



For better  
mental health

## How to... deal with anger



# How to... deal with anger

“I don’t think of myself as an angry person, but sometimes I suddenly lose my temper over some little thing. Then, I say and do really hurtful things, and when I’ve calmed down again I hate myself.”

“No, I don’t get angry when I remember the break-in. What’s the point? It was just bad luck.”

“In our family, no-one ever shouts or throws things. Sometimes, I wish that they would. They just make snide comments, or sulk, or refuse to talk to each other for weeks.”

“I was so angry after that weekend, visiting my parents, that I came home and ate a whole pot of jam!”

“When I was little, my Dad used to shout and hit out sometimes, especially when he’d just come back from the pub. We’d be really scared. And then my Mum would go all tight-lipped and give him the deep-freeze treatment for days. But they never talked about whatever it was that he was angry about in the first place.”

**Many people have trouble managing their anger. This booklet is for anyone who wants to learn how to deal with it in a constructive and healthy way.**

## Is it always bad to feel angry?



Anger is a natural response to feeling attacked, injured or violated. It's part of being human; it's energy seeking expression. Our anger can be our friend. It helps us survive, giving us the strength to fight back or run away when attacked or faced with injustice. In itself, it's neither good nor bad, but it can be frightening.

Angry feelings can lead to destructive and violent behaviour, and so we tend to be frightened of anger. The way we are brought up, and our cultural background, will very much influence how we feel about expressing anger. You may have been punished for expressing it when you were small, or you may have witnessed your parents' or other adults' anger when it was out of control, destructive and terrifying. Or you may have been frightened by the strength of your own bad temper. All of this encourages you to suppress your anger.

When something makes you angry, you feel excitement in your body and emotions. Your glands are pumping your blood full of the hormone adrenalin, preparing for fight or flight. You are full of energy, alert, ready for action. Tension builds up, but is released when you express your anger. The release is good for you, helping to keep body and mind in balance and able to face life's challenges.

As long as the build-up of tension is usually released in action or words, you should be able to cope with feeling frustrated occasionally! But if, as a rule, you have to bottle up your feelings, the energy has to go somewhere. It may turn inwards and cause you all sorts of problems. Suppressed anger can have very negative effects, physically and mentally.

# How to... deal with anger

## Physical effects

Anger might affect your:

- digestion (contributing to the development of heartburn, ulcers, colitis, gastritis or irritable bowel syndrome)
- heart and circulatory system (leading to blocked arteries)
- blood pressure (driving it too high)
- joints and muscles (resulting in inflammations, such as in arthritis)
- immune system (making you more likely to catch 'flu and other bugs, and less able to recover from operations, accidents or major illnesses, such as cancer or AIDS)
- pain threshold (making you more sensitive to pain).

## Emotional effects

These might include:

- depression (when the anger is turned inwards)
- addictions (to alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs)
- compulsions (eating disorders, such as excessive dieting or binge-eating, overworking, unnecessary cleaning and any other behaviour that is out of control, including sexual activities)
- bullying behaviour (especially expressing racist, sexist or homophobic views)
- ill-thought-out political activity. (A terrorist blowing up a bus, or a pacifist on a prison hunger-strike could both be 'acting out', on a bigger stage, their personal difficulties with anger.)

All of these will damage relationships with other people, and this is likely to lower your self-esteem further, and make you more depressed.



### **Is there a healthy way to let out my angry feelings?**

It's much healthier to recognise when you are feeling angry and to express it directly in words, not in violent action. Expressing anger assertively in this way:

- benefits relationships and self-esteem
- allows fuller and richer communication and intimacy
- defuses tensions before they get to 'explosion' point
- helps to keep people physically and mentally healthy.

For example, Pat shouts angrily at her husband, Andrew, 'How could you treat me like that, you bastard?'. Andrew feels attacked for no good reason, and shouts back with more abuse. Pat may then feel helpless and victimised. Neither of them will feel happy with the exchange. Yet, if Pat were to say to Andrew, 'I'm angry with you because you haven't done any washing-up for weeks!', he will know why she is angry, and there will be a chance for them to talk about the washing-up, and work out a solution. Pat will feel better about herself, and the tension between them is less likely to build up to the point of violence. Andrew will have more information about what annoys Pat, and they will communicate better.

If you have spent a lifetime squashing your feelings, it will take time and effort to get into the habit of expressing anger in an assertive, but not aggressive way! But the following tips will help.

#### **Assertiveness training**

Learn about anger and assertiveness. Read about them and if possible, find an assertiveness training or other personal development group. (You could try your local authority adult education classes; details of these and other classes should be available at your local library.)

# How to... deal with anger

## Caring for yourself

Look to your general health, especially diet and exercise. Lack of certain nutrients can make people feel irritable and weak. Exercise increases our self-esteem, as well as our fitness and muscle tone. Find pleasurable ways to let off steam involving vigorous physical activity, dancing, chopping wood, jogging, or whatever you feel like. This will prevent tension building up in your body in a destructive way. Nurture your self-esteem: treat yourself kindly and give yourself regular treats.



