

# Managing Anger (Before it Manages You!)

By Tammy Fletcher, LMFT

Anger is a normal, human emotion. Nearly everyone feels angry from time to time, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Anger can actually have its positive side. Anger can alert you that something is wrong, or needs to be changed. When channeled properly, anger can motivate you to work harder and accomplish your goals. Anger, by itself, is not automatically bad or good. It's what we do with it that matters. Uncontrolled anger can be harmful to your relationships, your job, and your health. Learning to manage anger before it manages you can lead to a more healthy lifestyle. This article will help you get started.

Let's start by exploring what can be good about healthy anger. Anger is a natural emotion that is designed for your protection. It's a response that people have when they feel threatened or wronged in some way. Anger is an energizing emotion that you can use for good, healthy purposes. It can let you know that a change needs to be made, or that your needs are not being met.

Okay, so that's what can be good about healthy anger. What's the difference between healthy and unhealthy anger?

First, unhealthy anger is chronic. It's always there. Have you seen someone you would describe as "having a chip on their shoulder"? That's what I mean by chronic anger. It's like being a time bomb, always headed for the next trigger. You may feel you need to walk on eggshells around someone with chronic anger.

Second, any type of violence is unhealthy – whether breaking things, putting your fist through the wall, or putting your hands on another person in anger – always inappropriate, and a sign that anger is playing a destructive role in your life. In these cases I recommend the steps below to begin to dial it down, but I also suggest seeing a professional for support as you tackle the role of violence in your life. This would also be true if you are self-medicating your angry feelings with drugs or alcohol.

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What are some specific steps you can take when you feel angry?

There are usually physical signs that come along with feeling very angry. Become aware of yours. Do you tighten your jaw, clench your fists, or feel your heart racing? Once you become aware of your own particular signs, you can engage your brain and respond to the situation appropriately.

Next, become aware of your thoughts. What comes up when you are feeling angry? What are you telling yourself? This isn't fair, I can't take this, I hate my co-worker, are some typical thoughts. If these kinds of thoughts keep repeating, and they never move toward resolution or change of what is making you angry, they can actually add a lot more fuel to the fire, making you angrier and angrier. On the other hand, you can change those thoughts to ones like "I am feeling angry, but I can handle this." You can talk yourself through it.

-Choose your battles. This can be particularly helpful if you find yourself angry much of the time. Is the situation worth the emotional, mental, and physical stress of anger? Will being angry help the situation, or is there something else you can try?

-Walk away before a situation escalates. Count 10 breaths. The reasons for counting your breaths

are: 1) to calm and relax you by breathing more deeply and 2) to pause for a few moments instead of reacting automatically.

-Sometimes, getting the anger out can help. Write about it. Get your feelings and thoughts out on paper instead of confronting the source of your anger right away. Talk to someone who you are not feeling angry with. Phone a friend, relative, or professional. Tell them about what happened and how you are feeling.

This can be a double-edged sword, though. Venting can easily become a habit and even a lifestyle. Do you know someone who seems to always spend every conversation complaining or raging about things they are mad about, and how unfair life is? They never seem to work through it to the other side? That's not helpful for them, and certainly not for you. So expressing yourself is fine, as long as it goes hand in hand with taking real steps to make a frustrating situation better.

-Distract yourself. Do something you enjoy, like exercise, reading, TV, music, games, going to the store, cooking a meal.... and take your mind off the anger. Come back and deal with it when you are feeling calmer.

-Step away from the situation, and come back later. This will give you a chance to respond more positively.

-Finally, if there is a specific situation that continually makes you angry, what can you do to change it? Sometimes we can get so caught up in what's wrong with a person or a situation, we forget that in some cases we have the option to make it better. So in this respect, anger can be used as the fuel to make your life better.

We don't want to eliminate anger from your life – people feel angry sometimes, even good people. ☺ The goal is to allow you to respond, rather than react. Responding means your brain is engaged, you are thinking clearly about what you are experiencing – rather than reacting out of reflex. The more practice you get at responding in positive ways, waiting until the anger decreases enough so that you can respond, and learning new habits, the more easily you will be able to manage anger – before anger manages you.

### **About the Author**

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