

How to cope with anger

Explains anger, giving practical suggestions for what you can do and where you can go for support. Also includes advice for friends and family.

What is Anger?

We all feel angry at times – it's part of being human. Anger is a normal, healthy emotion, which we might experience if we feel:

- attacked
- deceived
- frustrated
- invalidated or unfairly treated

It isn't necessarily a 'bad' emotion; in fact it can sometimes be useful. For example, feeling angry about something can:

- help us identify problems or things that are hurting us
- motivate us to create change, achieve our goals and move on
- help us stay safe and defend ourselves in dangerous situations by giving us a burst of energy as part of our [fight or flight system](#)

Most people will experience episodes of anger which feel manageable and don't have a big impact on their lives. Learning healthy ways to recognise, express and deal with anger is important for our mental and physical health. (Our pages on [managing outbursts](#) and [long-term coping](#) have some tips on how to deal with anger.)

When is anger a problem?

Anger only becomes a problem when it gets out of control and harms you or people around you. This can happen when:

- you regularly express your anger through unhelpful or destructive behaviour
- your anger is having a negative impact on your overall mental and physical health
- anger becomes your go-to emotion, blocking out your ability to feel other emotions
- you haven't developed healthy ways to express your anger
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It feels like there's a ball of fire in the middle of my chest that blurts its way straight out of my mouth and burns the people around me.

What is unhelpful angry behaviour?

How you behave when you're angry depends on how well you're able to identify and cope with your feelings, and how you've learned to express them (see our page on [causes of anger](#) for more information).

Not everyone expresses anger in the same way. For example, some unhelpful ways you may have learned to express anger include:

- **Outward aggression and violence** - such as shouting, swearing, slamming doors, hitting or throwing things and being physically violent or verbally abusive and threatening towards others.
- **Inward aggression** - such as telling yourself that you hate yourself, denying yourself your basic needs (like food, or things that might make you happy), cutting yourself off from the world and [self-harming](#).
- **Non-violent or passive aggression** - such as ignoring people or refusing to speak to them, refusing to do tasks, or deliberately doing things poorly, late or at the last possible minute, and being sarcastic or sulky while not saying anything explicitly aggressive or angry.

My brain goes blank and I absent-mindedly release my anger through physical violence towards myself or objects around me. I don't realise how destructive I've been until immediately afterwards.

If you find you express your anger through outward aggression and violence, this can be extremely frightening and damaging for people around you - especially children. And it can have serious consequences: it could mean you lose your family, job and get into trouble with the law. In this case it's very important to seek [treatment and support](#).

But even if you're never outwardly violent or aggressive towards others, and never even raise your voice, you might still recognise some of these angry behaviours and feel that they're a problem for you. For example, you turn your anger inwards and [self-harm](#) or deny yourself [food](#).

I internalise anger and punish myself by self-harm.

Anger Symptoms

What does anger feel like?

Anger feels different for everyone. You might experience some of the things listed below, and you might also have other experiences or difficulties that aren't listed here.

Effects on your body

- a churning feeling in your stomach
- tightness in your chest
- an increased and rapid heartbeat

- legs go weak
- tense muscles
- you feel hot
- you have an urge to go to the toilet
- sweating, especially your palms
- a pounding head
- shaking or trembling
- dizziness

Effects on your mind

- feeling **tense, nervous or unable to relax**
- feeling guilty
- feeling resentful towards other people or situations
- you are easily irritated
- 'red mist' comes down on you
- feeling humiliated

Recognising these signs gives you the chance to think about how you want to react to a situation before doing anything. This can be difficult in the heat of the moment, but the earlier you notice how you're feeling, the easier it can be to choose how to express and manage your anger.

The best advice I was given was to stop briefly once I am angry to ask myself what painful emotion I am feeling in the situation where I became angry. A bit of compassion for my own pain often stops me from taking that pain out on others.

Causes of Anger

Why do I get angry?

