

## Anger Management

**Is your temper hijacking your life? These tips and techniques can help you get anger under control and express your feelings in healthier ways.**



### **Understanding anger**

Anger is a normal, healthy emotion, neither good nor bad. Like any emotion, it conveys a message, telling you that a situation is upsetting, unjust, or threatening. If your kneejerk reaction to anger is to explode, however, that message never has a chance to be conveyed. So, while it's perfectly normal to feel angry when you've been mistreated or wronged, anger becomes a problem when you express it in a way that harms yourself or others.

You might think that venting your anger is healthy, that the people around you are too sensitive, that your anger is justified, or that you need to show your fury to get respect. But the truth is that anger is much more likely to have a negative impact on the way people see you, impair your judgment, and get in the way of success.

## Effects of anger

Chronic anger that flares up all the time or spirals out of control can have serious consequences for your:

**Physical health.** Constantly operating at high levels of stress and anger makes you more susceptible to heart disease, diabetes, a weakened immune system, insomnia, and high blood pressure.

**Mental health.** Chronic anger consumes huge amounts of mental energy, and clouds your thinking, making it harder to concentrate or enjoy life. It can also lead to stress, depression, and other mental health problems.

**Career.** Constructive criticism, creative differences, and heated debate can be healthy. But lashing out only alienates your colleagues, supervisors, or clients and erodes their respect.

**Relationships.** Anger can cause lasting scars in the people you love most and get in the way of friendships and work relationships. Explosive anger makes it hard for others to trust you, speak honestly, or feel comfortable—and is especially damaging to children.

If you have a hot temper, you may feel like it's out of your hands and there's little you can do to tame the beast. But you have more control over your anger than you think. With insight about the real reasons for your anger and these anger management tools, you can learn to express your emotions without hurting others and keep your temper from hijacking your life.

### Myths and facts about anger

**Myth: I shouldn't "hold in" my anger. It's healthy to vent and let it out.**

**Fact:** While it's true that suppressing and ignoring anger is unhealthy, venting is no better. Anger is not something you have to "let out" in an aggressive way in order to avoid blowing up. In fact, outbursts and tirades only fuel the fire and reinforce your anger problem.

## Myths and facts about anger

**Myth: Anger, aggression, and intimidation help me earn respect and get what I want.**

**Fact:** Respect doesn't come from bullying others. People may be afraid of you, but they won't respect you if you can't control yourself or handle opposing viewpoints. Others will be more willing to listen to you and accommodate your needs if you communicate in a respectful way.

**Myth: I can't help myself. Anger isn't something you can control.**

**Fact:** You can't always control the situation you're in or how it makes you feel, but you can control how you express your anger. And you can communicate your feelings without being verbally or physically abusive. Even if someone is pushing your buttons, you always have a choice about how to respond.

## How anger management can help you

Many people think that anger management is about learning to suppress your anger. But never getting angry is not a healthy goal. Anger will come out regardless of how hard you try to tamp it down. The true goal of anger management isn't to suppress feelings of anger, but rather to understand the message behind the emotion and express it in a healthy way without losing control. When you do, you'll not only feel better, you'll also be more likely to get your needs met, be better able to manage conflict in your life, and strengthen your relationships.

Mastering the art of anger management takes work, but the more you practice, the easier it will get. And the payoff is huge. Learning to control your anger and express it appropriately will help you build better relationships, achieve your goals, and lead a healthier, more satisfying life.

## Tip 1: Explore what's really behind your anger

Have you ever gotten into an argument over something silly? Big fights often happen over something small, like a dish left out or being ten minutes late. But there's usually a bigger issue behind it. If you find your irritation and anger rapidly rising, ask yourself, "What am I really angry about?" Identifying the real source of frustration will help you communicate your anger better, take constructive action, and work towards a resolution.

**Is your anger masking other feelings such as embarrassment, insecurity, hurt, shame, or vulnerability?** If your knee-jerk response in many situations is anger, it's likely

that your temper is covering up your true feelings. This is especially likely if you grew up in a family where expressing feelings was strongly discouraged. As an adult, you may have a hard time acknowledging feelings other than anger.

**Anger can also mask anxiety.** When you perceive a threat, either real or imagined, your body activates the “fight or flight” response. In the case of the “fight” response, it can often manifest itself as anger or aggression. To change your response, you need to find out what’s causing you to feel anxious or scared.

