

Anger: What it is and what it does

Anger is a FEELING. It is not an action. Feeling angry is neither good nor bad – it just IS. We all feel angry at times. When managed appropriately, it helps motivate us to action. It propels us to fight an injustice or right a wrong.

However, anger also triggers a physical response in the body which, over time if not managed, can lead to a host of issues.

What Anger Does to your Body

Anger triggers the body's 'fight or flight' response. Other emotions that trigger this response include fear, excitement and anxiety. Stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, flood the body. The brain shunts blood away from the internal organs and towards the muscles, in preparation for physical exertion. Heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increase, the body temperature rises and the skin perspires. The mind is sharpened and focused. While all of this is terrific if you are about to battle a raging rhinoceros, it's not so good when stuck in your car during rush hour.

Health Problems related to Anger

The constant flood of stress chemicals and associated metabolic changes that accompany recurrent unmanaged anger can eventually cause harm to many different systems of the body. Unmanaged anger has been linked with:

- **Headache**
- **Suppressed immune system**
- **Gastrointestinal problems**
- **Skin problems**
- **Insomnia**
- **Increased anxiety**
- **Depression**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Heart attack**
- **Stroke.**

Adjusting for Life: Anger Management

The first step to managing anger appropriately is recognizing your early warning signs. These are the physical signs your body gives you that something is about to blow. Some common signs of anger are listed in the chart below. Write in any additional signs you have noticed in yourself.

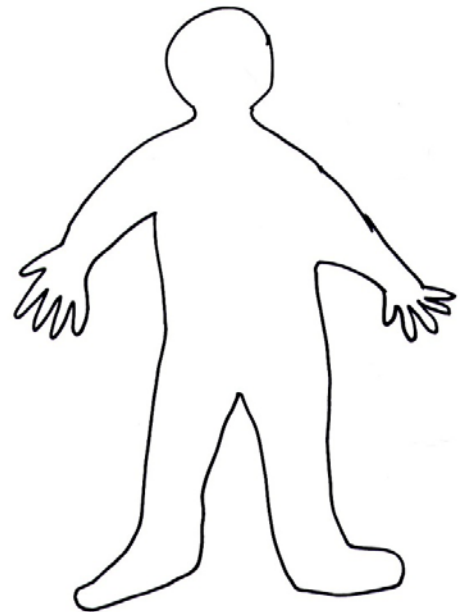
Signs of Anger

Physical signs	Mental Signs	Behavioral Signs
Fast heart beat Sweating Shaking Clenched jaws Clenched fists Fast breathing Headaches Stomach aches Upset feeling in the stomach Tight chest Tense muscles Frowning or Scowling Hot or Red face	Problems concentrating Confusion Memory problems Thoughts of doing harm Angry thoughts Irritability Jumpy	Inability to sit still Withdrawing from others Throwing things Pacing Yelling

Listen to Your Body

Think about a time recently when you were angry. Now, shade or circle the areas in your body where you felt that anger. Head pounding? Tight chest? Clenched fists? Butterflies in the belly?

What is the FIRST sign you notice when you are getting angry?



Basic Anger Journal

For the next week, write down the situations, events and people who cause you to have a negative physical, mental or emotional response. Give a brief description of the situation. Where were you? Who was involved? Rate the intensity of your anger (1 = not angry at all; 100 = furious, out of control). Then, describe your response. Did you stay silent, blow up, or walk away?

[illegible]

Anger: Cause and Effect

Now that you understand a little bit about the pattern of your angry responses, it's time to look at the cost. As with the Basic Anger Journal, you will write down the situations, events and people that provoke an angry response in you. This week you will also be recording the effect your anger has on the situation, on the other people involved and on you. What happens AFTER you get angry? Do people walk away? Does the situation escalate? Do you feel guilty or ashamed?

Date	Description of the Situation	Others involved: spouse, boss, other drivers?	Anger Intensity: 1-100?	Reaction: What did you do?	Effect: What happened AFTER you got angry?

Anger Distortions: Thinking that makes you Mad

Anger-triggering thoughts often distort our view of reality. Here are some of the most common cognitive distortions that feed anger:

1. **Blaming.** The belief that someone else is responsible for our pain, and that you can do nothing about it. By blaming others, you discount that you have the power to make choices that impact your situation. You feel powerless, helpless, and stuck. You expect someone else to fix things.
2. **Magnifying.** The tendency to view “molehills” as “mountains” – to make an uncomfortable situation much worse. Using words like “awful,” “terrible,” “unbearable,” or “horrible” provoke an exaggerated angry response.
3. **Global labels.** The use of sweeping judgments and black-and-white thinking that inflame anger – seeing a person as “totally evil” or “completely selfish” and ignoring the good bits.
4. **Misattributions.** Jumping to conclusions and mind-reading; assigning negative motivation to the actions of others. You don’t ask for clarifications or feedback because you think you already know.
5. **Overgeneralization.** Closely related to global labels, this one involved the use of “always,” “never,” “nobody,” and “everybody.” Thoughts like “she’s ALWAYS late” or “he NEVER listens” make a single incident into an intolerable situation.
6. **Demanding/commanding.** Imposing your own values and needs on others who may have very different values and needs. Feeling that your “needs” require other’s compliance.

Sample Coping Thoughts

1. **Blaming:** “What can I do to change the situation?” “I can do something about this.”
2. **Magnifying:** “How bad is this really?” “This is irritating but I can handle it.”
3. **Global Labels:** “This is a problem, but he/she is not a monster.”
4. **Misattributions:** “I can’t read minds-I need more facts.” “What else might be going on?”
5. **Overgeneralization:** “How often does this really happen?”
6. **Demanding/Commanding:** “I would rather things were different, but I can get through this.” “Not getting what I want is not the end of the world.”

Progressive Relaxation

There are terrific benefits from learning to relax your body. By focusing on the PHYSICAL feelings of tension and release, we can trick our brain into de-stressing as well. You cannot feel both physically relaxed and anxious at the same time. And, we can train our body to habitually respond to anxiety-provoking situations with relaxation. In this way mastering progressive relaxation can serve as a kind of “anti-anxiety pill.” This technique has been used to effectively treat anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia, neck and back pain, and high blood pressure. It is also a helpful tool for anyone dealing with anger management issues.

The Technique

The basic principle of Progressive Relaxation is pretty straight-forward: You focus on the feeling of tension in one muscle group. Then, you consciously release the tension and focus on the feeling of relaxation in that muscle group. Then, you move on to the next muscle group, systematically working through the whole body.

Practice

Here is a brief version of progressive relaxation for you to start practicing. For a more complete description and detailed instructions I highly recommend [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#) (2008).

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the ground. Take a few deep breaths and relax your body.
2. Curl both hands into tight fists; tighten your biceps and forearms as tight as you can. Focus on the feeling of tension. Now completely relax your arms and hands. Notice how they feel.
3. Pull your shoulders up toward your ears; scrunch up your face by drawing your eyebrows together and wrinkling your nose. Make it as tight as you can. With a strong exhale, release your shoulders and relax your face. Notice the feeling.
4. Now tighten your torso. Arch or hunch your back; take a deep breath and puff out your belly as far as you can. Hold it and focus on the feeling of tension. Release your breath and completely relax your torso.
5. Straighten your legs in front of you. Point your toes. Tighten your thighs, calves, and ankles. Notice the feeling of tension from your hips to your toes. Now allow your legs to relax and flop back to the floor. Notice the feeling of relaxation.

Practice a few times a day for the next two weeks. At first you should do this exercise when you are in a calm environment and can focus on the process. Once you are comfortable with it, start practicing when you find yourself in a stressful situation. Intentionally tighten your hands, arms and feet and then intentionally relax your body.

Snap Out of It

Your thoughts influence how you feel and how you behave. For example, if your thoughts magnify an uncomfortable situation into something catastrophic, you start feeling overwhelmed. You become angry that you have to live with it. Before you know it, you are reacting as if this really is the end of the world. Unchecked, these angry thoughts keep feeding the feeling... and out-of-control behavior follows.

What Is Thought Stopping?

Part of the solution is to give yourself time to choose a different response. This is where a thought stopping technique becomes helpful. The idea is to snap your brain out of the unconscious, automatic thought process that leads to problems. Interrupting negative thoughts with a “stop” command serves as a reminder and a distraction. You regain a sense of control as you use the technique. When followed with positive coping statements, you break the angry chain and allow a new behavior pattern to emerge.

So Snap Out of It

Here is a simple thought stopping technique you can start using today. You will need to have completed the Change the Voice in Your Head worksheet prior to starting this.

