

Feeling Angry? Get Over It!

You've had a bad week. A week to end all weeks. Everything that could've gone wrong has. The car battery died on Monday. You had to locate back-up child care on Tuesday after your babysitter called in sick. You had an argument with your spouse yesterday. It's now Thursday afternoon and your boss dumped a report in your lap with a due date of Monday, whittling away at your plans to take Friday off. To top it off, your computer just went down, short-circuiting your attempt to get on top of that report.

As the muscles in your neck and shoulders tense up and your head starts pounding, you realize that you are about to lose it! The irritation and frustration you have felt building all week is about to climax into a fit of intense anger! But you tell yourself that getting angry won't do any good and it might actually make things worse! You're stuck. Now you're headed for a meltdown.

Unfortunately, this scenario is all too familiar in today's fast-paced world. To make matters worse, anger is an emotion most of us feel uncomfortable with and uncertain how to manage well. Mental health professionals agree it is important that we manage anger feelings effectively. But how?

Let's take a look at anger. Anger is a normal human emotion, like love, sadness, fear and joy. Anger, like all feelings, is always valid. Not all expressions of anger are healthy. When anger is suppressed, depression, obesity and other physical symptoms, such as headaches and high blood pressure can develop. Anger inappropriately turned outward, or externalized, usually takes the form of blaming, aggressive behavior and even violence.

How we express anger is something we learn as children. Because we learn how to experience anger, we can also learn how to manage it. This four-step approach may help you better manage angry feelings:

Admit it.

Explore it.

Express it.

Drop it.

The next time you feel angry, admit it. Don't deny feeling angry or try to cover it up. When you take responsibility for your feelings, you can then choose how to express them responsibly. Dispel personal myths about anger such as, "If I get angry, I will be rejected."

Then, explore why you're angry—identify the source of your feelings. Often your anger is caused by the belief that someone is acting unfairly or some event is unjust. The thoughts that generate anger more often than not contain distortions and unrealistic expectations. Adjusting your expectations is the simplest solution.

Expressing your anger is the next step. Try to put yourself in the driver's seat before expressing yourself. That is, find a way to calm down a bit first. Put some distance between yourself and the source of your anger by taking a break from the situation, going for a brisk walk and taking a few deep breaths. Stop—understand your motives and think about your options before you express yourself. When you can discuss the issue without exploding, do so. It is perfectly legitimate to say you are angry or displeased with another person. Use constructive language rather than accusations, threats or name-calling. Use "I" statements to assertively communicate your feelings and to state requests. For example: "I feel angry that you lied to me. I would like you to be honest with me in the future."

The final step is often the hardest. Once you've let the object of your anger know how you feel, drop it. Whether the other person changes or not, you've done all you can to express your anger in a healthy manner and influence the situation. Now you've got to let go and move on.

Sometimes we stubbornly hold onto our anger, sulking and punishing those around us because we feel we have a right to be angry. No question about it, anger is legally permitted in this country! The crucial issue is this: is it to your advantage to hold onto your anger? Chances are that when you rid yourself of it, you will experience greater joy, peace, productivity and intimacy.

Dos and don'ts when you're feeling angry

Do ask yourself: "What is another way of looking at this?"

Don't tell another person what she or he "should" think or feel.

Do take time out to de-escalate, clarify your position and consider your options.

Don't displace your anger by yelling at the kids or driving aggressively.

Do be specific when you introduce your gripes and requests.

Don't assume you know what others are thinking or that you have all the information about a situation.

Do try to appreciate the fact that people have different perspectives.

Don't use unfair tactics such as blaming, labeling or threatening.

Do strive for a "win-win" resolution by considering compromise and negotiation.

Don't ever use violence to express your anger or resolve problems.

For more information

The Dance of Anger by Harriet Lerner, PhD, HarperCollins, 1989.

Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion by Carol Travis, Touchstone Books, 1989.

Anger At Work: Learning the Art of Anger Management on the Job by Hendrie D. Weisinger, PhD, William Morrow & Co. Paper, 1996.

Dr. Weisinger's Anger Work-Out Book by Hendrie D. Weisinger, PhD, William Morrow & Co. Paper, 1985.

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