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# Anger management

## **Angry feelings and aggressive behaviour**

Most of us are aware of feeling angry at times. Anger is a normal emotion and not in itself a problem. Frustration, irritation and annoyance are some of the many different ways of describing the same basic emotion. It is the way in which we express that anger that can become problematic. Learning what anger signifies can help to empower us – to challenge injustice or to make necessary changes in our lives.

People can feel angry for any number of reasons: perceived attacks on their wellbeing, status, rights or apparent unfairness.

## **So when can anger become a problem?**

For some people anger is not a problem - they recognise they feel angry, sort the issue out relatively quickly and then return to their normal state of viewing the world. Anger becomes problematic when it is too easily triggered or too prolonged, and then it impacts on concentration, mood, relationships, self-esteem, work and social life, and can result in aggression or violence to self or others.

For some people, dealing with angry feelings and their possible consequences is more of a problem than the situation that caused them - they try to suppress anger but inevitably allow it out in covert ways. Because of this, they may feel stressed and struggle to cope.

For a few people, anger is present most of the time, constantly re-enforced by negative interpretation of the things that happen to them and always just beneath the surface ready to explode – they feel highly stressed and very easily get themselves into conflict situations, thus continuing to reinforce their negative interpretations.

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## **Anger and change**

Another common situation that can cause angry feelings to become a problem is failure to adapt to a change in our situation, or in someone's attitude towards us. Change can feel unsettling until we have found a way to adapt to it.

### *Impact on our sense of self identity*

In our changed environment, it may not always be easy or possible to match how we see ourselves with the new situation. We may find that attitudes and ways of presenting ourselves that worked well previously don't work in our new setting and we have to find other ways of presenting ourselves and relating to people.

When we encounter a situation that we perceive as threatening, the primitive centres of the brain become aroused that control the release of hormones involved in aggressive responses. These archaic centres don't question the accuracy of our perception - when we are angry, we accept the validity of our feelings. Yet most of us have had the experience of discovering that what motivated our angry feelings was in fact based on a distorted interpretation. However, when angry, it can be difficult to keep a sense of perspective.

Chronic anger can keep us in a state of physical heightened arousal which puts a great strain on our bodies and minds.

## **How you can help yourself**

If you think that you may have a problem recognising, expressing, or controlling your anger, there are some things that you can do to help yourself.

- Try to deal with angry feelings through confronting the source, to effect a change that will reduce your angry feelings without resulting in destructive consequences for others and yourself.
  - This means developing control over your angry responses and not letting them develop into a destructive force.
  - Suppressing and refusing to acknowledge angry feelings does not make them go away.
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- If you are worried by your anger, or some of the things that have happened because of it, you can speak to your college nurse or GP, or to a counsellor.

## *Reframing*

This is the term used to describe the placing of a new frame of reference around your thoughts. Instead of developing negative thoughts and scenarios that fuel your anger, try looking for valid alternative explanations, for example:

*“My friend is usually late, if she really liked and respected me she would not keep me hanging around”* might become: *“This is part of her easy-going nature that I like so much. She is like that with everyone.”*

*“This house is a mess and I’m the only one who cares or does anything about it”* might become: *“Actually, it’s not dirty or unhygienic. It’s just a house where we all have different standards.”*

## *Use the L.I.F.E. model*

- L Listen to the other person attentively and allow them the space to either confirm or modify your frame of reference by feeding back to them what you understand the situation to be.
  - I Use ‘I’ statements and tell the person just what it is that is making you angry, without blaming them and escalating the conflict. For example: “I feel angry when you make arrangements without telling me and expect me to go along or get left behind. I feel as if you have no respect for me.” Rather than ‘You have no respect for me, it’s no wonder I get so angry.”
  - F Allow people the freedom to deal with their problems as they see fit. It’s no good getting cross because they can’t see the wisdom of your approach; it just makes things worse.
  - E Everyone’s a winner! Continue to negotiate until both sides feel they have been heard and have got something out of the situation. Trying to outdo the other person or make them feel a loser is only storing up future trouble.
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The L.I.F.E. model can give you a framework to help you to address things that make you angry quickly without escalating the situation into a conflict. 'Stewing' in your angry feelings, or 'swallowing' them in order to pretend that it doesn't matter, is unlikely to help in the long run.

## **Anger and depression**

Angry outbursts, irritability and developing a short temper can also be symptoms that mask depression. Sometimes when we feel depressed, we feel angry that things are going so wrong for us, angry that we are in so much emotional pain and angry at the seeming hopelessness of our situation. We may struggle showing the helpless vulnerable sides of ourselves. Anger can often feel a more acceptable way to express emotional pain.

The problem is that angry expressions sometimes drive people away and put them off wanting to try to understand the problems we may be facing. We are then left feeling isolated, which can increase our angry feelings and loneliness

## **Where to seek more help**

Counselling can help you to develop new ways of coping with and expressing your angry feelings. Along with individual consultations the service offers groups and workshops throughout the academic year on a range of issues, including assertiveness. You can find out more about these on the service website: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/groups](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/groups)

You can also find information on a range of self-help resources at: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp)

Tel: 01223 332865

Fax: 01223 760990

Email: [counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk)

Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>