

Is Anger a Problem for You?

By Sloan Fabricius, MFT

You might be surprised to read that anger is a normal, healthy emotion and serves as a signal to meet a need. Like the “check engine” light in your car, anger is important to your survival. However, when anger is a primary way of coping, it becomes a problem. A chronic anger problem can be compared to the cycle of drug or alcohol addiction and the shame often associated with it.

Those who lose control of their anger, particularly after they’ve promised themselves to not do so, can feel ashamed and discouraged. That usually sets them up to repeat the cycle. Not being able to control one’s anger can cause chronic health problems and depression, lead to violence or increased use of drugs or alcohol, and destroy relationships.

Anger has many causes and there are numerous situations that give rise to angry feelings. Stress, which is the mismatch between demands made of us and the resources available to meet the demands, is a primary catalyst for anger. Other feelings come into play as well when we react to stress such as low self-esteem, fear, frustration, powerlessness, loneliness, and loss. One’s thoughts in reaction to a situation can fuel anger. Angry thoughts lead to angry feelings.

Prone to anger

When interacting with others, we often feel entitled to have things go our way, or at the very least, to expect fairness. But what if your definition of fairness in a particular situation is different from mine? What angry thoughts might be prompted by a situation in which your minimal expectations are not met?

This simple checklist will give you clues about your own anger:

- People tell you that you need to calm down.
- You feel tense much of the time.
- At work or school, you find yourself not saying what is on your mind.
- When you are upset, you try to block the world out by watching TV, reading a book, going to sleep or using drugs or alcohol.
- You have trouble falling asleep.
- You feel misunderstood or ignored much of the time.
- People ask you not to curse so much.
- Your loved ones keep saying you are hurting them.
- Friends do not seek you out as much as they used to.
- People say you are easily hurt and oversensitive.

Here are some tools to help you when you become angry:

- Rate your anger on a scale of 1 to 10.
- Use “I” statements and seek compromise.
- Walk away.
- Breathe deeply from the abdomen.
- Count to 10
- Say a prayer
- Love yourself
- Take a walk
- Punch a pillow, bed, bag, or something soft
- Learn communication skills
- Ask yourself what else you’re feeling besides anger
- Ask yourself who or what you are trying to control
- Remind yourself you can only control your thoughts and behaviors
- Tell yourself that not getting your way doesn’t mean you are weak and that you don’t need to prove yourself in this situation

- Tell yourself you will survive even if you don't receive someone's love and acceptance
- Tell yourself you don't have to feel threatened in this situation, but can relax and stay calm
- Apologize for your actions if necessary.
- Forgive another person and forgive yourself.
- Seek help from a mental health professional.

Here are some tools to help you in your long-term goal of managing your anger:

- Get regular exercise (with a doctor's recommendation).
- Get adequate rest.
- Choose a healthy diet.
- Limit caffeine intake.
- Eliminate drug and/or alcohol abuse.
- Do volunteer work.
- Enhance your spiritual awareness.
- Reduce violent TV programming.
- Keep an anger journal.
- Identify where in your body you feel your response to anger or stress.
- Explore how anger was expressed and how others responded to your anger during your childhood.
- Be patient with yourself.

If anger is so bad, you might ask, why do we have that emotion? In a word, survival. Anger signals that something is wrong. It can prompt awareness of potentially harmful situations and help you to protect yourself. But chronic anger can spur negative consequences.

Children, too, can use some of the techniques cited above to control their anger. Be advised, though, the younger the child, the more immature their skills to manage their emotions will be. When responding to an angry child, it's prudent to have age appropriate expectations. For young children, the more basic skills of using their words and employing time-outs can be helpful. Also, help them to label their feelings so they can better understand the feelings associated with anger.

How do you deal with someone else's anger? If you or someone you love is being physically threatened, walk away or call 911. If there's no immediate threat, you might use "I" statements to let the other person know how their anger is affecting you. In many instances, it's expedient to simply give each other time and space to cool down. You can always make an appointment later, when cooler heads prevail, to resolve an issue.

About the Author

Sloane Fabricius is a licensed Marriage Family Therapist and Certified Anger Management Facilitator working in a county setting providing individual therapy to welfare recipients in order to address barriers to employment. Fabricius facilitates parenting, self-esteem and anger management groups. Fabricius also offers individual and family therapy in private practice in Westlake Village, Calif. Learn more about Sloane Fabricius at <http://www.camft.org/Therapists/SloaneFabricius>