Feelings of anger arise due to how we interpret and react to certain situations. Everyone has their own triggers for what makes them angry, but some common ones include situations in which we feel:

- threatened or attacked
- frustrated or powerless
- like we're being invalidated or treated unfairly
- like people are not respecting our feelings or possessions

People can interpret situations differently, so a situation that makes you feel very angry may not make someone else feel angry at all (for example, other reactions could include annoyance, hurt or amusement). But just because we can interpret things differently, it doesn't mean that you're interpreting things 'wrong' if you get angry.

How you interpret and react to a situation can depend on lots of factors in your life, including:

- [your childhood and upbringing](#)
- [past experiences](#)
- [current circumstances](#)

Whether your anger is about something that happened in the past or something that's going on right now, thinking about how and why we interpret and react to situations can help us learn how to cope with our emotions better. It can also help us find productive strategies to handle our anger.

(See our page on [managing outbursts](#) for more information.)

Your childhood and upbringing

How we learn to cope with angry feelings is often influenced by our upbringing. Many people are given messages about anger as children that may make it harder to manage it as an adult. For example:

- **You may have grown up thinking that it's always okay to act out your anger aggressively or violently**, and so you didn't learn how to understand and manage your angry feelings. This could mean you have angry outbursts whenever you don't like the way someone is behaving, or whenever you are in a situation you don't like.
- **You may have been brought up to believe that you shouldn't complain**, and may have been punished for expressing anger as a child. This could mean that you tend to suppress your anger and it becomes a long-term problem, where you react inappropriately to new situations you're not comfortable with. If you don't feel you can release your anger in a healthy way, you might also turn this **inwards on yourself**.
- **You may have witnessed your parents' or other adults' anger when it was out of control**, and learned to think of anger as something that is destructive and terrifying. This could mean that you now feel afraid of your own anger and don't feel safe expressing your feelings when something makes you angry. Those feelings might then surface at another unconnected time, which may feel hard to explain.
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Past experiences

If you've experienced particular situations in the past that made you feel angry, such as [abuse](#), trauma or bullying (either as a child or more recently as an adult), and you weren't able to safely express your anger at the time, you might still be coping with those angry feelings now.

This might mean that you now find certain situations particularly challenging, and more likely to make you angry.

Sometimes your present feeling of anger may not only be about the current situation but may also be related to a past experience, which can mean that the anger you are feeling in the present is at a level that reflects your past situation.

Becoming aware of this can help us to find ways of responding to situations in the present in a safer and less distressed way.

Current circumstances

If you're dealing with a lot of other problems in your life right now, you might find yourself feeling angry more easily than usual, or getting angry at unrelated things.

If there's a particular situation that's making you feel angry, but you don't feel able to express your anger directly or resolve it, then you might find you express that anger at other times.

Anger can also be a part of grief. If you've lost someone important to you, it can be hugely difficult to cope with all the conflicting things you might be feeling. [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) can offer support and information in this situation.

(For more information on organisations that can help with your anger see our page on [useful contacts](#).)

Breathing techniques have helped me to control my anger. I know that if I take a moment to concentrate on my breathing and not my anger, I'll have something else to focus on.

Managing Outbursts

What can I do to manage my anger?

It can be frightening when your anger overwhelms you. But there are ways you can learn to manage your anger when you find yourself in difficult situations. You can:

- [look out for warning signs](#)
- [buy yourself time to think](#)
- [try some calming techniques](#)

Remember: if your outbursts can be violent or abusive this can cause serious problems in your life and relationships, and can be very damaging to the people around you. In this case, it's essential to seek professional [treatment and support](#) for your anger.

Look out for warning signs

Anger can cause a rush of adrenaline through your body, so before you recognise the emotion you're feeling you might notice:

- your heart is beating faster
- your breathing is quicker
- your body is becoming tense
- your feet are tapping
- you're clenching your jaw or fists

[Recognising these signs](#) gives you the chance to think about how you want to react to a situation before doing anything. This can be difficult in the heat of the moment, but the earlier you notice how you're feeling, the easier it can be to choose how to manage your anger.

