

Struggling with Anger

Everyone gets angry, and when we're confined to close quarters with the same people day after day, that anger can often get the best of us. While anger is a difficult emotion, most people handle it as best they can with minimal consequences. Sometimes, just a sincere apology can work wonders.

The Cycle of Anger

Some people constantly struggle with anger. Sometimes this is due to a life experience, such as being raised in a family environment full of anger. Others just seem to have a volatile temperament. Often, it is a combination of these two factors. Understanding the often-addictive cycle of anger and developing the tools to cope with this cycle can help you successfully manage anger.

The cycle of anger often begins with an emotional injury of some sort. Often, there is a rapid progression through a sequence of inaccurate and inflammatory thoughts. This progression through a series of almost automatic and distorted thoughts can quickly lead to an inappropriate expression of anger.

The first step in anger management is to understand the cycle of anger and the thoughts that propel it. Here is an example of how inaccurate thoughts can lead to escalating stages of anger:

1. In its first stage, emotional hurt can spark a rapid emotional reaction, leading to an inaccurate perception. For example, if your spouse says to you, "This place is a mess!" you feel hurt because you interpret this to mean that the messy house is your fault.
2. In the second stage, you arrive at a faulty interpretation of the emotional hurt without time to reflect on the facts or missed emotional clues. Perhaps your spouse is not blaming you for the condition of the house as much as he or she is just stating a fact. Because the statement hurt you, you may jump to the conclusion that he or she thinks the situation is your fault.
3. In the third stage, you may feel overly sensitive. Perhaps the way anger was dealt with in your childhood causes you to be overly sensitive to the simple statement, "This house is a mess!" You interpret it to mean that you are a failure in your spouse's eyes.
4. In the fourth stage, called the "decision-making stage," you may make a snap judgment based on your inaccurate reading of the situation. You may decide, "My spouse does not understand or care about me; he or she only cares about how neat the house is."
5. In the fifth stage, called the "feelings stage," you may begin to seethe with intense feelings of anger and resentment. These angry feelings can become addictive, and you may have trouble letting go of them.
6. In the "behavioral response" stage, your intense anger boils over, and you react with rapid, angry outbursts. These can take the form of yelling, throwing things, engaging in physical violence or saying things with the specific intention of hurting.
7. The seventh stage, or "self-appraisal stage," may lead you to minimize the impact of your anger, and even blame others for your poor behavior. This sets the stage for the next angry act, and the cycle begins again.

Break the Cycle of Anger

If you recognize this cycle of anger, you are on your way to controlling it. The next step is to take some preventive measures to keep your anger in check. Here are some steps you can take to help break your cycle of anger:

1. **Understand your mood changes:** Know that your moods can change unpredictably, independently of what is going on in the external world. Do not waste your time looking for someone to blame. Focus on learning to tolerate your bad mood, knowing that it will pass. Change your mental set by getting involved in a new activity, such as conversing with a friend, reading a book or exercising.
2. **Have a structured "blow-out" time:** Set aside a predictable time for just letting go. Find out what works for you, whether it is playing your favorite music at high volume, going shopping or having a feast. Find an activity that allows you to safely vent your anger.

3. **Develop a helpful habit:** Healthy habits can include exercise, spiritual commitment, music, journal writing or some other positive pursuit. Use your helpful habit to calm yourself when you start to feel the cycle of anger beginning.
4. **Learn how to name your feelings:** Many people, particularly men, get frustrated and angry because they cannot put their feelings into words. With practice, this is a helpful skill to develop.
5. **Use symbols, mantras and sayings:** Use them as shorthand ways of labeling and quickly putting angry comments and rudeness into perspective. This is not the same as making excuses or turning yourself into a doormat. This is just a way to give yourself time to gather more data, to try and understand the person before you react. For example, if a co-worker repeatedly says things you find offensive, you might repeat a mantra in your mind, such as, "This is his or her problem, not mine."
6. **Use timeouts as you would with a child:** When you are upset, give yourself a timeout. Go away someplace safe, and do not return until you have calmed down.
7. **Do not become automatically defensive:** Sometimes it is appropriate to have angry feelings.
8. **Exercise vigorously and regularly:** Schedule regular exercise, and stick with it. Exercise helps work off excess energy, aggression and anger in a positive way. It soothes and calms your body and mind.
9. **Learn to joke with yourself and others about your sensitivity and your quick temper:** If you can bring a sense of humor to your failings, others will forgive you much more quickly.
10. **Seek professional help:** Seek it from a doctor, counselor or clergyman when your anger begins to have a negative effect on you or your family's happiness, or when it affects your success at work.

Anger management is a skill that can be learned. It takes hard work and practice, but it is well worth the effort. If you can take the energy that had been expressed in angry outbursts and redirect it in other, more productive ways, you will be amazed at how much you can accomplish. Then, instead of angry sulking, you will feel energized with satisfaction.

Contributed by Dr. Edward Hallowell.

Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov