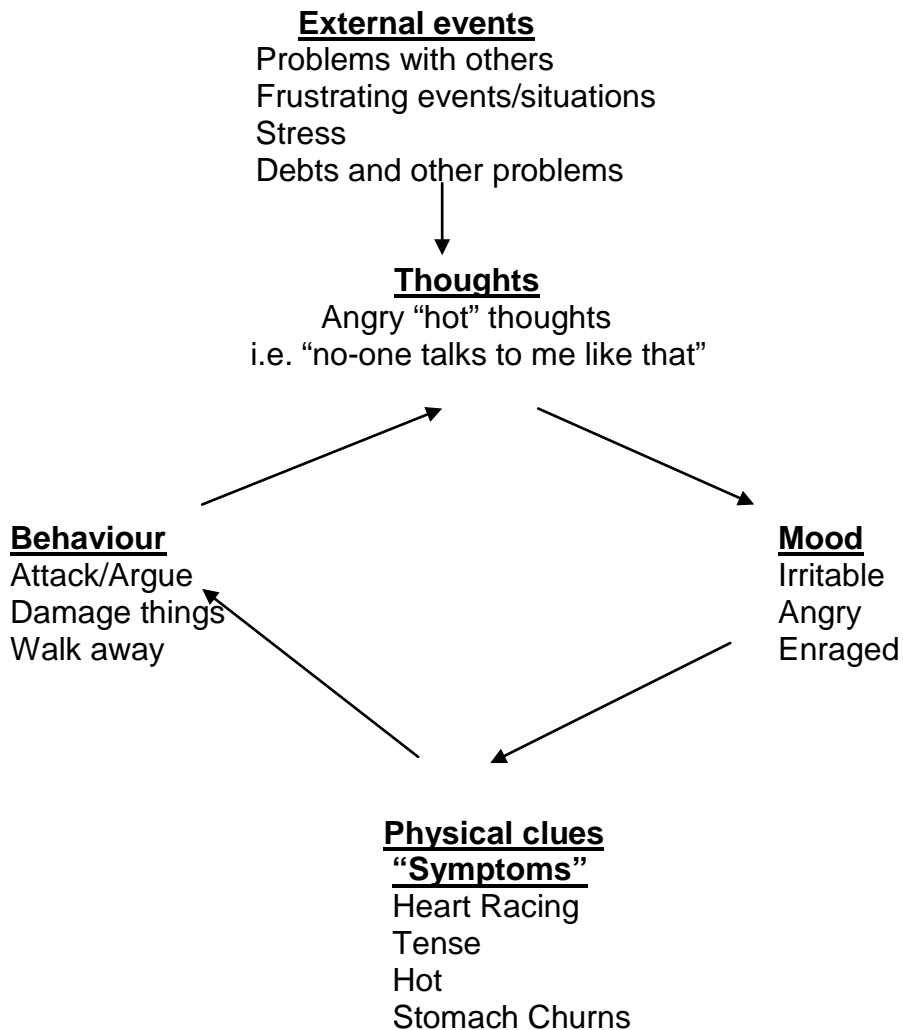
What you do

- Snappy and irritable behaviour
- Shout and argue
- Hit out
- Leave the situation
- Throw/hit an object, slam door, etc
- Attack someone
- Say something unkind
- Cry
- Push someone
- Do nothing, bottle it up
- Get drunk/smoke/take drugs
- Hurt yourself

If you are regularly experiencing some or all of these signs then you may have a difficulty with anger control. The following sections may help you to tackle this problem.

Vicious circles of anger

In order to understand your own anger better it is important to appreciate the various aspects that influence our feelings of anger. The diagram below demonstrates the interaction between our mood, thoughts, physical reactions, behaviour and external events:



All of these aspects can affect each other and maintain the anger cycle. Our angry behaviour can cause anger responses from others, our physical clues can make us feel out of control and our thoughts can heighten our moods.

Activity: Why not try and create your own vicious cycle of anger?

My vicious circle of anger

External events

Thoughts

Behaviour

Mood

Physical clues
“Symptoms”

What makes you angry?

The first step in understanding your anger and taking control is to recognise the things that make you angry in the first place. Anger can be caused by reacting to things externally such as other people or events. It can also be caused by upsetting memories from the past or worrying about current problems.

Note: It is not people or events that make you angry, it is the way you react to them that makes you angry.

What things trigger your anger?

