

Healthy Ways to Manage Your Anger



If anger becomes the way you usually respond to stress, it can have long-term negative effects on you and others.

Everyone gets angry sometimes. Anger isn't "good" or "bad." You should not feel bad about feeling it. The key is to notice what you are really angry about and then find healthy ways to express it. Understanding your anger and using new ways to deal with problems and stress can make a big difference in your life.

Why do you feel so angry?

Anger can become a habit. It may become the main way that you deal with problems and stress. It is something you may have learned very early in life to help you deal with pain, hurt, and helplessness, or to get people to pay attention to your needs.

Most of us know what makes us feel angry. Things that make you angry may include problems at work or school, stress, traffic jams, money worries, and relationship conflicts.

What happens when you get angry in an unhealthy way?

Some people think that holding back anger is bad, but "blowing off steam" may be even worse. When you get angry, your body starts a "stress response."

Physical symptoms of this response include:

- Your heart beats faster.
- Blood flows more quickly through your body.
- Your muscles get tense.

If anger becomes the way you usually respond to stress, it can lead to health problems. Getting angry a lot can lead to heart disease and other conditions, like back pain and ulcers.

Anger can also affect your relationships with others and how you feel about yourself. When you use anger to feel powerful or in control, people around you may get upset or fearful and begin to avoid you. If this continues, over time you may start to feel isolated and depressed. Sometimes people who overuse anger to cope with stressful feelings turn to drug and alcohol use to feel better.

Learning to manage your anger in a healthy way will help you get along better with others as well as take better care of yourself.

What should you do when you begin to feel angry?

- **Take a time-out.** People get angry when they think that a person or situation is threatening them, or that they may be hurt or harmed in some way. Sometimes we may think that another person has wronged us, and that makes us angry. On reflection, these thoughts often turn out to be either false or only a little bit true. When you start to think angry thoughts, allow yourself to stop and take a "time-out." The first step in controlling anger is to identify what your anger is really about and then to notice the thoughts that come with it.
- **Become aware of the warning signs.** Check in with your body. If you feel your heart beating faster or your fists clenching, these are important signals. Notice your negative thoughts. These warning signs are often followed by aggressive or harmful behavior, including yelling, hitting, or throwing things.
- **Try deep breathing.** Slow, deep breathing is a good way to cool off and relax. Inhale as deeply as you can through your nose, expanding

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your stomach and chest. Then exhale through your mouth. Do this breathing exercise for a couple of minutes when you first start to feel angry. Try to practice it several times a day.

Breathing exercises can be a powerful tool in keeping your anger in check and in helping you to see a new point-of-view.

Other healthy ways to express and manage anger

- **Talk about how you feel.** Say things clearly, calmly, and directly without attacking the other person with words or actions. Talk about how you feel about the situation. Use “I statements,” such as “I feel...” or “I think ...” or “I want ...,” to describe your own reaction rather than blaming the person. It will help them understand what you need from them. People usually respond better when they hear you speak with a calm voice.
- **Name the problem.** Explain why you are angry. Don’t yell, use insults, or make threats. If you use “I statements” and remain calm, you may be surprised at the way the other person responds.
- **Listen to the other person.** Allow the other person to say what they want and to talk about their feelings and needs.
- **Talk about solutions.** Say what you would like to change or what you want to see happen in the future. If you’re having a problem with another person, try to find a solution together.
- **Exercise.** Walking, jogging, swimming, or bicycling are good and natural ways to reduce stress and anger. Exercise releases chemicals in the brain that will help you relax. Also, exercise usually takes you away from a stressful situation, gives you time to think, and helps you have more energy.
- **Be good to yourself.** Get enough sleep each night and do not use drugs or alcohol to solve your problems. Find healthy ways to manage stress—perhaps watch a favorite movie, read a good book, or take a bubble bath or hot shower.
- **Get help if you need it.** Talk with a trusted family member or friend. You may want to see a counselor or other health care professional. Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department for information on anger management books, videos, and classes.

Call Kaiser Permanente if . . .

- You are concerned that anger may cause you to hurt yourself or others.
- Your anger is causing serious problems at work, at school, or at home.

Other Resources

- Visit your physician’s home page at kp.org/mydoctor.
If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233, or connect to ndvh.org.

Books

- *When Anger Hurts: Quietening the Storm Within* by Matthew McKay, Peter Rogers, and Judith McKay (New Harbinger, 2003).
- *Anger at Work: Learning the Art of Anger Management on the Job* (by Hendrie Weisinger (William Morrow, 1995).
- *The Anger Control Workbook* by Matthew McKay and Peter Rogers (New Harbinger, 2000).

Websites

- Kaiser Permanente Mind/Body Featured Health Topic kp.org/mindbody
- Kaiser Permanente Depression Guide kp.org/depression