

# Dealing With Our Anger

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Consumer Series | Family

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson\*

Revised by C.J. Kemp, A. Quinn, & C.A. Fruhauf\*\*

## What Is Anger?

Anger is an emotional or behavioral reaction of displeasure to an unmet expectation, demand or belief. Anger also occurs when we sense that our progress towards a goal has been hindered, or when we feel hurt by another person's actions or words. We often view anger as an inherently negative emotion; however, anger can sometimes be a healthy and appropriate emotion to feel. Anger often becomes unhealthy when we make unsafe choices or actions based on anger. We can think of anger as having three components: thinking, feeling and acting.

Sometimes when we are angry it can seem like our mind is blank and all we can feel is anger (e.g., "seeing red"); other times, it is as if our mind is racing with negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves or others. For example, when we are angry, we may think: "I'll have to remind her three times and get mad before she'll set the table!"; "You can't trust him! He's always out to get what he can for himself!"; or "I can't believe I acted so stupid!"

If we think this way, judgments may increase our feelings of threat (e.g., "This is not how it out to be") and actions of defensiveness ("I need to change the situation to make it right").

The feeling part of anger includes from low to high levels: disappointment, annoyance, irritation, resentment, frustration, contempt and rage.

We may turn our thoughts and feelings into action. Often times these behaviors are directed towards the person or situation that we view as having wronged us. When people are angry, they may do a variety of things: shake their finger and say, "You turkey! Get your \_\_\_\_ car out of my way!"; or, "Say what? You called me a \_\_\_\_? We'll see about that!"

Extreme actions that express anger include assault and violence. In the last few years, multiple violent acts (e.g., assaults, murders) in schools, on public transit, in fast-food restaurants, and through gang-related activities led to public outcry and a call for legislative action to control handgun sales, stiffen penalties on felons, and appropriate funds for prevention.

## Understanding Our Anger

Ten different people might have 10 different reactions to the same situation. For some people getting stuck behind a slow driver on the way to work might be seen as humorous, for others it might be seen as a personal slight or hurt and for others it might be evidence that the world is out to get them. In other words, different situations might "trigger" us to feel angry. As we move towards learning how to control our anger, it is beneficial to take a look at how our own life experiences and relationships might be contributing to our current feelings of anger.

For example, children who have been abused are more likely to see neutral events around them as negative or threatening, compared to children who have not been abused. Experiments with adults have also found that when we are primed to feel angry, we are more likely to interpret neutral people or events as threatening or dangerous. With this in mind, it is often helpful to understand our typical anger "cycles": what types of situations often make us angry, what thoughts/feelings/actions come next, and



## Quick Facts

- It helps to understand anger if we look at its three components: thinking, feeling and acting.
- The first step to managing anger is to be aware of and acknowledge the feelings that indicate you are angry.
- Some early symptoms of anger are disappointment and irritation. Methods to control anger include the STAR-R approach (stop, think, ask, reduce and reward), time outs, safety-plans and mindfulness practices.
- Habitual hostility can lead to heart attacks and can increase your risk of dying from other causes.
- There are a number of practical ways that individuals, couples, families and communities can empower themselves to make small yet significant differences in the amount of violence that's happening in society.

\*R.J. Fetsch, retired Colorado State University Extension human development and family studies specialist and professor, human development and family studies; and B. Jacobson, retired Extension family and consumer sciences agent, Douglas County.

\*\*C.J. Kemp and A. Quinn, doctoral students, human development and family studies; C.A. Fruhauf, associate professor of human development and family studies, and director, HDFS Extension. 12/2013



how do our reactions affect other people. Many people find it helpful to talk through these things with a trusted friend or counselor.

It is also important to recognize that we are often feeling multiple emotions at one time. For example, when a close friend does something hurtful, we often feel angry and sad and hopeful that we can remedy the interaction. These complex reactions to any given situation are often related to our own relationships (past and present), experiences and ability to regulate our negative emotions.

## How to Regulate Anger

There are many popular ways to manage anger: count to 10, take three deep breaths, take a time out, leave the situation, ask yourself if anyone will remember this problem in five years, etc. Sometimes these tips work well, and other times they do not. If you find that these ideas for managing anger are not working for you, you might find it helpful to consult a therapist or counselor to discuss different strategies.

