



mental health
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Anger Management

Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy, human emotion which allows us to respond and take action against danger or injustice. It varies in intensity from mild irritation to fury and rage and is accompanied by physical changes in the body and energy hormones. We get angry at other people, situations and ourselves. Anger is something that everyone in life will experience. However, when it gets out of control it can lead to problems at work, in our personal lives and in relationships.

When an angry episode occurs all of the following are involved:

- cognition – our present thoughts
- emotion – the physiological arousal our anger produces
- communication – the way we display our anger to others
- the effect of anger on others – fear, hostility
- behaviour – the way we act when we are angry.

If we are aware of it we will also feel the results of anger in our bodies. According to psychologists who specialise in anger management, some people become angry more easily and more intensely than the average person. Others do not show their anger in loud spectacular ways but are chronically irritable and grumpy. These people sometimes withdraw socially and/or become physically ill.

What are the Symptoms of Anger Problems?

- tension or stress begins to build, e.g. easily frustrated, clenched posture
- breathing and heart rate increase
- blood pressure rises, e.g. flushed face and neck, veins stand out
- increases in hormones such as adrenaline and noradrenaline
- direct verbal abuse, e.g. blame and criticism
- indirect verbal attacks, e.g. sarcasm, put-downs, sullenness
- violence, threats, and temper tantrums.

What Effect does Anger have on Health?

In the case of chronic anger, long-term hyper-arousal of the autonomic nervous system can cause the following:

- headaches
- stomach ache
- skin rash

- arthritis – anger produces uric acid in the bloodstream which may contribute to the onset of arthritis
- circulatory disorders
- aggravation of existing physical symptoms
- emotional disturbances such as depression
- the physical effects of violence towards the self and others.

What are the Causes of Anger Problems?

There are a number of reasons why some people tend towards anger more than others. There is evidence that suggests that some children are born with irritable, sensitive and easily angered natures and these signs are present from a very early age. Another cause might be our fast paced and increasingly pressured way of life.

As anger is often regarded as negative, we are taught that it is all right to express anxiety or depression and other emotions but not anger. This can result in outbursts from a build up of tension. It may also be a result of frustration from our experiences in life, a disturbed background and/or our lifestyle. People may also have learned to react with anger from seeing how their parents dealt with conflict.

Is there a Link between Anger and Mental Illness?

The prevalence of anger attacks (defined as irritability, inappropriate anger, rage, frequent outbursts and overreaction to minor annoyances) in patients with depression can be as high as 40% while those with bipolar disorder can also have periods of irritability when hypomanic or manic.

Helpful Strategies

It is potentially dangerous to 'let it rip.' Anger can easily escalate into aggression and it generally does nothing to help us or the person we are angry with. However, we can learn to deal with anger in different ways such as the following:

- find out what triggers your anger and then develop strategies to keep those triggers from tipping you over the edge
- learn to relax by slowing down your breathing
- slowly repeat a calm word or phrase, e.g. 'take it easy' or 'relax' and repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply
- practice non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises to relax muscles and bring feelings of calmness
- change the way you think by replacing exaggerated angry thoughts with more rational ones, e.g. 'I know it's frustrating but it's not the end of the world and anger is not going to fix anything'

- develop better communication skills by slowing your responses, rather than saying the first thing that comes into your head and listening carefully to what the other person is saying
- make sure you have some 'personal time' scheduled for times in the day that you know are particularly stressful
- see a counsellor or psychologist if you think that your anger is out of control
- admit there's a problem and be willing to change, as frightening as that may be
- learn to speak assertively by expressing your needs clearly and respectfully, e.g. using "I" statements ' (such as 'I feel upset when you don't return my calls' rather than 'you never return my calls') as this tends to reduce blaming and defensiveness.

Goals of Anger Management

- developing better communication skills with the aim of improving relationships
- developing an understanding of what triggers anger
- developing strategies to deal with anger
- developing listening skills
- developing the ability to 'reframe' negative thoughts about life situations
- getting help to change your life circumstances, if necessary
- stress management.

Where to Get Help

- Mental Health Information Service: 1300 794 991
- Make an appointment with your General Practitioner
- Contact your local Community Health Centre (under 'Community' in the White Pages)
- Relationships Australia: (02) 9425 4999
- Australian Counselling Association to find a counsellor in your local area: 1300 784 333
- The Australian Psychological Society to find a psychologist in your local area: 1800 333 497

Further Reading

Beyond Anger: A Guide for Men: how to free yourself from the grip of anger and get more out of life, by Thomas J. Harbin ISBN: 1569246211 published by Marlow & Co 2000

The Angry Self; a comprehensive approach to anger management by Miriam M. Gottlieb. Publisher Zeig, Tucker and Theisen, 1999, ISBN 189194407X

Dealing with Anger, by Carol Rogne, Discovery Counseling & Educational Center 2002, ISBN: 1881565025

Medicare rebates and accessing private practitioners

What is the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists?

Psychiatrists are medically trained doctors who specialise in the treatment of mental illness. Like GPs they can prescribe, administer and monitor medication. Psychiatrists do not advertise so it is up to your GP to refer you to someone appropriate.

Psychologists are trained in human behaviour and use a range of therapies to treat patients. They provide services including assessment, psychological testing, and various types of psychotherapy and counselling.

Medicare rebate for psychologists

A Medicare rebate is now available for up to 12 sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist* with a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, i.e. a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition.

The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost.

For further information about the rebate or to locate a psychologist in your area contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 www.psychology.org.au.

* Similar Medicare rebates also exist for mental health accredited social workers and occupational therapists.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW. This and other fact sheets are available for download from www.mentalhealth.asn.au. The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

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