



# UNDERSTANDING ANGER

Anger has enormous costs. It can impact all of our relationships—personal, social, work. Some people get angry at strangers—in the car, at the supermarket. Some people get mad at “things” like the computer. Or angry with themselves. Where does anger come from? How does it try to help?

Gender may affect how anger is displayed or even felt. Men are often taught to express their anger as a way to appear strong. They are taught to “be a man” and “don’t act like a girl.” Fear and pain are often underneath anger, yet men often lose touch with those feelings and are only aware of a discomfort that can be temporarily discharged through aggression.

Women are often taught not to express anger, or to even feel anger. Some women are aware only of feelings of depression, low self-esteem, or of being untrue to themselves; this is what they feel when they bury their anger.

Anger is essentially a way of reducing stress, both physical and emotional. It reduces emotional stress by preventing us from feeling the fear, pain, or shame that is behind the anger. When expressing anger, we may feel strong or courageous. We may feel like we have solved a problem, and that we have everything under control. Anger helps reduce emotional stress because as we vent our anger we often feel a sense of relaxation in our muscles.

When we communicate our anger to another person, we communicate with both our behaviors and our words.

Start to think of your anger as a messenger, something that is trying to help you figure out what needs you have that aren’t getting met. Then, you can communicate that need directly to the other person instead of trying to get your need met through anger. It can be as simple as “excuse me, but you are squishing my loaf of bread with that jug of milk. Please get me a fresh loaf of bread and bag it separately.” Or it can be as complex as “Sweetie, I need to know that you love me. You tell me all the time, but I would really like it if you would \_\_\_\_\_.” Then let them know the love actions that hit your radar.

## How do I Keep from Getting Angry?

### YOUR THOUGHTS

One way to prevent anger is to watch the way you think about things. First of all, you want to stop yourself as soon as you find yourself thinking those thoughts that start getting you fired up.

A good way to interrupt your negative thoughts is with Thought Stopping. Pick an image that you can use to remind yourself to stop thinking negatively: a stop sign, a stop light, the emergency stop button in an elevator. Focus your attention on the image to disrupt your thinking. You may want to count to ten. Or from ten to one. Try doing it in a foreign language. Keep your thought-stopping imagery in your mind.



You can also watch the way that you think about things. Do you think people should do things a certain way? Do you think people treat you unfairly? Do you think people are “stupid” because of things that they do? Do you blame other people for your situation?

Try to imagine things from the other point of view. Imagine why they are doing what they are doing; and how they feel. REMEMBER: THIS IS JUST YOUR IDEA—YOU DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THEM. The point is to move into a place of empathy—it is very hard to stay angry while looking at things from the other person's possible perspective.

## STRESS REDUCTION

Anything that you can do to relax your body and your emotions before you find yourself feeling angry will help to prevent anger. You will be more able to feel what is going on underneath the anger, such as having your feelings hurt, being embarrassed, being afraid of being rejected, and so on.

There are many methods of stress reduction. Find a few that work for you, and remember to use them. Some ideas are:

- stretching exercises (especially when at the computer)
- progressive relaxation (you can get information about this online)
- meditation
- deep breathing
- listening to relaxing music
- spending time in nature
- physical exercise—both aerobic and anaerobic
- journaling
- creative expression



## TIME OUTS

One of the best ways to work with your anger is to take time outs. No, you're not going to sit in your room like a kid. What you are going to do is remove yourself from the situation that is aggravating you, pay attention to your thoughts, do some stress reduction, and try to figure out what it is that you need from the other person. Then you can go back and have a productive dialog instead of another argument.

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