## How can I deal with my angry feelings better?

### Examine your behaviour patterns

Get to know your own pattern of behaviour and history around anger. What was your family like when you were growing up? Who got angry, and what happened when they did? If no-one was openly angry, what happened to resentments and differences of opinion or of needs?

What unspoken messages did you receive about anger? Perhaps they were similar to these:

*'Only men get angry, but nice girls don't. They grow up to be martyrs and victims.'*

*'Women's anger is too terrible to be talked about.'*

*'It's no good getting angry about anything, because they never take any notice of people like us, and it only gets you into trouble.'*

*'People often lose their tempers and break things, but there's nothing we can do about it. It'll all blow over soon.'*

Think about these messages, and how they have affected your life. Do you still believe them? What do you think is possible for you now? Do you tend to bottle things up and get depressed, or do you tend to explode and be aggressive? How do you feel about your current pattern? Find someone to talk to about your feelings – an understanding friend, or a professional counsellor.

### **Acknowledge past hurts**

It's important to acknowledge angry feelings left over from the past, especially your childhood. Nothing can change what happened to you, but your attitude to it can change. Past losses and injustices, big or small, can rankle for years. Painful experiences may include being neglected by your parents, bitter rivalry with a brother or sister, the death of someone close, or growing up in exile.

You may think you have forgotten about them, that it's pointless to go over old bones. But, if something suddenly happens to you in the present, and your response to it is totally over the top, it may become clear that these feelings are not so dead after all! While you remain unaware of them, they can cause unnecessary problems. But, if you can get to know them, you will have a chance of dealing more constructively with present situations.

For example, Sharon attends a parents' meeting at her children's new school. She finds herself increasingly irritated with the person chairing the parent-teacher association (PTA), who behaves in a very domineering way. Sharon comes away feeling depressed.

# How to... deal with anger

The school has requested volunteers to help organise a fundraising event. It is just the kind of thing she usually enjoys, but now Sharon feels that she wants nothing to do with the social side of the school. Then she realises why she didn't like the Chair of the meeting. He reminds her of a bullying teacher, with whom she had some very bad experiences at school. Memories come flooding back of how hurt, angry and powerless she felt at that time in her life.

Sharon talks about this with her friends, and they remind her that she is no longer powerless or friendless – that this is an opportunity to make a different kind of experience of school. Some of her friends have children at the same school, and share her concerns about the style and presence of the PTA Chair. Sharon can separate her old experience of the bullying teacher from her current challenge as a parent. She can have the possibility of a more constructive engagement with this dominant person. She feels free to join in the fundraising event, and plans with her friends and other parents how they might change the way the PTA is run!



## **What should I do when I feel myself getting angry?**

Stop and think, if at all possible! There is a traditional saying, which is very sound, that goes: 'Hold your breath and count to ten before you say anything.'

### **Walk away from situations**

It's a good idea to ask yourself, 'Am I so angry I can't think?', and, 'Am I wanting to lash out and hit someone?'. If the answer to either of these is yes, then walk away from the situation. Tell the other person that you are too angry to speak to them at this moment, if you can. Go away somewhere to calm down.

If necessary, let out the desire to lash out by hitting a cushion, breaking crockery if you have to, shouting, screaming or making some kind of angry noise where it will not alarm anyone.

### **Resolve unfinished business**

'Why am I so angry?'. Finding the answer to this is important for the next step. Are you angry because of something that is happening now, that threatens you, your life, your loved ones, your work, someone or something that you value? In other words, is your anger justified and in proportion? Or is it that some of the anger that you feel is not really due to the person and situation that you are facing now, but to some unfinished business from the past?

If your anger turns out to be more to do with the past than the present, then think about how to address that before, or as well as, dealing with the current situation.

The way to find out about this is by talking it over with another person, preferably someone who is not involved, personally. Once you are clear that the anger is about the here-and-now, prepare to tell the other person that you are angry!

### **What is the best way to tell someone I'm angry?**

#### **Before you meet**

- Get clear in your head what your rights are, and be realistic. What do you want to happen? What are you entitled to? What might happen when you tell the person you are angry? Can you do anything about that? Can you live with the consequences?



# How to... deal with anger

- Question your conclusions. You may believe that if you tell your boss that you're angry she'll sack you, but this belief may not be true. It may even be part of a depression; your way of keeping yourself powerless! If in doubt, talk to someone about your fears. It's important to clear up any doubts before the meeting, or you may sabotage your chances of being heard.
- Set the scene. Choose a time and a place that will suit you, and where you think the other person is more likely to listen and hear what you have to say. Make sure you won't be disturbed; warn other people not to interrupt you for a set period.
- Choose a setting that allows you to feel that you are both equal and that you both matter. Either sit in chairs at the same height, or both stand up. Have the light coming in at a sideways angle, not behind one of you (people get anxious if they can't see the face of the person they are talking to). Make sure there are no physical obstacles (such as a pile of papers) between you.