Activity: Spend some time thinking about times when you have been irritable or angry and try to identify the following:

External/outside triggers:

(People/events)

Internal/personal triggers:

(Memories/worries/angry thoughts)

Recognising what keeps you angry?

When you have identified the things that can make you angry it is also important to understand the role your thoughts can play in the anger process. The vicious cycle of anger demonstrates the impact angry “hot” thoughts can have on anger. Quite often people who have a problem with anger don’t notice their angry thoughts. It is important to recognise these and begin to challenge them whenever possible. Once someone starts to feel angry, they tend to keep reminding themselves of what it is they feel angry about which in turn makes them feel even angrier.

Activity: Have there been times when just thinking about things that have happened in the past have made you angry? Make a note of them below:

- _____
- _____
- _____

“Hot” thoughts

These thoughts are angry thoughts that flash into your mind and can make you feel angrier about the situation. These thoughts often relate to feelings of being ignored, disrespected, criticised or overwhelmed. Listed below are some typical “hot” thoughts:

“how dare you talk to me like that”

“You’re making a fool of me”

“I hate this place”

“I want to hurt you”

Activity: Have you had thoughts like these before? If so, make a note of them below:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

For further information about negative thinking and its impact on anger please see appendix A.

How do I know I am getting angry or irritable?

In the introduction it was said that anger is a healthy emotion that we need to manage threatening situations. This is known as the “fight or flight” response. If you are in a situation where there is a perceived or real threat, adrenalin is dispersed into your blood stream. This is an automatic survival mechanism which “energises” or “prepares” our bodies to either escape the situation (Flight) or defend ourselves (fight). This chemical reaction produces physical sensations such as:

- Racing heart
- Rapid breathing
- Tension in muscles
- Shaking
- Hot, sweaty
- Light headed
- Churning stomach or butterflies
- Fist or teeth clenching

Activity: Spend some time thinking about the physical sensations you experience when you get annoyed or become angry. List them below:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

These physical symptoms can act as “clues” that you are becoming angry. It is important to recognise your personal clues as soon as they occur in order to reduce the physical symptoms of anger and therefore have more control over the anger itself. The next section explains how you can regain control.

How do I start to control my anger?

People that have an anger problem have often behaved in this way for some time so the behaviour has become “natural” to them and they get angry automatically. This can often make situations seem worse or make you feel bad. In order to take control of anger it is important to “remind” yourself that you need to take control and reduce the adrenalin levels in your blood stream. **This is why recognition of your physical clues is so important.**

As soon as you have recognised your clues, you should be aware that you are getting angry, this is your opportunity to take some control and REMIND yourself to calm down. This can be a short, snappy sentence or even a word that reminds you that you need to reduce your anger levels. Some examples could be:

- Calm down
- Relax
- Chill out
- Stop
- Don't do it

This reminder needs to be relevant for you and something that will make you take notice and use the anger reducer techniques discussed in the next section.

Activity: Spend some time thinking about short reminders you could use that will remind you to take control of the anger:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Anger-reducing techniques

We have established that when adrenalin reaches our blood stream it causes a number of physiological symptoms to occur. In order to reduce anger levels it is important to reduce the adrenalin in your blood stream. This will allow you to feel calmer in dealing with the situation that has angered you in the first place but will also give you time to think about the best way to deal with it. There are several techniques that help this process along.

Deep breathing:

Often when people are angry they begin to take shallow breaths which in turn can make them feel light headed, dizzy and out of control. Deep breathing can counteract these physical symptoms and also allows the individual to take “time out” of a tense situation and focus on something other than what triggered the anger initially. This process is fairly simple to use and is often not noticeable to others. See Appendix B for guidance on how to do this effectively.

Pleasant imagery:

This technique involves imagining a peaceful scene that has a calming effect on you. An example could be of a scene from a relaxing holiday, picturing your children or a loved one. Another form of pleasant imagery could be as simple as changing your view from the thing that is angering you, to another viewpoint i.e. looking out of the window. This acts as a distraction and can reduce your anger.

Note: It is important NOT to use any imagery that could potentially increase your physical arousal images e.g. sexual images, images relating to alcohol/drug use.

Counting backwards:

This is another technique that can distract you from the triggers of your anger. This is a “time out” technique which allows you to think about what you are doing rather than reacting in an angry way.

Note: It is better to count backwards from a high number. Some people find that counting down from ten feels like a “countdown till take off” which could result in aggressive behaviours or angry outbursts.