1. Find a thick rubber band that fits comfortably (and loosely) around your wrist. You will be wearing this day and night for the next few weeks so make sure it isn't binding.
2. Practice first:
 - a. Think about a time recently when you were angry. Imagine it in detail until you begin to feel the physical signs of anger (teeth clenching, stomach tightening, etc).
 - b. As soon as you feel the first sign, snap the rubber band hard and say “SNAP OUT OF IT!” The jolt of pain helps break the hold of negative thoughts and gives you time to choose something different.
 - c. Repeat one of your positive coping statements until you feel calm
3. Put it to work in real life. Pay attention for the first signs of anger. As soon as you feel it, snap that rubber band and say “SNAP OUT OF IT!” (You can say it in your head if others are around). Be ready with a positive coping statement.

Try it for yourself for a couple of weeks. Before long you will notice you automatically replace anger-fueling thoughts with more helpful alternatives.

Changing the Voice in Your Head

Use the following chart to generate alternative coping thoughts for the situations most likely to provoke an angry response. Use those situations you rated highest on the Anger Hierarchy worksheet.

How Angry	Situations or events	Distorted Thought (Blaming, overgeneralization, etc)	Positive Coping Thought
100			
95			
90			
85			
80			
75			
70			
65			
60			
55			
50			
45			
40			
35			

Staying Calm under Pressure

It's time to start practicing your new skills so you will be ready to face the pressure of the real world. Anger inoculation is all about training yourself to use relaxation and new thought patterns during anger-inducing situations. You will start by imagining situations of various intensity while using your new skills. Over time, you will find that you habitually turn to these new skills to stay cool.

First, you will write descriptions of "anger scenes" – situations that you have identified as causing an angry response in you. Be sure to include as many details as possible – the richer the description, the more effective the exercise. Try to include your physical environment, body sensations, and thoughts.

Hierarchy of Angry Scenes

1. Scene 1 (anger hierarchy ranking of 40-50):

2. Scene 2 (anger hierarchy ranking of 50-60):

3. Scene 3 (anger hierarchy ranking of 60-70):

4. Scene 4 (anger hierarchy ranking of 70-80):

5. Scene 5 (anger hierarchy ranking of 80-90):

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6. Scene 6 (anger hierarchy ranking of 90-100):

Anger Inoculation Process

Day 1

1. Complete a Coping Thoughts worksheet for each scene. Be sure to generate several coping thoughts prior to moving on to the visualization exercises.
2. Relax. Use your Special Place visualization technique to completely relax.
3. Once you are relaxed, visualize the first Anger Scene. Try to bring as much detail to the scene as possible. Allow it to unfold like watching a movie. Intentionally intensify your angry response by using some of the anger-triggering thoughts you've identified. Keep at it until you really feel the angry response building. Hold that scene for 30 seconds.
4. Now, erase that scene from your mind. Use your progressive muscle relaxation to let go of any tension in your body. Start repeating your coping thoughts to yourself until you begin to feel calm. Use your Breathing technique to calm and still your mind.
5. Once you are calm, repeat the whole process using scene 2.
6. Alternate between scenes 1 and 2 for up to 6 repetitions during your first session.

Day 2

Repeat steps 1-6 again

Day 3

After you have completed at least 2 sessions using scenes 1 and 2, move on to scenes 3 and 4 following the same procedure outlined in steps 1-6 above.

Day 4

Now you are ready to move on to the highest ranking anger triggers in your hierarchy. The process is a bit different:

1. Complete a Coping Thoughts worksheet for each scene. Be sure to generate several coping thoughts prior to moving on to the visualization exercises.
2. Relax. Use your Special Place visualization technique to completely relax.
3. Once you are relaxed, visualize the Anger Scene 5. Try to bring as much detail to the scene as possible. Allow it to unfold like watching a movie. Intentionally intensify your angry response by using some of the anger-triggering thoughts you've identified. Keep at it until you really feel the angry response building. Hold that scene for 30 seconds.
4. Now, *while still holding on to your anger scene*, begin to use your coping thoughts and relaxation techniques. Maintain the image while you focus on releasing tension from your body and replacing trigger thoughts with coping thoughts. Keep at this until you are completely relaxed.

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5. Once you are relaxed use your breathing technique to clear your mind.
6. Repeat the process with Scene 6.

It is tough to hold on to the anger scene while simultaneously focusing on relaxation. By practicing this now, you will be in much better shape when you have to use it in the real world.

My Anger Management Plan

Make a written plan for dealing with real-life provocations. Complete this worksheet for every situation in which you find yourself getting angry.

Precipitating Event:

Anger-triggering Thoughts:

Anger Distortions:

Coping Thoughts/ Revised Distortions:

Relaxation Strategy (Body Scan, Deep Breathing, progressive relaxation):

Coping Behaviors (count to ten; excuse yourself from situation; take a walk; look for compromise):