**Anger problems can stem from what you learned as a child.** If you watched others in your family scream, hit each other, or throw things, you might think this is how anger is supposed to be expressed.

**Anger can be a symptom of another underlying health problem,** such as depression, trauma, or [chronic stress](#).

## **Clues that there’s more to your anger than meets the eye**

**You have a hard time compromising.** Is it hard for you to understand other people’s points of view, and even harder to concede a point? If you grew up in a family where anger was out of control, you may remember how the angry person got their way by being the loudest and most demanding. Compromising might bring up scary feelings of failure and vulnerability.

**You view different opinions as a personal challenge.** Do you believe that your way is always right and get angry when others disagree? If you have a strong need to be in control or a fragile ego, you may interpret other perspectives as a challenge to your authority, rather than simply a different way of looking at things.

**You have trouble expressing emotions other than anger.** Do you pride yourself on being tough and in control? Do you feel that emotions like fear, guilt, or shame don’t apply to you? Everyone has those emotions so you may be using anger as a cover for them. If you are uncomfortable with different emotions, disconnected, or stuck on an angry one-note response to situations, it’s important to get back in touch with your feelings. HelpGuide’s free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#) can help.

## **Tip 2: Be aware of your anger warning signs**

While you might feel that you just explode into anger without warning, there are in fact physical warning signs in your body. Becoming aware of your own personal signs that your temper is starting to boil allows you to take steps to manage your anger before it gets out of control.

### **Pay attention to the way anger feels in your body**

Knots in your stomach

Clenching your hands or jaw

Feeling clammy or flushed

Breathing faster

Headaches

Pacing or needing to walk around

"Seeing red"

Having trouble concentrating

Pounding heart

Tensing your shoulders

## **Tip 3: Identify your triggers**

Stressful events don't excuse anger, but understanding how these events affect you can help you take control of your environment and avoid unnecessary aggravation. Look at your regular routine and try to identify activities, times of day, people, places, or situations that trigger irritable or angry feelings.

Maybe you get into a fight every time you go out for drinks with a certain group of friends.

Or maybe the traffic on your daily commute drives you crazy. When you identify your triggers, think about ways to either avoid them or view the situations differently so they don't make your blood boil.

## **Negative thought patterns that can trigger anger**

You may think that external factors—the insensitive actions of other people, for example, or frustrating situations—are causing your anger. But anger problems have less to do with what happens to you than how you interpret and think about what happened. Common negative thinking patterns that trigger and fuel anger include:

**Overgeneralizing.** For example, “You ALWAYS interrupt me. You NEVER consider my needs. EVERYONE disrespects me. I NEVER get the credit I deserve.”

**Obsessing over “shoulds” and “musts.”** Having a rigid view of the way a situation should or must go and getting angry when reality doesn't line up with this vision.

**Mind reading and jumping to conclusions.** Assuming you “know” what someone else is thinking or feeling—that they intentionally upset you, ignored your wishes, or disrespected you.

**Collecting straws.** Looking for things to get upset about, usually while overlooking or blowing past anything positive. Letting these small irritations build and build until you reach the “final straw” and explode, often over something relatively minor.

**Blaming.** When anything bad happens or something goes wrong, it's always someone else's fault. You tell yourself, “life's not fair,” or blame others for your problems rather than taking responsibility for your own life.

When you identify the thought patterns that fuel your anger, you can learn to reframe how you think about things. Ask yourself: What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true? Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at a situation? What would I say to a friend who was thinking these things?

## **Tip 4: Learn ways to cool down quickly**

Once you know how to recognize the warning signs that your temper is rising and anticipate your triggers, you can act quickly to deal with your anger before it spins out of control.

There are many techniques that can help you cool down and keep your anger in check.

**Focus on the physical sensations of anger.** While it may seem counterintuitive, tuning into the way your body feels when you're angry often lessens the emotional intensity of your anger.

**Take some deep breaths.** Deep, slow breathing helps counteract rising tension. The key is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible into your lungs.

**Get moving.** A brisk walk around the block is a great idea. Physical activity releases pent-up energy so you can approach the situation with a cooler head.

**Use your senses.** You can use sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste to quickly relieve stress and cool down. You might try listening to a favorite piece of music, looking at a treasured photo, savoring a cup of tea, or stroking a pet.

**Stretch or massage areas of tension.** Roll your shoulders if you are tensing them, for example, or gently massage your neck and scalp.

