

Anger is a normal, human emotion. It's also powerful and unpredictable—ranging in intensity from minor, fleeting annoyance to full-blown, sustained rage. The feelings triggered can be constructive when controlled and expressed effectively, within socially acceptable norms (motivating people to stand up for causes they believe in, for example). But when it spins out of control or isn't adequately addressed, anger can lead to serious problems, such as ruined relationships and careers, as well as property damage and physical harm to others (and self).

WHAT IS ANGER

Anger is a “stress response”—a primitive emotion that evolved as a survival mechanism enabling humans to react quickly to life-threatening situations. During a stress response, the body releases large amounts of the hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline, which in turn trigger a cascade of other chemical, physiologic and behavioral responses that rev up the body for “fight or flight.” Heart rate, blood pressure and respiration (breathing) rates increase, and energy-boosting fats and sugar (glucose) are pumped into the bloodstream. The feelings and behaviors anger evokes are powerful, instinctual, and often aggressive.

Back in the Stone Age, mankind's stressors truly were life-threatening: saber-toothed tigers, the elements, competition for food. Over time, life has become more complicated and human stressors have evolved into just about anything—real or perceived—that threatens a person's emotional or physical well-being and sense of self (ego): financial problems, a perceived insult or disrespect, even a traffic incident.

Despite the proliferation of possible provocations, modern man lives in civilized society where it isn't safe or acceptable to let loose and act out stressful feelings. So how a person handles anger is key to his or her ability to function successfully in today's world.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO ANGER

There are two main ways that people deal with anger—by expressing it or by suppressing it. Expression is the active communication of feelings through actions and behavior. Most people recognize that overexpressing anger usually results in no good, but suppressing it (holding it in, trying to ignore it) can also be harmful. Suppressed anger typically doesn't go away; it manifests itself in indirect ways, or passive-aggressive behavior, such as through malicious jokes, sullenness and resentment.

Besides the damage anger can cause to relationships and other aspects of a person's social interactions, over time, repeated and/or sustained activation of a stress response such as anger may have physical and psychological repercussions. Cardiovascular diseases (hypertension, atherosclerosis) have been linked to the physiological changes that occur during stress. The release of hormones and other chemical changes in the brain can trigger or contribute to mood disorders, anxiety, and even substance abuse problems.

CAUSES OF EXCESSIVE ANGER/WHY RAGE OCCURS

A mix of biological, psychological and social factors are involved in how a person handles anger. These may include genetic predisposition/temperament; underlying feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, insecurity or vulnerability; and learned behavior such as growing up in an environment in which inappropriate outbursts of anger were the norm or, alternatively, in an environment in which feelings were discouraged and suppressed.

TREATING ANGER

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), which classifies mental disorders, includes a diagnosis for intermittent explosive disorder (IED), a behavioral/impulse-control deficit characterized by extreme rage responses out of proportion to the situation. People with IED may lash out physically, as well as verbally, attacking others and their possessions and causing bodily injury and property damage. IED onset typically occurs at 13 in males and 19 in females and may make a person more susceptible to depression and substance abuse disorders.

Anger isn't something that can be "cured," only managed. Even people who seem to keep an even keel aren't free of the emotion—they've simply learned how to manage it effectively. Learning to control anger may take professional help. Group and individual anger/stress management training classes and counseling are available. The most effective approach typically involves cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) which combines cognitive restructuring and coping skills training and psychotherapy. CBT includes:

- Understanding to recognize what anger is (some people are so accustomed to feeling it, that it seems normal)
- Identifying triggers
- Recognizing signs you're becoming angry
- Learning techniques for responding in a controlled, healthy way, including tempering the physical effects through relaxation activities

In cases of IED, medications known to reduce aggression and prevent rage outbursts—certain antidepressants, mood stabilizers and antipsychotics—have sometimes proved helpful.