

# Strategies for Controlling Your Anger

Everybody gets angry, but out-of-control rage isn't good for those around you, and it plays havoc with your own body. Here are some tips to help you 'simmer down.'

## Relaxation

Simple relaxation tools such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery can help calm down angry feelings. If you are involved in a relationship where both partners are hot-tempered, it might be a good idea for both of you to learn these techniques.

Some simple steps you can try:

- Breathe deeply, from your diaphragm. Breathing from your chest won't relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your 'gut.'
- Slowly repeat a calming word or phrase such as 'relax' or 'take it easy.' Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply.
- Use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience from either your memory or your imagination.
- Non-strenuous, slow exercises such as yoga can relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer.

Practice these techniques daily. Learn to use them automatically when you're in a tense situation.

## Cognitive Restructuring

Simply put, this means changing the way you think. Angry people tend to curse, swear, or speak in highly colorful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you're angry, your thinking can get very exaggerated and overly dramatic. Try replacing these thoughts with more reasonable ones. For instance, instead of telling yourself, 'Oh, it's awful, it's terrible, everything's ruined,' tell yourself, 'It's frustrating, and it's understandable that I'm upset about it, but it's not the end of the world and getting angry is not going to fix it anyhow.'

Be careful of words like 'never' or 'always' when talking about yourself or someone else. 'This machine never works,' or 'You're always forgetting things' are not just inaccurate; they also tend to make you feel that your anger is justified and that there's no way to solve the problem. They also alienate and humiliate people who might otherwise be willing to work with you on a solution.

For example, suppose you have a friend who is constantly late when you have made plans to meet. Don't go on the attack; think instead about the goal you want to accomplish--getting you and your friend there at about the same time. Avoid saying things like, 'You're always late! You're the most irresponsible, inconsiderate person I've ever met!' The only goal that accomplishes is hurting and angering your friend.

State what the problem is, and try to find a solution that works for both of you; or take matters into your own

hands. For example, you might set your meeting time a half-hour early, so that your friend will, in fact, get there on time, even if you have to trick him or her into doing it! Either way, the problem is solved and the friendship isn't damaged.

Remind yourself that getting angry is not going to fix anything, that it won't make you feel better (and may actually make you feel worse).

Logic defeats anger, because anger, even when it's justified, can quickly become irrational. So use cold hard logic on yourself. Remind yourself that the world is not 'out to get you,' you're just experiencing some of the rough spots of daily life. Do this each time you feel anger getting the best of you, and it'll help you get a more balanced perspective.

Angry people tend to demand things: fairness, appreciation, agreement, willingness to do things their way. Everyone wants these things, and we are all hurt and disappointed when we don't get them; but angry people demand them, and when their demands aren't met, their disappointment becomes anger. As part of their cognitive restructuring, angry people need to become aware of their demanding nature, and translate their expectations into desires. In other words, saying 'I would like' something is healthier than saying 'I demand' or 'I must have' something. When you're unable to get what you want, you will experience the normal reactions--frustration, disappointment, hurt--but not anger. Some angry people use their anger as a way to avoid feeling hurt, but that doesn't mean the hurt goes away.

### Problem-Solving

Sometimes our anger and frustration are caused by very real and inescapable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it's a healthy, natural response to these difficulties. Some people have a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to their frustration to find out that this isn't always the case. The best attitude to bring such a situation is to focus not on finding the solution but rather on how to handle and face the problem.

Make a plan and check your progress along the way. (People who have trouble with planning might find a good guide to organizing or time management helpful.) Resolve to give it your best, but also not to punish yourself if an answer doesn't come right away. If you can approach it with your best intentions and efforts, and make a serious attempt to face it head-on, you will be less likely to lose patience and fall into all-or-nothing thinking, even if the problem does not get solved right away.

### Better Communication

Angry people tend to jump to--and act on--conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be pretty wild. The first thing to do if you are in a heated discussion is to slow down and think your responses through. Don't say the first thing that comes into your head, but slow down and think carefully about what you want to say. At the same time, listen carefully to what the other person is saying and take your time before answering.

Listen, too, to what underlies the anger. For instance, suppose you like a certain amount of freedom and personal space, and your 'significant other' wants more connection and closeness. If he or she starts complaining about your activities, don't retaliate by painting your partner as a jailer, a warden, or an albatross

around your neck.

It's natural to get defensive when you're criticized, but don't fight back; instead, listen to what lies beneath the words. Perhaps the message is that this person feels neglected and unloved. It may take a lot of patient questioning on your part to uncover this, and it may require some breathing space, but don't let your anger--or a partner's--make a discussion spin out of control. Keeping your cool can keep the situation from becoming disastrous.

### Using Humor

'Silly humor' can help defuse rage in a number of ways. For one thing, it can help you get a more balanced perspective. When you get angry and call someone a name or refer to them in some imaginative phrase, stop and picture what that word would literally look like. If you're at work and you want to call a co-worker a 'dirt-bag' or a 'single-cell life form,' for example, picture a large bag full of dirt, or an amoeba, sitting at your colleague's desk, talking on the phone, and going to meetings. Do this whenever you want to call another person by a rude name. If you can, draw a picture of what the actual thing might look like. This will take a lot of the edge off your fury; and humor can often be relied on to help un-knot a tense situation.

The underlying message of highly angry people is 'Things oughta go my way!' Angry people tend to feel that they are morally correct, that anything blocking or changing their plans is an unbearable indignity that they should NOT have to tolerate. Maybe other people do, but not them.

When you catch yourself feeling that way, picture yourself as a god or goddess, a supreme ruler who owns the streets and stores and office space, striding alone and having your way in all situations while others defer to you. The more detail you can get into your imaginary scenes, the more chance you have to realize that maybe you are being a little unreasonable; you'll also realize how unimportant the things you're angry about really are.

There are two cautions in using humor. First, don't try to just 'laugh off' your problems; rather, use humor to help yourself face them more constructively. Second, don't give in to harsh, sarcastic humor; that's just another form of unhealthy aggression.

What these techniques have in common is a refusal to take yourself too seriously. Anger is a serious emotion, but it's often accompanied by ideas that, if examined, can make you laugh.

### Changing Your Environment

Sometimes it's our immediate surroundings that give us cause for irritation and fury. Problems and responsibilities can weigh on you and make you feel angry at the trap you seem to have fallen into, and all the people and things that form that trap.

Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some 'personal time' scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful. For example, a working mother might make a standing rule that when she comes home from work, the first 15 minutes will be quiet time. With this brief respite, she will feel better prepared to handle demands from her kids without blowing up at them.

Some other tips for easing up:

- Timing. If you and your spouse tend to fight when you discuss things at night--perhaps you're tired, or distracted, or maybe it's just habit--try changing the times when you talk about important matters so these talks don't turn into arguments.
- Avoidance. If you get furious every time you walk by your child's chaotic room, shut the door. Don't make yourself look at what infuriates you. Don't say to yourself, 'Well, my child should clean up the room so I won't have to be angry!' That's not the point. The point is to keep yourself calm.
- Finding alternatives. If your daily commute through traffic leaves you in a state of rage and frustration, give yourself a project. Perhaps you could find a different route, one that's less congested or more scenic. Or find an alternative way to travel, such as taking a bus or commuter train.

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