**Slowly count to ten.** Focus on the counting to let your rational mind catch up with your feelings. If you still feel out of control by the time you reach ten, start counting again.

## Give yourself a reality check

When you start getting upset about something, take a moment to think about the situation. Ask yourself:

How important is it in the grand scheme of things?

Is it really worth getting angry about it?

Is it worth ruining the rest of my day?

Is my response appropriate to the situation?

Is there anything I can do about it?

Is taking action worth my time?

## Tip 5: Find healthier ways to express your anger

If you've decided that the situation is worth getting angry about and there's something you can do to make it better, the key is to express your feelings in a healthy way. Learning how to resolve conflict in a positive way will help you strengthen your relationships rather than damaging them.

**Always fight fair.** It's OK to be upset at someone, but if you don't fight fair, the relationship will quickly break down. Fighting fair allows you to express your own needs while still respecting others.

**Make the relationship your priority.** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Respect the other person and their viewpoint.

**Focus on the present.** Once you are in the heat of arguing, it's easy to start throwing past grievances into the mix. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the present to solve the problem.

**Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.

**Take five if things get too heated.** If your anger starts to spiral out of control, remove yourself from the situation for a few minutes or for as long as it takes you to cool down.

**Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

## Tip 6: Stay calm by taking care of yourself

Taking care of your overall mental and physical wellbeing can help ease tension and diffuse anger problems.

**Manage stress.** If your stress levels are through the roof, you're more likely to struggle controlling your temper. Try mindfulness meditation / techniques such as mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing. You'll feel calmer and more in control of your emotions.



**Talk to someone you trust.** Nothing eases stress more effectively than chatting face-to-face with a friend or loved one. The person doesn't have to provide answers, they just need to be a good listener. But talking about your feelings and seeking a different perspective on a situation is not the same as venting. Simply venting your anger at someone will only fuel your temper and reinforce your anger problem.

**Get enough sleep.** A lack of sleep can exacerbate negative thoughts and leave you feeling agitated and short-tempered. Try to get seven to nine hours of good quality sleep.

**Exercise regularly.** It's an effective way to burn-off tension and ease stress, and it can leave you feeling more relaxed and positive throughout the day. Aim for at least 30 minutes on most days, broken up into shorter periods if that's easier.

**Be smart about alcohol and drugs.** They lower your inhibitions and can make it even harder to control your anger. Even consuming **too much caffeine** can make you more irritable and prone to anger.

## Tip 7: Use humor to relieve tension

When things get tense, humor and playfulness can help you lighten the mood, smooth over differences, reframe problems, and keep things in perspective. When you feel yourself getting angry in a situation, try using a little lighthearted humor. It can allow you to get your point across without getting the other person's defenses up or hurting their feelings.

However, it's important that you laugh with the other person, not at them. Avoid sarcasm, mean-spirited humor. If in doubt, start by using self-deprecating humor. We all love people who are able to gently poke fun at their own failings. After all, we're all flawed and we all make mistakes. So, if you've made a mistake at work or you've just spilled coffee over yourself, instead of getting angry or picking a fight, try making a joke about it. Even if the joke falls flat or comes out wrong, the only person you risk offending is yourself.

When humor and play are used to reduce tension and anger, a potential conflict can even become an opportunity for greater connection and intimacy.

## Tip 8: Recognize if you need professional help

If, despite putting these previous anger management techniques into practice, your anger is still spiraling out of control, or if you're getting into trouble with the law or hurting others,

you need more help.

**Anger management classes** allow you to meet others coping with the same struggles and learn tips and techniques for managing your anger.

**Therapy**, either group or individual, can be a great way to explore the reasons behind your anger and identify triggers. Therapy can also provide a safe place to practice new skills for expressing anger.

## **Anger isn't the real problem in an abusive relationship**

Despite what many believe, domestic violence and abuse does not happen due to the abuser's loss of control over their temper. Rather, it's a deliberate choice to control another person. If you are abusive towards your spouse or partner, know that you need specialized treatment, not regular anger management classes.