How many times were you angry, and your anger gave you the energy and the motivation to redirect your actions constructively? Some people make positive use of their energy or adrenaline in anger to communicate with the other person or take action to solve the problem. For example, instead of lying awake all night and stewing, one person preferred to get up in the middle of the night to map out a strategy to resolve a problem with a boss. This helped manage his anger. Another person might prefer to “compartmentalize” or leave the problem at work and get a good night’s sleep.

The first step is to stop, be aware of and acknowledge the feelings that indicate anger. The more aware we are of the early symptoms of disappointment and irritation, the more likely we can take effective steps to solve the problem, decrease our anger and prevent a potentially violent scene. The less aware we are of our anger, the more likely we are to have trouble controlling our anger, which can turn to rage and actions that hurt ourselves or others. There are many tools we can use to better understand our own anger reactions. For example, you can focus on what happens in your body you’re feeling angry:

- Some common physical signs of anger include:
  - o Clenching your fists
  - o Face turning red
  - o Racing heart
  - o Shortness of breath
  - o Pacing
  - o Making our bodies bigger (e.g., waving our arms, towering over others)
  - o Yelling or using an intimidating tone
  - o Muscles feeling tense

The more we can be aware of our own anger “signals” the more we can work with our anger to be constructive. For example, many times we get angry at others who fail to meet our expectations. When this happens, express the anger and unmet expectation in a constructive way that is likely to lead to a resolution. A constructive way is to use an “I” statement, rather than a “you” statement: “You always forget to \_\_\_\_\_”, or “You never pick up your clothes.”

“You” statements blame. When we are blamed, we usually defend ourselves. “What do you mean, I never pick up my clothes? I picked them up the day before yesterday!”

Successful I-statements open up discussion and lead to solutions to the problem. “When you \_\_\_\_\_, I felt \_\_\_\_\_ and what I want is \_\_\_\_\_.”

For example: “When you didn’t pick up your clothes yesterday and put them in the hamper I was angry and felt unappreciated and taken advantage of. What I want is to find your clothes in the hamper when I am ready to do the laundry.”

## Techniques to Better Control Our Anger

Have you ever been so angry you couldn’t see straight or you felt like taking it out on anyone who happened to be available, like the dog, a spouse or child? These are good times to back off and control your anger. Once we control it, we can channel it into successful problem-solving by beginning with an I-statement. Some people find it relatively easy to move from their anger into these positive strategies; for other people, this is not as easy. If you find that it is hard to say these types of things when you are angry, you can consider a time-out policy or other safety-plan.

- A time-out plan means that when you become aware of your anger signals (e.g., physical signals, specific thoughts or feelings), you call a “time-out.” If you are with another person, like your partner or family, the time-out involves taking a break for a pre-determined period of time and then agreeing to meet back together to discuss the situation. For more information, see the “[Dealing with Couple’s Anger](#)” fact sheet.

- If you are alone and feeling angry, a time-out might mean removing yourself from the situation that is making you angry and participating in a calming task (See “Mindfulness and Anger” below).

- If you have any concerns that you might become violent or hostile in a particular situation, it is important to have a well-developed safety-plan. A safety-plan includes specific steps you can take to keep yourself and other people around you physically and emotionally safe. It can be very helpful to discuss your safety plan with trusted people in your life. Safety-plans often include steps such as:

1. Noticing escalation signals (e.g., “I know I am at risk for becoming violent when I start to \_\_\_\_\_.”

2. Removing yourself to a **safe** place when you are feeling angry (e.g., going on a walk outside, retreating to a quiet place inside the house). It is important that you do not do any activities during this time that might further escalate your anger (e.g., watching a violent movie or show, ruminating on the event, etc.).

3. Preventing access to any weapons or harmful substances (e.g., drugs or alcohol).

4. Reaching out to others in a safe way (e.g., calling a trusted friend, a national hotline, a parent).

Another approach to use is called the **STAR-R approach**, from the book, *Preparing for the Drug (Free) Years: A Family Activity Book*. STAR-R stands for stop, think, ask, reduce, and reward.

