

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.
- Practise 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.

¹The relaxation and mindfulness sheets provide some useful information.



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Improving anger expression skills

- 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 BDI website can be used to plot anger and irritability as well as depression, disappointment, your 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.

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:
 1. What happened...? Was this a 'one off' or part of a pattern?
 2. What effect did your behaviour have on the situation? On you? On others?
 3. Was it useful...? Were you satisfied/content with the end result?...
 4. How did those around you feel? Would you do it again the same way?
 5. 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..."

Try saying:

"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."