Breathing techniques have helped me to control my anger. I know that if I take a moment to concentrate on my breathing and not my anger, I'll have something else to focus on.

Buy yourself time to think

Sometimes when we're feeling angry, we just need to walk away from the situation for a while. This can give you time to work out what you're thinking about the situation, decide how you want to react to it and feel more in control. Some ways you can buy yourself time to think are:

- Counting to 10 before you react.
- Taking yourself out of the situation by going for a short walk – even if it's just around your block or local area.
- Talking to a trusted person who's not connected to the situation, such as a friend, family member, counsellor or peer support group. Expressing your thoughts out loud can help you understand why you're angry and help calm you down. If you don't feel comfortable talking to someone you know, you can confidentially call the [Samaritans](#) 24 hours a day to talk about anything that's upsetting you. (For other organisations that can help please see our [useful contacts](#) page.)

What helps me is getting away from the situation to cool down.

Try some techniques to manage your feelings

There are many ways to calm down and let go of angry feelings, depending on what suits you and what's convenient at the time you are angry.

- **Breathe slowly** – try to breathe out for longer than you breathe in and focus on each breath as you take it.
- **Relax your body** – if you can feel your body getting tense, try focusing on each part of your body in turn to tense and then relax your muscles. (See our pages on [relaxation](#) for more tips on how to relax.)
- **Try mindfulness techniques** – mindfulness can help you to be aware of when you're getting angry and can help calm your body and mind down. [Be Mindful](#) has more information on mindfulness and guidance on how to practice it. (See our information on [mindfulness](#) to learn more.)
- **Exercise** – try to work off your anger through exercise. Sports like running or boxing can be really helpful for releasing pent up energy.
- **Use up your energy safely in other ways** – this can help relieve some of your angry feelings in a way that doesn't hurt yourself or others. For example, you could try tearing up a newspaper, hitting a pillow or smashing ice cubes in a sink.
- **Do something to distract yourself mentally or physically** – anything that completely changes your situation, thoughts or patterns can help stop your anger escalating. For example, you could try:
 - putting on upbeat music and dancing
 - doing something with your hands, like fixing something or making something
 - doing something creative like colouring or drawing
 - writing in a journal
 - taking a cold shower

Long Term Coping

How can I control my anger long term?

If you think about how to manage your anger when you're feeling calmer, you can avoid feeling overwhelmed by it in the heat of the moment. In particular, you can:

- [learn your triggers](#)
- [examine your thought patterns](#)
- [develop your communication skills](#)
- [look at your lifestyle](#)

Learn your triggers

Understanding what sort of situations trigger your anger means you can develop strategies to cope and think about how to react before the situation happens. You might find it helpful to keep a diary or make notes about the times you have felt angry. You could record:

- What were the circumstances?
- Did someone say or do something to trigger your anger?
- How did you feel?
- How did you behave?
- How did you feel afterwards?

If you do this for a while, you might start to see patterns emerging. You could do this yourself using a mood diary (many are available online for free, see our [useful contacts page](#) for suggestions), or you could find a professional therapist to help you – see our page on [treatment and support](#).

Over time I have been able to spot certain triggers, which then enables me to look at myself and choose a healthier path.

Examine your thought patterns

If you're feeling upset or angry, you might find yourself automatically thinking or saying things like:

- "This is all their fault."
- "They never listen."
- "This always happens to me."
- "Other people should behave better."

But often there are lots of different ways we could interpret a situation. It can make you feel worse if you think in terms of 'always', 'never' and 'should', because in reality things are rarely so black and white. Making an effort to replace these words with softer terms like 'sometimes' or 'could' when thinking about your situation might help you to break up negative thought patterns, reflect more calmly on your situation and find new ways through conflicts.

The best advice I was given was to stop briefly once I am angry to ask myself what painful emotion I am feeling in the situation where I became angry. A bit of compassion for my own pain often stops me from taking that pain out on others.