**Stop.** Notice when you get angry and look for the signs. Is your voice rising, neck tightening, face getting hot, hand shaking, jaw tightening and breath shortening? Do you want to run away?

**Think.** Try to picture the consequences if you lose control. Most of us don’t want to hurt our children, spouse, co-workers or others, either physically or emotionally. If you try to picture the consequences both

for you and for the person with whom you are angry, it can help you engage your brain before you engage your tongue or fist. Example: "If I lose control, I'll feel worse, be embarrassed, humiliate myself and the other person in front of friends. There might even be a newspaper story with my name in the headlines tomorrow."

**Ask.** Ask yourself what you're really angry about. What do you want? All too often the family member we're angry at is just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We may actually be angry about a decision our boss made, the slow driver who made us late, or ourselves for not handling a situation as well as we should have. (Notice the unmet expectations in each case?)

It usually is easier to take our anger out on a spouse or child than on other people. For example, it is probably easier to yell at our children for not doing their homework than to face the possibility that we made a mistake or that we do not have enough money to pay the bills. Still, sometimes we need to tell the person by using an effective I-statement. ("When you \_\_\_\_\_, I felt angry, and what I want now is \_\_\_\_\_.")

**Reduce anger.** Often we're so angry that we can't resolve the problem until we cool down. Ask yourself, "What can I do to reduce my anger?" Take a walk or a 20-minute run, a cold shower or bath, listen to relaxing music, do stretching exercises, call a friend, or sit in the shade and unwind.

**Reward.** Reward yourself by saying, "I did a good job and I'm going to \_\_\_\_\_." You've controlled your anger and maintained a bond with a family member, friend or other fellow human being. To continue this new behavior, reward yourself, go to lunch, see a movie, buy something special, or spend time with a friend. By controlling anger and thinking about effective solutions, we increase our chances of finding healthy solutions to our problems.

## Mindfulness and Anger

Although the STAR-R, time-out and safety-plan approaches are often effective for handling our anger in the moment, other techniques are helpful in improving our overall ability to deal with difficult emotions and events in our lives. Mindfulness practices have been shown to help us better regulate our negative

emotions and responses. When we are better regulated, we are better able to soothe uncomfortable feelings, make safer choices, and live healthier lives.

Mindfulness can be thought of as a specific way of paying attention to our daily lives. Often times we are living our lives on "autopilot" – we are not always paying attention to our moment-to-moment experiences; instead, our minds often are stuck ruminating on the past or the future. Oftentimes people report that their rumination on negative thoughts/feelings contributes to angry or aggressive acts (e.g., "I just couldn't stop thinking about how much he screwed up my life!"). Mindfulness provides us with a set of tools to help us shift our attention from ruminating on negative thoughts back to the present moment. Common practices include focusing on our breathing and/or shifting our attention to a neutral body part (e.g., the soles of our feet). For more information on how mindfulness can be helpful in managing anger, you can read about the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program at [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/crisis-knocks/201003/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-what-it-is-how-it-helps](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/crisis-knocks/201003/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-what-it-is-how-it-helps).

## Are Anger and Hostility Harmful or Helpful?

While research on the effect of hostility and health is relatively new, there is growing evidence that habitual hostility is associated with increased risk of suffering a heart attack and increased risk of dying from other causes. Some researchers find that people who remain angry and hostile much of the time also have less physical activity, less self-care (e.g., adequate sleep and dental hygiene), more smoking, more alcohol consumption, and more frequent drinking and driving episodes. Ironically, sometimes anger hurts the angry person most.

In a 25-year study of physicians and attorneys, researchers found a relationship between hostility and heart problems. High hostility physicians were four to five times as likely to develop coronaries than low hostility ones. Of those with high hostility scores at age 25, 14 percent of physicians and 20 percent of attorneys were dead by age 50. Of those with low hostility scores at

age 25, only 2 percent of physicians and 4 percent of attorneys were dead by age 50.

Each of us can help reduce violence by changing our thoughts of fear, anger, hostility, and possibly rage, to optimism, gratitude and tolerance. We can change our feelings that we or our families are victims. We can practice for 30 days managing our anger and negotiating our differences for mutually beneficial outcomes. As we practice expecting better solutions, we look for more options and create alternatives to violence in our communities and our lives.

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