

Dealing with Anger and Impulsivity

Anger is a useful emotion when used well. It can get you moving, stimulate you to be honest (say something you've been meaning to say), give you the energy to protect yourself or your values, to stand up for something.

Used inappropriately, it can lead to aggression and saying things 'in the heat of the moment' that are later regretted. Ideas expressed when you are very angry are often said in hurtful ways, they can get other people offside or afraid of having further contact with you.

Improving anger expression skills

You can't avoid people or things that anger or irritate you - but you can learn to control how you react to them. *You can practice using the anger you experience positively to give you the energy and determination to accomplish your goals.*

- **Stay away from substances that increase your anger and irritability** Anger is usually harder to control when you are stressed, tired, or have had a few drinks or taken stimulant substances like speed, cocaine, steroids. If you have a difficult situation to deal with, it's better to have a clear head.
- The Daily Mood Chart can be used to plot episodes of anger or irritability, as well as any other events that may be related (eg intake of caffeine, other substances, sleep pattern, life events).
- **Become aware of 'trigger points' for irritability or impulsivity, your anger signals.** Find your own range of strategies for dealing with these (eg, exercise, discuss the situation with others, use problem solving sheet). Use the "Hints to Avoid Harmful Stress" sheet for ideas. Gain other information on alcohol, stimulants and gambling if these areas apply to you.
- **Practice relaxation techniques** such as breathing control and using imagery to visualise being calmly and completely in control to help calm down angry feelings, also the mindfulness technique¹.
- **Listen to how you come across to others: change your language.** Angry people tend to demand things. Try saying "*I would like*", rather than "*I demand*" or "*I must have it*" or "*You must*". Then if you are unable to get what you want you'll feel frustration and disappointment, rather than anger.
- **You may decide to tell the other person you'll talk about it later** when you've calmed down or thought about it a bit more. Sometimes putting it down on paper or talking it through with someone else first can help get more perspective.
- The Mood Chart on the Black Dog Institute website can be used to plot anger and irritability as well as depression, disappointment, you use of stimulants and alcohol. The Problem Solving, Goal Setting and Change sheets can assist in breaking down problems into manageable steps and achieving 'win win' solutions.

If you feel your anger or impulsivity is really out of control or is having an impact on your relationships and on important parts of your life, then consider counselling to learn how to handle it better.

The relaxation and mindfulness sheets provide some useful information.

¹ The 'Soar like an Eagle' tape is useful – see resource list for details.
Patient Handouts: Dealing with Anger and Impulsivity. (January 2007) <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au>

Understanding your Anger Responses:

- **To gain more insight into anger or impulsivity**, think about a typical occasion when you were angry or impulsive and consider the following:
What happened...? Was this a 'one off' or part of a pattern?
What effect did your behaviour have on the situation? On you? On others?
Was it useful...? Were you satisfied/content with the end result?...
How did those around you feel? Would you do it again the same way?
Would you change anything next time?
- It can be useful to consider what messages you were brought up with concerning expression of anger. Have a think about your family's messages and how they dealt (or failed to deal) with frustration and anger.
- It can be particularly useful to consider what models you have from family members (for women, how your mother/sisters dealt with anger, for men your father/brothers).

Instead of telling yourself:

It's terrible -
everything's
ruined...



Say instead:

It's frustrating, and it's
understandable that I'm upset
about it, but it's not the end of
the world and getting angry is
not going to fix it anyhow.



Recommended Reading

Church M (2003). **Adrenalin Junkies - A Guide to Life in the Fast Lane, also Serotonin Seekers**. Sydney: ABC Books. *Two Australian books with information on dealing with sadness and irritability.*

Goleman D, Lama, Dalai (2003). **Destructive Emotions and How We Can Overcome Them**. Bloomsbury. *Developed with the Dalai Lama, integrating Eastern and Western ideas.*

McKay M, Davis M, Fanning P (1995) **Messages: The Communication Skills Book**. New Harbinger. *Very useful for improving all relationships.*

Merlevede P, Bridoux D, Vandamme R (2001). **Seven Steps to Emotional Intelligence**. Crown House. *An insightful overview of the area with practical user-friendly advice on applying the principles.*

Nay, R. (2004) **Taking Charge of Anger: How to Resolve Conflict, Sustain Relationships and Express Yourself Without Losing Control**. Guilford.

Written specifically for men

Donovan F, (1999). **Dealing with Anger: Self Help Solutions for Men**, Finch.

Harbin T, (2000). **Beyond Anger: A Guide for Men: How to Free Yourself from the Grip of Anger and Get More Out of Life**, Marlowe & Co.

Written specifically for women

Goldhor Lerner, H. **The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Pattern of Intimate Relationships**.

Useful self help workbooks

McKay M, Davis M, Fanning P (1997). **Thoughts and Feelings: Taking Control of Your Moods and Your Life**, New Harbinger.

McKay M, Rogers P (2000) **The Anger Control Workbook**. New Harbinger.

Schiraldi G, Kerr M (2002) **The Anger Management Sourcebook**. Contemporary Books.

Useful websites

American Psychological Association (2004) **Controlling Anger - Before It Controls You**, APA Online www.apa.org/pubinfo/anger.html#anger

Better Health Channel . **Anger - how it affects people**. Available as a fact sheet that can be printed at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Anger_how_it_affects_people?open