

LifeSkills

How to deal with anger

Expressing your emotions is healthy, but letting your anger explode can have serious consequences in interpersonal relationships. There is nothing wrong with being angry; it is how you express your anger that makes all the difference. Here are some suggestions to help you control and express your anger.

Know yourself

The first step in controlling your anger is to be aware of the kinds of situations that set you off.

What are your triggers?

Emotions usually have triggers. Identifying your "high risk" situations, or external triggers, is a good place to start. You probably know what situations usually trigger your anger. This information will allow you to prepare for "high risk" situations. For example, it could be coming home and finding the kids have left their toys all over the place. The workplace is another likely source of irritation, perhaps in the form of a colleague with whom you often disagree.

What is your self-talk?

How you talk to yourself about a situation is often as important as the situation itself. It is helpful to be aware of how you can talk your own anger up by dwelling on negative assumptions and thoughts, for example: "I am sure he did that on purpose."

Recognize your anger signs

The earlier you are aware of your anger, the better. Practice paying attention to your own set of physical reactions (e.g. rapid heart beat, flushing, muscle tightness, etc.) and behavioral signs (e.g. pacing, talking faster, slamming doors) that you are getting angry.

Know what to do: Calm yourself down

Take ten deep breaths. Deep breathing is a simple way to lower your arousal. It is also a way to put some time between the event and your reaction and to increase your chances of communicating your anger more effectively.

Take time out

There are not many people who can communicate anger effectively when they are at a "10" on a "0 to 10" anger scale. Most find it useful to take a break and remove themselves from the situation before acting. It may help just to take a walk around the block or, if possible, do a physical activity.

Direct yourself

Once you are aware of your anger and "talk up" process, you can begin to direct yourself by acknowledging your anger and channeling it into a plan. This implies that you are responsible for your own reactions and gives you a sense of control.

Choose a time to talk

Once you have cooled down, you may find it helpful to go back to the person you are angry with and arrange a time and place to get together and work out your differences. This is an act of control and it points to a constructive way you can work out your differences.

Clarify the issue

Angry threats and accusations do not work well if solutions are what you have in mind. Tell the other person why you are angry by describing the facts, what he or she said or did (e.g. You criticized me in front of the boss). Make certain the other person is prepared to listen, in other words has calmed down also. Finally, be sure you are prepared to listen.

Express your anger

Perhaps you feel you are unjustly treated or have not been respected. Whatever your feelings are, state them clearly (e.g. I felt angry and humiliated).

Specify what you would like

Letting the other person know what you would like helps create a problem-solving atmosphere and represents an opportunity for dialogue (e.g. Next time, I would like you to talk to me privately if you have any criticism).

Be realistic

Keep in mind that even if the strategy described here is highly effective, it does not guarantee compliance or even that you will be heard. If there is nothing you can agree on, you can agree to disagree and follow other options (e.g. in the workplace, talk to a supervisor).

Professional help

If you enter in violent or destructive behaviors when you are angry, whether they are physical or verbal, or if you feel angry most of the time, you should consider getting professional help.

Suggested readings

If you would like to learn more about anger and how to control it, we recommend the following books :

Bower, S.H. and Bower, G.H.. *Asserting yourself: A positive guide for positive change*. Pennsylvania : Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1991.

Lerner, H.. *The dance of anger: A woman's guide to changing the patterns of intimate relationships*. New York: Harper Perennial 1985.

La version française de ce document sera disponible sur Internet sous peu. Vous pouvez vous la procurer en composant le 1-800-668-4125.

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