## **Get more help**

Controlling Anger Before it Controls You - Origins of excessive anger, tips on coping, and when to seek more help. (American Psychological Association)

What Your Anger May Be Hiding - Reasons behind excessive anger. (Psychology Today)

Anger and Trauma - How anger should be treated when it's a symptom of PTSD. (National Center for PTSD)

When You Love an Angry Person - Tips on fighting fair, ways to approach a loved one, and when to seek more help. (Get Your Angries Out)

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## How to Turn Your Brain from Anger to Compassion



Attention is like a spotlight—whatever it shines on becomes brighter in the mind. This knowledge can help us build compassion, says **Paul Gilbert**.

BY PAUL GILBERT | SEPTEMBER 4, 2013

Why do we need compassion?



This week, we feature the video of a Science of a Meaningful Life presentation by Paul Gilbert, the author of *Mindful Compassion*. This essay is inspired by his talk.

We need compassion because life is hard. We are all susceptible to diseases and injuries. Every one of us has a lifespan that had a start and will have an end. Just like you, I am vulnerable to disease. Just like you, I could have a blood test tomorrow that says my life is going to end. Just like you, I could hear that my son has been killed in a car crash.

Because these things can happen to any of us at any time, we're all in this together. No one—*no one*—escapes. And the more we work together, the more we can make this journey of suffering bearable. The Buddhist tradition puts it this way: "Just like me, you want to be happy; just like me, you want to be free of suffering." That recognition of common fear and yearning is the basis for compassion.

But compassion isn't always easy. I take a fairly simple general view of compassion, which is that it is "a sensitivity to suffering with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent that suffering." We don't confuse it with other positive emotions, like love, because the hardest forms of compassion are for people you don't love. It's also harder to be compassionate toward people who seem very dissimilar from you than toward people who are like you. These are just some of the factors that can inhibit compassion.

Life experiences can also diminish our ability to give and receive compassion. I'm a therapist, and people who come to therapy are often caught in psychological loops that prevent them from accepting compassion from others or from themselves.

But we can break those loops by becoming aware of how our brains work—by becoming aware of own awareness. We can then begin to deliberately cultivate compassion by learning to cultivate compassionate attention, compassionate thinking, compassionate feeling, and compassionate behavior. We learn to be open to suffering in others as well as to suffering in ourselves—and then we can act to alleviate that suffering.

### The trouble with brains



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We are all biologically created. Our brains are created by our genes; they were not created by us, but *for* us by evolution, and as such we discover our brains can do wonderful things (find ways to cure disease) and terrible things (make war). So the way

Mindfulness helps us understand that attention is like the spotlight—whatever it shines on is what becomes brighter in the mind, which can even affect us physiologically.

Try this: Deliberately imagine your excitement around a vacation, or the possibility of winning a lottery. Let that be your focus for a minute or two and notice what happens in your body. Then switch your attention (on purpose) to an argument or one of your core worries at the moment. Notice what happens in your body. Did you feel very differently, according to where your attention was focused?

Attention also puts things outside the spotlight, into darkness. Let's say you go Christmas shopping and enter 10 shops, and in nine shops the assistants are very helpful to you, but in one shop the assistant is very rude and she makes you wait. Well, whom do you think about when you go home? "God, where do they get these people from?" you say to yourself. "Should I write to the store manager and get her fired? She was so rude." You're in a loop now and you're in the anger system. You've forgotten all the shop assistants who were nice to you. They're in darkness because the spotlight is on the rude one. How absolutely extraordinary that we can forget 90 percent of our experience!

But of course once we notice what the mind is up to—and why—then we can begin to take control over our attention and use it mindfully and practically. What about if you, on purpose, decide that you're going to recall the other nine people? Just spend time remembering how kind one of them was in that shop, another's smile, how one tried so hard to find you the thing you wanted.

## MORE ON MINDFULNESS

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Watch all the other presentations from our "Practicing Mindfulness and Compassion" conference, which was co-sponsored by

Taking that step—breaking out of the anger loop—requires intention. And that intention is a key to cultivating compassion.

Compassion is rooted deeper in brain systems having to do with intentionality and motivation, and if you orient yourself to compassion, then you're going to change the whole orientation of your mind. And the key here is to understand that we can select, on

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purpose, one of our basic motivational systems—for caring—and we can cultivate it, help it grow and mature, through practice. We also need to understand exactly why it's useful to do this: because it changes our brain and will give us much more control over our thoughts and our lives.

So in therapy that tries to develop compassion, we train people to remember, remember, remember, notice, notice, notice

kindness—and then to build upon those remembrances. Buddhist monk and author Matthieu Ricard says our minds are like gardens and they will grow naturally. But if uncultivated, they are influenced by the weather and whatever seeds are in the wind. Some things will grow big and others shrivel—and in the end we may not like the results.

