

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing anger

Studies show that those who were most prone to anger were almost three times more likely to have a heart attack than those with the lowest anger ratings. Those who scored high on the anger scale were also more likely to be smokers and drinkers.

There are many ways to handle anger—some constructive and some not. Some of us displace anger. Instead of expressing our feelings to those involved, we vent our anger on people who had nothing to do with the situation. Some of us do the opposite and turn our anger inward, which can be destructive emotionally and physically.

What causes anger?

We typically think of our feelings as cause and effect. For example, "He called me a name. I felt angry." This is to say—he made me angry. But in between the stimulus (name-calling), and the response (anger), are our mental filters, or the way we think about the stimulus. In other words, it’s our perception of the situation that causes our anger. The key is to recognize how your perspective can be modified to decrease anger.

Destructive anger strategies

While anger is a common human response, many people have not had opportunity to develop positive and constructive strategies for handling it. Ineffective strategies include:

- Avoiding feelings of anger by not talking about what is causing them or pushing angry thoughts out of the mind.
- Dealing with anger indirectly by "punishing" the person we are angry with. This can take the form of sulking, holding a grudge, or not talking to the person.
- This is direct but counter-productive, as anger is expressed using an aggressive tone or accusatory remarks.

Defusing anger

In order to manage anger we must recognize when it is building. Sometimes resentment grows for a period of time without our even knowing it, until some event or situation, perhaps completely unrelated, triggers an anger response. Look for these signs of anger:

- **Physical.** Tensed muscles, racing heart, suddenly louder or quieter speech, knots in the stomach, clenched teeth and sensations of heat can all be signs that anger is welling up.
- **Cognitive or Intellectual.** "Hot thoughts" such as, "I'm going to show him he can't walk over me," or "I know how to fix him" and plotting activities to get revenge are signs of unhealthy anger levels. Obsessing on the perceived source of anger and/or replaying the scene in your mind are also signs of anger and actually intensify it.
- **Emotional.** Sometimes, anger manifests itself as depression or sadness. Episodes of crying, feeling emotional or anxious, or panic attacks may also have anger at their root.

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What you can do

Take a time out. List the physical, cognitive and emotional symptoms you experience when anger builds. When you feel them starting to take hold—call time out on yourself.

Try deep breathing—in through your nose for three seconds, and out through your mouth for six. Repeat this three times. If you are having "hot thoughts" try changing the dialog in your mind to something more positive such as "What will best help me right now?"

Be assertive. Although anger often has adverse consequences, it can be useful in helping us identify better approaches to managing people or situations. Being assertive means expressing feelings and beliefs in helpful, honest ways. Assertive communication around issues that cause anger can be a very constructive way to develop effective long-term solutions.

Withdraw. If you think you are going to lose your temper, withdraw from a volatile situation. Simply excuse yourself and ask if the discussion can be continued later. Take a break and do something physical—go for a walk, do some stretching or deep breathing exercises. In other words, take time to regain your composure.

Other anger management options:

- **Deal with mild annoyances before they get out of hand.** Angry situations are often caused by poor communication or misunderstanding. Ask for clarification to make sure that you have interpreted remarks correctly. Remember that communication is a two-way process.

- **Vent your anger.** Get rid of negative emotions through exercise. Rather than risk yelling at your spouse or children after an unpleasant day at work, try a game of tennis, handball or any vigorous activity that you enjoy.

- **Writing about the incident in a calm, cool manner** can help you to vent your anger. It may also help you to understand and evaluate the situation.

While there are no stock solutions that can stop people from getting angry, each of us can learn to handle our anger constructively. We can decide to apply techniques to manage our anger and deal better with the frustrations of life.