## During the meeting

- Keep your body language assertive; alert, relaxed, keeping direct eye contact, with your feet firmly on the floor.
- Keep breathing! This will help you to keep calm.
- Be specific. Say, 'I feel angry with you because...' This avoids blaming anyone, and shows that you are taking responsibility for your half of the problem. The other person is less likely to feel attacked.
- Listen to the other person's response, and try to understand their point of view. Treat them with the same courtesy and attention you want from them.
- Ask for more time or another meeting, if things can't be resolved at once.
- Finish by thanking the other person for their time and attention, whatever the outcome.

### After the meeting

- Give yourself a pat on the back and a treat for the time and effort you have put into managing your anger assertively!

Following these tips won't mean you never get angry, but it will help you feel better about yourself.

### What if I'm angry about a public issue?

Sometimes, people are angered by political issues; by sleaze in public life, by the treatment of people in mental hospitals, or by the invasion of one country by another, for instance.



Anger can be an important fuel to campaigns for social justice. But, as with personal issues, it's important to think about what you are doing and to use your anger assertively. In a healthy society, participation in public campaigns for justice in a non-violent and responsible way would be seen as evidence of maturity and good citizenship.

There's a well-known prayer that asks, 'Lord, give us the courage to change what needs to be changed, the strength to bear what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference'. Being in touch with your own anger is a potent source of that knowledge and wisdom.

# How to... deal with anger

## Useful organisations

### Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or *Mindinfo*line on 0845 766 0163.

### Alcoholics Anonymous

PO Box 1, Stonebow House, Stonebow, York YO1 7NJ  
helpline: 0845 769 7555

web: [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

National network of local Alcoholics Anonymous groups. Look for 'Alcoholics Anonymous' in any telephone directory

### Andrea Adams Trust

tel. 01273 704 900, web: [www.andreaadamstrust.org](http://www.andreaadamstrust.org)  
UK charity dedicated to tackling workplace bullying

### British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel. 01254 875 277, email: [babcp@babcp.com](mailto:babcp@babcp.com)

web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

Full directory of psychotherapists available online

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel. 0870 443 5252, web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

**BAAM (British Association of Anger Management)**

tel. 0845 1300 286, web: [www.angermanage.co.uk](http://www.angermanage.co.uk)  
Support and training for men, women and children needing anger management and those who have to deal with someone else's anger

**Careline**

counselling line: 0845 122 8622  
web: [www.carelineuk.org](http://www.carelineuk.org)  
Crisis telephone counselling service on any issue

**Depression Alliance**

tel. 0845 123 2320  
email: [information@depressionalliance.org](mailto:information@depressionalliance.org)  
web: [www.depressionalliance.org](http://www.depressionalliance.org)  
Information and support for anyone affected by depression

**Everyman Project**

1a Waterlow Road, London N19 5NJ  
helpline: 020 7263 8884 web: [www.everymanproject.co.uk](http://www.everymanproject.co.uk)  
Counselling for men who want to stop their violence

**Supportline**

PO Box 1596, Ilford, Essex IG1 3FW  
helpline: 020 8554 9004, web: [www.supportline.org.uk](http://www.supportline.org.uk)  
Helpline for problems, including child abuse, bullying, depression, anxiety, domestic violence and sexual assault

**Women's Aid**

helpline: 0808 2000 247, email: [info@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:info@womensaid.org.uk)  
web: [womensaid.org.uk](http://womensaid.org.uk)  
National domestic violence charity

# How to... deal with anger

## Further reading

- The anger control workbook: simple, innovative techniques for managing anger and developing healthier ways of relating* M. McKay, P. Rogers (New Harbinger Press 2000) £14.99
- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- Heal the hurt: how to forgive and move on* A. Macaskill (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2006) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- Making sense of counselling* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Making sense of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis* (Mind 2004) £3.50
- Managing anger: simple steps to dealing with frustration and threat* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2005) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2006) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2004) £1
- Overcoming anger and irritability* W. Davies (Robinson 2000) £9.99
- Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £9.99
- Understanding bereavement* (Mind 2005) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2006) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding self-harm* (Mind 2005) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2005) £1

## Order form

For a catalogue of publications from Mind, send an A4 SAE to the address below.

If you would like to order any of the titles listed here, please photocopy or tear out these pages, and indicate in the appropriate boxes the number of each title that you require.

Please add 10 per cent for postage and packing, and enclose a cheque for the whole amount, payable to Mind. Return your completed order form together with your cheque to:

Mind Publications  
15–19 Broadway  
London E15 4BQ  
tel. 0844 448 4448  
fax: 020 8534 6399  
email: [publications@mind.org.uk](mailto:publications@mind.org.uk)  
web: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
(Allow 28 days for delivery.)

Please send me the titles marked opposite. I enclose a cheque (including 10 per cent for p&p) payable to Mind for £

Name

Address

Postcode

Tel.

## Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

**This booklet was written by Penny Cloutte**

First published by Mind 2000. Revised edition © Mind 2006

ISBN 1-903567-11-14

No reproduction without permission

Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

tel: 020 8519 2122

fax: 020 8522 1725

web: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)



**For better  
mental health**