Please see appendix C for more details of the above reducers.

Thinking ahead

Quite often when you become angry you are unable or unwilling to consider the consequences of your actions, partly because you may feel justified in being angry in the first place and also because the adrenalin makes it difficult to think clearly about things.

Once an anger reducer has been used and your adrenalin levels have reduced you have an opportunity to think more clearly and therefore make decisions about how you want to handle the situation that has angered you. This “thinking” time gives you the chance to consider the consequences of your actions i.e. “if I scream at her now then we’ll end up not talking to each other all night”. This allows you to make a choice, continue in the way you always have before OR choose to do something differently to try and avoid the problem/anger escalating.

This method also works as an anger reducer because it helps you to stop and think before acting and so interrupts the anger build up. It will also encourage you to consider alternative ways of dealing with a difficult situation.

Note: The consequences could be external or internal:

External: I’ll upset my partner, children, friends etc. I could damage my relationships

Internal: Feeling terrible about yourself, losing self respect, feeling guilty.

Activity: Based on your previous experiences of getting angry, try to think about the consequences you faced as a result and how you could have considered that during the event.

What do I do instead?

A common question asked by people who are in the process of learning to control their anger is “what do I do instead?” and this is a valid question. Controlling your anger is good however in most cases the outside or personal triggers discussed earlier are still present and need to be addressed. If you are unable to do something differently there is potential for your anger to resurface or you could develop feelings of resentment/frustration as you have not been able to deal with the situation effectively.

If you have reacted in an angry or irritable way to an external or outside trigger, it may be necessary to use a different social skill in order to manage the situation. See appendix D for a number of different skills that could be used.

Activity: Spend some time thinking about previous example when you have become angry. Try noting down things you could have done differently in those situations.

If you have reacted in an angry or irritable way to an internal or personal trigger, it may be necessary to spend time considering the angry thoughts you have been having and attempt to change them into more balanced thoughts. Please refer to the “hot” thoughts section and Appendix A for further information.

How did you do?

An important process when changing any behaviour is to reflect and review how well you did. This is important for two reasons, if you have done well it is vital that you reward yourself in some way to acknowledge that you behaved differently and managed your anger or irritability, if you didn't manage to control your anger it is important to look back on it, identify which steps you missed and think about ways of remembering to use them in the future.

Self reward: Acknowledging that you have done well is important as it encourages you to repeat the new behaviour rather than revert to the old, unwanted behaviour. Rewards can be as simple as telling yourself you did well or treating yourself to something you like. Often people find that those around them notice that they have reacted differently to situations and will comment on it, this is a form of reward and can help you to feel pride in what you have achieved and again encourage you to practise the new skills further.

Self coaching: If you feel that you did not handle your anger as well as you could have, it is important that you can think about this and identify which step or steps you didn't use and how you could have used them in order to manage your anger. This is known as self coaching as you will be identifying for yourself which part of the sequence you need to practise more in order to develop your anger control skills.

Note: Learning to control your anger is a SKILL. When learning a new skill it is important to remember that you will not be an "expert" straight away and practise is required in order for the new skill to become an automatic behaviour. With this in mind it is important to remember not to give up if it doesn't work as well as you would have liked in the early stages. We learn from our mistakes and again this is why the self evaluation is so important.

Appendix A

Common thinking errors:

People can often have common thinking errors that can encourage anger to continue or indeed create angry thoughts in the first place. Beware a number of thinking errors. Do you recognise any of these in yourself?

Filtering. Only looking at the bad, never the good in yourself or others. You may single out a negative detail or behaviour and dwell on it, ignoring any good things/behaviours around you. You may see only yours or others weaknesses and mistakes, and disregard strengths and accomplishments.

Overgeneralisation. One negative event is the beginning of a never-ending pattern e.g. If you experience anger the first time, you will get angry every time.

All or nothing thinking. You see things as black and white with nothing in between. You are either right or wrong, smart or stupid and so on. There is no in-between. Being unable to see alternatives can lead to an anger response.

Catastrophising. A small incident is a disaster. For example, your child accidentally spills a drink on the carpet, you think that they should have somehow avoided the accident and that they have been careless, you'll now have to spend a long time trying to clean it, it may not get clean so you'll have a stain and the carpet will be ruined. As a result, you react to the imagined catastrophe (child's perceived carelessness, the drain on your time and a ruined carpet), than to the little event (the accidental spillage).

