

anger management

Learning anger management strategies is important for people in general but certainly for students who may meet a wide variety of unique frustrations and challenges as part of their experience on a university campus. Some of these potential frustrations include: the initial registration process; instructors who may be better researchers than teachers; receiving poor grades or grades that are seen as unjustified; being placed on academic probation or asked to withdraw from university; being overtaxed with both academic pressures and severe financial worries; conflict with friends, roommates, or classmates; and having academic supervisors who are uncaring or unduly authoritarian. This list, of course, is only the most obvious potential triggers for anger, and many other day-to-day situations exist that can generate anger.

People are generally not taught how to deal with their anger other than through modeling and, unfortunately,

there are not many good models out there. Anger has a biological basis, and it serves us well to deal with certain threats to our well-being. However, in many situations, anger is not justified or it is expressed in a way that is inappropriate and negatively impacts our relationships. As well, anger can significantly affect our health, particularly if it is chronic. Chronic anger contributes to a variety of illnesses such as heart disease, hypertension, headaches, digestive problems, susceptibility to infections, cancer, and skin disorders to mention a few. Anger is probably the least understood and poorly handled emotion. It is the root of some of our most serious social problems including domestic violence, prejudice, assaults, murders, wars, and terrorism. Anger can have enormous costs to you personally, and to society in general, if it is not managed appropriately.

coping strategies

1 avoid anger-provoking situations

One of the most basic skills in managing anger is to avoid situations, conversations, or people that typically make you angry. Of course, this avoidance is not always possible but can be highly effective when used consciously. Consider: What are your triggers and can you avoid them? What safe, trusting, and predictable people (or environment) can you find to help you to stay calm?

2 identify early warning signs

Become aware of the early warning signs that you are becoming angry so that you can use strategies early and prevent anger from building and getting out of control. Common warning signs include a raised voice, a pounding heart, faster breathing, dry mouth, flushed face, or clenched fists (the “fight/flight” response).

3 keep an anger log

Keep a record of various aspects of your anger. These could include:

- The situation that triggered your anger
- The thoughts which generated your anger
- The intensity of your anger
- The techniques you used to control your anger
- How well the techniques worked
- The consequences of your anger on either yourself or those people around you

By keeping a record like this for a couple of weeks, you will have much more information about your anger so that you can apply the most appropriate strategies to manage it.

4 determine whether your anger is justified

Distinguish between anger that is justified and anger that is generated over minor irritations. Examples of situations where anger is justified, and therefore helpful, include when you are physically threatened or attacked, when you are dealing with a social injustice, or when your boundaries are violated. Anger in these cases can energize you to take meaningful action to resolve the situation.

5 delay responding to your anger

Delay responding immediately when you begin to feel your anger building. The longer you are able to delay your response, the more likely you will be able to respond rationally rather than explosively. This delay could involve counting to 10, singing a song in your head, doing something physical, or focusing on something humorous. Anything that serves as a distraction to your angry thoughts would potentially work.

6 assertiveness

Learn the skill of communicating assertively rather than passively or aggressively. Assertiveness means openly communicating your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values in a way that also respects the rights of the other person. When you are passive, you fail to communicate your thoughts and feelings and thus disrespect yourself. When you communicate aggressively, you express your thoughts and feelings but in a way that is not respectful of the rights of the other person.

7 time-out

Use time-out as a chance to give yourself time to cool down when an argument begins to escalate. Time-outs are typically used when there is conflict between two people and, in this case, you need to first agree on the value of time-out. Once this is established, decide on a time-out signal which can either be verbal (e.g., "I need to take a time out") or visual (e.g., a letter T formed by your two hands). Next, the person taking the time-out needs to tell the other person the duration of the time-out and that they plan on returning to the topic at issue after the time-out. During the time-out, leave the room or building and distract yourself with other (preferably relaxing) activities. Do not keep re-running the initial conflict in your head, since doing so undermines the purpose of taking time-out.

8 use healthy self-talk

It is not a situation itself that makes us angry but what we say to ourselves about the situation. Anger-triggering thoughts typically either blame others for our pain or involve unrealistic expectations for other people's behavior. Both types of thoughts involve the belief that the other person is wrong, bad, or deserves to be punished.

Replace your anger-triggering thoughts with more healthy self-talk. These thoughts should be specific to the given situation as much as possible. Some examples of healthy self-talk include:

- "He is only trying to meet his needs, as am I."
- "My anger won't get me what I want. It will only create more conflict."
- "She has the right to say no to my requests."
- "I don't need to get upset. I know how to manage my anger."
- "People will change only when they want to. I can't make them."
- "Don't assume anything. I need to check out my assumptions."

9 put yourself in the other person's shoes

Make every effort to see the situation you are angry about from the other person's perspective. Realize that we are all primarily motivated by our own needs, and most people don't try to make us angry. People are human, and they will make mistakes that will unintentionally impact us.

10 reduce stress

Stress is considered one of the primary factors that fuels anger. Therefore, any strategy that reduces our level of stress is also considered an anger management technique. For a complete list of stress management techniques, see the handout at Counselling and Clinical Services or find the web link entitled Stress Management Strategies.

11 relaxation skills

Just as relaxation skills can be used successfully to manage anxiety and irrational fears, these skills can also be used to manage anger. On a physiological level, relaxation exercises create a state that is incompatible with anger. Simple relaxation skills to counteract anger include:

- Deep breathing (breathe from your diaphragm rather than from your chest)
- Autogenic words or phrases repeated to yourself such as “calm” or “relax”
- Imagery of a relaxing place or a relaxing time in your life
- Progressively tightening and relaxing various muscle groups in your body
- Focusing on each muscle group in your body and using the power of your mind to relax it

12 problem solving skills

Develop some effective problem solving skills, since a lot of anger can be generated when we are frustrated and blocked in developing an effective solution to a problem or issue.

13 use rewards and punishments

Reward yourself for positive efforts to control your anger. This reward can involve anything that you enjoy. At the same time, punish yourself for any aggressive outbursts so it no longer proves profitable to express your anger inappropriately. Anger and aggression can sometimes get us what we want, so we also need to devise ways to eliminate these rewards. For example, talk to loved ones who usually give in to you when you are angry, and advise them not to let your anger be rewarded. Ask them to reward your pleasant interactions instead.

14 humor

Use humor to de-escalate anger and develop a much more balanced perspective. When we are angry, we tend to develop a very narrow focus where we feel that things need to go our way. Humor can allow you to change your focus and take the situation you are angry about less seriously.

15 develop a feeling vocabulary

Expand your feeling vocabulary, since many feelings end up being expressed as anger. People don't always have more accurate words to describe their present emotions. People also do not recognize, name, and express their anger at lower intensity levels (e.g., perturbed or annoyed), which can mean anger building up to a higher intensity level.

16 avoid angry subcultures

Avoid people, subcultures, or environments that condone violence or angry outbursts. Research indicates that when we are around people who express anger in ways that are unhealthy or inappropriate, we are more likely to model this same behavior.

17 forgiveness

Practice forgiveness of people whom you've felt angered by. Holding on to your anger has much more detrimental effects on your own health than on the person with whom you are angry. Anger expressed inappropriately also ultimately damages relationships and can alienate you from people generally.

18 anger transformation

Instead of trying to control your anger, you can take the energy that anger generates and put it into more positive directions. This could include four types of transformation:

- Creative (e.g., artistic expressions, scientific inventions, musical representations)
- Social (e.g., social and political activism)
- Existential (e.g., wisdom, serenity)
- Spiritual (e.g., prayer, meditation, forgiveness, reconciliation)

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