Develop your communication skills

Being excessively angry and aggressive can get in the way of communicating your feelings and thoughts effectively. People may focus on your anger, and find it hard to listen to what you're saying. On the other hand, if you are able to express your anger by talking in an assertive, respectful way about what has made you angry, then you're more likely to be understood by others.

Being assertive means standing up for yourself while still respecting other people and their opinions. It can:

- make communication easier
- stop tense situations getting out of control
- benefit your relationships and self-esteem

Learning to be assertive might not feel easy to start with, but here are some things to try:

- **Think about the outcome you want to achieve.** What's making you angry, and what do you want to change? Is it enough just to explain what you are angry about?

- **Be specific.** For example, you could open your statement with, “I feel angry with you because...” Using the phrase ‘I feel’ avoids blaming anyone and the other person is less likely to feel attacked.
- **Really listen to the other person's response** and try to understand their point of view.
- **Be prepared for the conversation to go wrong** and try to spot when this is happening. If you feel yourself getting angry, you might want to come back to the conversation another time.

The organisation MindTools provides [tips on respectful assertiveness](#) on their website.

What helps me is acknowledging how I'm feeling and why, then taking time to address it productively.

Look at your lifestyle

Looking after your wellbeing more generally could help you feel calmer and more in control when things happen that make you feel angry. You might want to:

- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** Although you might feel this could help you cope in the short term, alcohol and drugs can both affect your ability to control your emotions and actions, and can be a factor in violence. For information and support to stop using drugs or alcohol you can contact [Turning Point](#) or [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). See our pages on the [mental health effects of alcohol and street drugs](#) for more information.
- **Be more active.** Being active can help let out any tension you're feeling, as well as having benefits to your self-esteem. Even gentle exercise like going for a walk can make a difference. See our pages on [exercise](#) for more information.
- **Get good sleep.** Not sleeping well can have a huge impact on how we're feeling, and how well we cope with things that happen to us. See our pages on [sleep problems](#) for more information.
- **Look at what you're eating and drinking.** See our pages on [food and mood](#) for more information.
- **Learn to deal with pressure.** We can feel pressured or stressed for lots of different reasons, but taking some time to learn how to deal with pressure can help us feel more in control of difficult situations. See our page on [dealing with pressure](#) for more information.
- **Develop your emotional resilience.** Emotional resilience helps us feel more able to handle difficult emotions. See our page on [developing resilience](#) for more information.
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Exercise is the best thing to manage my anger. It transforms my mood!

Treatment and Support

What help is available?

There are various treatments available that can help you with your anger problems. This page covers:

- [talking therapy and counselling](#)
- [anger management programmes](#)
- [help for abusive and violent behaviour](#)

If your difficulties with anger are related to a [mental health problem](#) and/or traumatic experiences then you might find that treatment and support for this also addresses your anger. (See our [A-Z of mental health](#) for information on treatments and support for different diagnoses and experiences).

Talking therapy and counselling

[Talking therapy and counselling](#) involves talking about your problems with a trained professional (such as a counsellor or psychotherapist) who can help you explore the causes of your anger and ways to manage it. This can help you work through your feelings and improve your responses to situations that make you angry.

There are different types of talking therapies, and some are specifically tailored to anger issues.

- [Counselling](#) is usually a short-term treatment where you might talk through a specific issue – such as outbursts of anger with your partner or in the workplace – and try to understand how you could manage those situations differently. Some workplaces, higher education institutions, local charities and GP surgeries offer free or low-cost counselling services to their employees, students or local residents.
- [Psychotherapy](#) often lasts longer than counselling and tends to go deeper into past experiences. Your focus here may be on learning more about yourself to help you understand why you express your anger the way you do, or why certain situations make you angry.
- [Cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) is highly structured short-term talking therapy that examines how your thoughts, feelings and behaviours affect each other, and aims to teach you practical skills to change this. CBT is the most commonly offered talking treatment on the NHS. You could also try to learn CBT techniques by yourself through accessing self-help books from your local library, or online through free apps.

the first step is usually to talk to your GP.

Talking, talking, talking over many years has helped immensely. Now I don't bottle it all up inside.