We can come to understand why and how to cultivate compassion within us, which has the capacity for healing and reorganizing our minds such that we can begin to become the people we want to be—in other words, to have the garden-mind we want. This requires courage. If you're an agoraphobic, compassionate behavior isn't sitting at home eating chocolates, because that's easy. Compassion is going out and confronting your anxieties.

With our male clients we often talk about two types of courage. There is physical courage, which many of them have, but there is also emotional courage, which is being able to move into areas of deep suffering and pain. Compassion helps us to move in those areas. We must be prepared to confront pain in ourselves—and to alleviate that pain.

So here is the situation. The brain we have inherited from millions of years of evolution is both a gift and a curse, if not understood and used wisely. It is easy for us to get lost in our very basic emotions and motives, or become personally distressed by the problems of others.

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The same mechanism is at work with the child who's loved in the morning but whose parent gets drunk and beats him up at night. The attachment system—the parts of the brain that facilitate loving connection with our parents—fuses with the fear system. So as that child grows up and begins to feel connection with other people, he is opening up the attachment system—but unfortunately, in his emotional memory, attachment is also toxic. That person now has a mental health problem.

A lot of people with mental health problems are in loops they can't escape. They ruminate about things that frighten them, they ruminate about being no good or inferior. They focus on all the negative aspects. This is not their fault, because we have a natural, old-brain threat bias. As Rick Hanson notes, the brain is Velcro for negative- and threat-based things but Teflon for positive ones. We're all like this.

### **How does mindfulness help fix the trouble?**



Fortunately, we also have the skills to reconcile the old brain with the new. One of them is a technique that we call mindfulness—moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts and feelings. That is, we have the capacity to be aware of awareness, and to simply observe and become familiar with the tricks our minds play on us.

This is a phenomenally important evolutionary quality, almost like a quality of developing a visual system. Before animals had the capacity to be aware of light, there was no awareness of light. But of course light exists. We now have a brain to be aware of being aware, which no other animal has—and this actually puts on our shoulders fantastic responsibilities, because we can wake up to the reality of the life we're in and start to make healthy choices as a result. Chimpanzees cannot do this—they can't look at their body and think, "Oh my God, I've got to lose weight."

our brains have evolved means it can give us a lot of trouble, actually—and the trouble arises from the fact that we really have two brains.

We have an old brain, which has a whole lot of motives and desires that evolved long ago and that we share with many other animals. So just like your family dog, we are naturally motivated to avoid things that could harm us, and we can be territorial, possessive, and concerned with status. We are also motivated to form friendships, reproduce, and care for offspring. And just like our family dog, we can experience emotions of anxiety, fear, anger, lust, and joy.

But we are very different from other animals, too. About two million years ago one of our primate ancestors started to evolve humanlike intelligence, and we are now capable of imagining, reasoning, using language, and using symbols. This “new” brain is fabulous when used wisely, but much depends on how it interacts with the old brain.

For example, imagine a zebra spots a lion and runs away—that’s what the older, animal brain is good at: detecting and responding to threats. If the zebra gets away, it will settle down and go back to the herd and start happily eating again. But that won’t happen for a human because of the new brain. The human will start thinking, “Oh my god, can you imagine what would’ve happened if I got caught?” They wake up in the middle of the night thinking, “What about tomorrow? And the children! Oh my god.”

The threat is over, but the new brain can’t let it go. We ruminate, and we run simulation after simulation in our minds of “what-if” scenarios. Now, of course, this can be very useful for working out how to avoid lions in the first place, or to make a spear. But it can also trap us in fear.

This is what we call emotional memory. I’ll give you another example, this time closer to the modern world. Suppose that you like holidays. When you think about holidays, it makes you excited. But then on one holiday you get severely beaten up and robbed, and you end up in the hospital. What will happen the following year when you think about holidays? Well, that trauma memory will come back, and so holidays are no longer pleasant to you.



But evolution has also given us a very different type of attention—an extraordinary competency as miraculous as the ability to see light—that can sense and experience consciousness of consciousness itself. From here we can begin to see into the nature of the mind—and begin to make choices about what emotions we want to cultivate in our lives. This is what it means to wake up and to start to become enlightened.

## About the Author



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