

Anger

What is Anger?

Anger is a commonly experienced emotion, which can range in intensity from mild annoyance to rage. Anger is often triggered when a person feels wronged by someone, that something deeply unfair has happened, or that important things like wellbeing, social status, possessions, or the social rules he or she lives by are either not being respected or are under threat. Whether someone gets angry typically depends on the person's mood, perspective, physical wellbeing, ability to manage stress, coping skills, and available supports.

Although anger is often seen as a negative emotion, it can be a normal and healthy response depending on the context and the way it is expressed. Indeed, anger can be helpful; it can motivate a person to take positive action to change a situation for the better or to achieve his or her goals.

Some people have character traits that make them more likely to experience anger, as they habitually see themselves as being wronged or treated unfairly. People with these traits tend to make impulsive choices, as they are less likely to see risk in certain situations. They are also more likely to experience work, relationship, and health problems.

Frequently experiencing anger can increase an individual's vulnerability to illness, affecting the immune system, increasing cholesterol, and making pain feel stronger. However, holding in or suppressing anger is not a helpful solution. A range of other health and emotional problems can occur when the sources of anger are not addressed and there is no healthy release.

What causes anger issues?

Although everyone experiences anger, some individuals are at greater risk for experiencing problem anger and its associated behaviours.

- Anger-related memories and images, such as those related to the experience of trauma, can trigger and add to the experience of anger.
- Family and culture provide messages about the acceptability of extreme anger and aggression, and can shape what is seen as a normal and appropriate response to stress.
- Fixed ways of thinking about the world that set inflexible standards and expectations can increase the likelihood of anger when situations do not work out as expected.
- Anger is also a symptom of some mental health disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and borderline personality

disorder, and is therefore more likely in individuals with these diagnoses. Frequent experiences of anger might therefore indicate broader mental health problems.

- A tendency to respond to stress with anger, hostility or aggression seems to be partly genetic and partly determined by the environment where a person was raised or currently lives

Do I have Anger related issues?

Signs and symptoms

The experience of anger involves thoughts, emotions, physical responses, and behaviours that all relate to one another.

Cognitive

The cognitive component of anger involves thoughts of being wronged, harmed or treated unfairly by others, and these thoughts can often be exaggerated. When angry, people are more likely to blame others, and not see themselves as playing a role in the situation. Thoughts might also focus on putting the other person down, or trying to get revenge.

Emotional

Anger also involves an emotional response, related to the person's thoughts and beliefs about a situation. It can range from mild annoyance or irritation to more extreme feelings of rage or fury.

Physical

The sympathetic nervous system is activated during anger, raising the heart rate, increasing muscle tension, and creating the sensation of feeling hot. The neurotransmitter serotonin, which helps control mood, sleep, appetite, learning, and memory, also seems to be involved in the expression and experience of anger.

Behavioural

A range of behaviours are associated with anger that have found to be consistent across cultures.¹² These include changes in facial expression, characterised by lowered eyebrows and tightened lips, and changes in speech, characterised by increased rate and volume, and by a rise in pitch.

Signs and symptoms of anger

Problem anger is typically frequent, intense, and enduring, and can lead to physical aggression, hurtful putdowns, and a number of other harmful consequences. It is associated with a range of negative behaviours, particularly aggression and violence, which cause further difficulties for the person and his or her relationships. Spouse abuse, child abuse,

road rage, assault, and other violent crimes have all been associated with problem anger. Individuals with problem anger are also more likely to experience difficulties at work, and to have problems with substance use.

What can I do?

How a psychologist can help

Effective treatment aims to develop more helpful responses to situations that typically provoke anger. In order to carry out effective treatment, your psychologist and you can develop a shared understanding of the causes of your anger, thoughts and understanding of past events where anger became a problem, associated behaviours, and the consequences of the anger.

Your psychologist may combine these discussions with surveys in order to gather relevant information, and will use this information to develop an appropriate treatment plan.

The recommended psychologist might also assist you with any lifestyle factors that may be contributing to anger problems, such as drug or alcohol use. Significant anger may be experienced as part of other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or trauma, among others; therefore, a good psychologist will also assess whether other mental health problems might be contributing to the anger as part of treatment planning.

Evidence-based psychological approaches and strategies

Research supports the effectiveness of the psychological treatment of anger, particularly those which focus on peoples' thoughts or behaviours and their ways of looking at situations.

Different types of anger problems can be addressed effectively by a range of techniques. Therefore, an approach that combines several of these strategies may be worthwhile, including:

- Addressing the motivation for change: Learning to monitor and be aware of the negative consequences of problematic anger can help with setting goals for changing behaviour.
- Managing physiological arousal: Decreasing bodily tension has been found to be an important first step in addressing anger problems. Learning relaxation techniques can help reduce tension and anger.
- Promoting changes in thinking: Developing more flexible, realistic, and accurate perceptions of events helps to reduce angry reactions. Cognitive reappraisal, where an individual changes his or her interpretation of an event (e.g. seeing a driver who cuts them off as possibly rushing to an important appointment rather than

purposefully holding them up) can be helpful in reducing or preventing angry responses.

- Learning effective problem-solving: Learning skills to identify problem situations which might trigger an angry response and finding effective solutions can lead to lower levels of problem anger.
- Behaviour change: Learning and practicing new responses to situations, particularly through facing real or role-played situations that typically lead to anger, can promote new, calmer responses.
- Improving communication skills: Learning effective communication and conflict resolution skills, such as compromise and negotiation, can help people to respectfully and calmly express their anger.

Additional strategies may also be helpful, including:

- Managing impulsive behaviours: Strategies involving avoiding or removing oneself from situations that trigger anger can help to decrease its harm to relationships in the short term; but, they appear less helpful in the long term if new skills and strategies are not being learnt and practiced at the same time.
- Incorporating forgiveness: Encouraging forgiveness can be effective particularly when the focus may be on revenge or blame.
- Considering systemic (family) interventions: Problem anger can often negatively affect families and personal relationships. Involving family members or partners can provide helpful information regarding the individual's anger and its negative consequences, and can help to improve communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, break cycles of anger and aggression, and encourage hope and the sharing of praise and emotions other than anger (both positive and negative).
- Rebuilding relationships: Taking steps to repair damaged relationships can help promote wider change.
- Changing social groups: Avoiding social groups that reinforce anger and developing new, more helpful relationships can help with the reduction of anger and problem behaviour.

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This information was sourced from the Australian Psychological Society