Labelling. You "label" external triggers in a way that promotes anger responses i.e. labelling someone as an "idiot" will encourage little tolerance for that individual, labelling an event/activity as "annoying/stupid" will lower your tolerance for that event/activity.

Mindreading. You know what others are thinking of you, and it's always bad. As a result, you react to what you imagine they are thinking without bothering to ask.

Fortune telling. You think you know what will happen next and get angry based on that assumption.

Disqualifying the positive. Anything positive about you or anything positive that happens is discounted. For example, "S/he did apologise but they still did something wrong in the first place".

Personalisation. If something bad happens, it must have been your fault. Other more likely causes are ignored. Alternatively you could interpret actions and behaviours as being directed at you specifically.

Perfectionism. It's only good enough if it's perfect. And because it's never perfect, you are never satisfied and this can cause anger to build up.

Should's. You know how you should be and how the world should be – but you are not, and neither is the world. "I should not upset people". "I ought to have achieved more than this." Result: You are constantly disappointed and angry with yourself and everyone around you.

‘Hot thoughts’

If you recognise some of the thinking errors outlined above it may help if you try to challenge these “hot” thoughts. The first step in challenging angry thoughts is to recognise them. Secondly it is important to consider if the thought is an accurate/balanced view of the situation or if it is helpful in any way. If you decide that it isn’t then you need to be able to replace these thoughts with something more constructive.

When you are aware that you are becoming angry, ask yourself: ‘What is going through my mind?’ It is not always easy to recognise angry thoughts and images but with practice you will become better able to identify what is going through your mind. It can be helpful to think about previous experiences or times when you have felt angry and try to think about the internal thoughts you had at the time, this will make it easier to identify any angry thoughts in the future. The table on the following page is a helpful tool that you can assist you in monitoring your angry thoughts. A blank version can be found at the back of this manual for you to use.

The next step is to try to decide whether or not your thoughts are realistic and in proportion. At the time of feeling angry, you might not be able to spot irrational thinking patterns or predictions in part due to the adrenalin in your system; if that is the case, look at your record later, when you are feeling calm and more able to view the situation clearly. If you still have difficulty in gaining a realistic perspective, ask your therapist (or a trusted friend) to help you to look through your diary entries and to comment on how balanced or helpful these thoughts are. A thought challenge worksheet could assist you in weighing up your angry thoughts. An example is outlined below and a blank version can be found at the back of the manual.

Once you have started to see that your thoughts might be distorted (or not always very helpful), you can begin to find more balanced alternatives to them. Challenging your angry thinking will make you feel less angry and better able to cope with your difficulties.

Hot Thought Diary

Example:

DATE	EXTERNAL TRIGGER	ANGRY "HOT" THOUGHT/INTERNAL TRIGGER <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What was going through my mind just then?• Record thought, and if you like, try to classify the kind of distortion	ANGER LEVEL <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rate how angry the situation has made you (1-100 scale)
30 September	A driver cuts me up on a roundabout	<i>I can't believe they just did that to me, how dare they (personalisation)</i> <i>I could have been in a terrible accident (catastrophising)</i> <i>They said sorry but that's not the point they shouldn't have cut me up in the first place. (disqualifying the positive)</i>	65%

Thought challenge sheet

Hot thought: *I can't believe they just did that to me, how dare they
I could have been in a terrible accident
They said sorry but that's not the point they shouldn't have cut me up
in the first place.*

Evidence For	Evidence against
<p>They shouldn't have cut me up on the roundabout</p> <p>What they did was unsafe</p>	<p>I am a safe driver and would have stopped in time</p> <p>We were not driving fast so if there had been an accident it would have been low impact</p> <p>They did say sorry, others wouldn't</p> <p>It's nothing personal, they would have cut someone else up if I hadn't been there</p> <p>I'm all hot and bothered and they have probably already forgotten about it.</p>

Below is some guidance on how to use deep breathing effectively. It is important that you learn how to use this technique properly in order to feel the benefit of it in when you are angry. Once you have practised and are confident using this skill it is important that you use it as soon as possible when you recognise that you are becoming angry.

Learning controlled breathing

When you first practice, it may be easier to do this exercise lying down, so that you can better feel the difference between shallow and deep breathing. As you become more practised, you can try this exercise sitting or standing.

- Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, allowing your stomach and chest to gently swell. You will know you are using your full lungs, and not just the upper portion, if you feel both of your hands gently rising.
- The in-breath should be slow and gently and quiet – others should not be able to hear you breathe.
- It may be helpful to pause briefly before you exhale.
- Exhale, slowly and gently.
- After exhaling, pause for a moment. Don't take the next breathe in until you feel it is "time". (This does not mean "holding" your breath – just a slight pause.)
- Repeat this process. Try to get a rhythm going. Keep the breathing slow and deep and gentle.
- You are aiming to take eight to twelve breaths a minute: breathing in and breathing out again counts as one breath. This might be difficult to gauge at first, so practice counting five to seven seconds for a complete breathing cycle (breathing in and out).

NOTE: Some people find that moving into an open area or outside can help them with their deep breathing.

Counting backwards

This method effectively give you a “time out” of a conflict during which time you can gather your thoughts and consider alternative ways of managing the situation.

It is better to count from a high number i.e. 80-60, 150-130 etc. This is because some people can count down from 20 or 10 without much thought so once zero is reached it can signify a “take off” situation which could in turn lead to you reacting in an angry way. To make it even more challenging you can try to count back in 2’s or 3’s. This technique distracts you from the situation and will give you a chance to calm down a little. It is advisable to turn away from the provoking person or situation if this is at all possible.

An adaptation to this technique could be to use words instead of numbers. Try to think of as many peaceful, calming words as you can and try to spell them to yourself. Again this will distract you from the person or situation to enable you to calm down.

Pleasant imagery

Pleasant Imagery is a very useful anger reducer but may not be suitable for all scenarios. This reducer is particularly helpful in a situation whereby your anger is “slow burning” i.e. waiting for a partner who has promised to be home from the pub 3 hours ago.

There are certain rules that are important to remember about pleasant imagery. Firstly the image must not be of a sexual nature as this can heighten physical arousal rather than help to calm you down. Try to ensure that the imagery does not include things that could induce an inappropriate response, i.e. imagining the person in a conflict situation as a clown for example could cause you to laugh out loud which could in turn aggravate the situation instead of calm it.

If you find it hard to imagine scenes in your mind you may find it easier to simply change your point of view for example looking out of the window or moving to another area. This will act as a distraction and prevent you from reacting to your external/internal triggers.

Appendix D

Alternative options when trying to resolve a conflict/manage your anger:

Negotiate: It may be necessary to negotiate in order to avoid a conflict. In order to do this you need to stay calm and explain to the person/s what you feel the conflict is about and suggest that all involved think about a suitable compromise that both sides will be satisfied with. Remember the art of negotiation is for both sides to feel that they have not given up completely and have both gained to some extent.

Avoid conflict: Sometimes if you know that the situation will not be resolved at this time it may be necessary to remove yourself from the situation completely. This can be done by explaining that you feel that some time to think is needed. This will give you an opportunity to manage your anger and potentially resolve the situation in the future.

Use assertion skills: Often people confuse aggression with assertiveness. In order to behave assertively you must be able to monitor the tone of your voice and ensure that you do not start shouting or raise your voice too loud. It should be a steady, confident tone. Also ensure that your body language is open and confident, make sure you are not clenching your fists, gritting teeth etc and not invading another person's body space as this can be seen as intimidating. The most important difference between being aggressive and assertive is the control of anger. If you are being assertive you are in control of your anger, if you are being aggressive the anger is in control of you.

Apologise: Sometimes we become angry if we have been accused of something regardless of whether we are guilty or not. If you know that you are responsible for something, it may be necessary to accept this and apologise.

Expressing your feelings: It is common for people to use anger inappropriately because they find it hard to express their feelings an example of this is a parent shouting at a child that has wandered off, their primary emotion is normally fear and they express this as anger when the child is found. If you are feeling sad, hurt, lonely, annoyed about something, it may be necessary to explain this to someone. Spend some time thinking about times when you have been angry and try to think if there were other emotions you felt at the time also.

DATE	EXTERNAL TRIGGER	ANGRY "HOT" THOUGHT/INTERNAL TRIGGER <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What was going through my mind just then?• Record thought, and if you like, try to classify the kind of distortion	ANGER LEVEL <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rate how angry the situation has made you (1-100 scale)

Evidence For	Evidence against

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) provides service users, their carers and families with help, information and support to resolve concerns quickly and efficiently.

Freephone: 0800 376 0775

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A graphic consisting of two overlapping black rectangular shapes with white, hand-drawn style text. The top shape contains the words 'FOR MORE' and the bottom shape contains the word 'INFORMATION:'.

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