

Chapter 7

Managing Conflict

Lesson 1

Managing Anger (Emotional Intelligence Program)



Key Terms

anger management
aggression
assertion
change orientation
deference
empathy

What You Will Learn to Do

- Apply anger management strategies

Linked Core Abilities

- Take responsibility for your actions and choices
- Treat self and others with respect

Skills and Knowledge You Will Gain Along the Way

- Determine the common causes and effects of anger in interpersonal relationships
- Select strategies for controlling anger
- Explain the role of empathy in reducing anger
- Define the key words contained in this lesson

Key Note Term

aggression – a tendency to be hostile or quarrelsome

Introduction

At some point in life, every human being feels angry. Anger is usually a healthy and normal emotion, but for some it can get out of control and become destructive. Uncontrolled anger can lead to failed relationships, loss of employment, and physical illness. It can also cause hurt feelings, frustration, annoyance, harassment, **aggression**, disappointment, and threats. This lesson is designed to help you understand the nature of anger, and how to manage it.

Understanding What Causes Anger

According to Dr. Charles Spielberger, anger can be explained and defined as “an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage.” Similar to other emotions, anger is usually accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. Other physical symptoms of anger can include the following:

- **Headaches**
- **Gastrointestinal disorders**
- **Respiratory disorders**
- **Skin disorders**
- **Disabilities of the nervous system**
- **Circulatory disorders**
- **Aggravation of existing physical symptoms**
- **Emotional disturbances**
- **Suicide**

Note

Dr. Charles Spielberger is a leading researcher in the link between anger and heart failure. He is a recipient of the APA Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Applied Psychology as a Professional Practice. Dr. Spielberger is currently on staff at the University of South Florida.

Anger can be triggered by external or internal events. For example, you could get angry at a fellow student or supervisor, or at being in the slow line at the grocery store. Memories of traumatic or enraging events can also trigger angry feelings.

Expressing Anger

For many, the natural way to express anger is to respond in an aggressive manner. Anger is an adaptive response to threats that can inspire powerful, often aggressive, feelings and behaviors. These feelings allow humans to fight and to defend themselves when attacked. When faced with survival, a certain amount of anger is healthy and necessary; however, lashing out at nearly every person or event that causes you to feel angry isn't appropriate or productive.

The three main approaches to managing anger are expressing, suppressing, and calming. Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive—not aggressive—manner is the healthiest way. To do this, you have to learn how to make clear what your needs are and how to get them met without emotionally or physically hurting others. Being assertive doesn't mean being pushy or demanding; it means being respectful of yourself and others.

Unexpressed anger can create other serious problems. It can lead to pathological expressions of anger, such as passive-aggressive behavior (getting back at people indirectly without telling them why, rather than confronting them) or a personality that seems cynical and hostile. People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to constructively express their anger.

Anger can be suppressed and then converted or redirected. This happens when you hold in your anger, stop thinking about it, and focus on something positive. The aim is to inhibit or suppress your anger and convert it into more constructive behavior. The danger in this type of response is that if it isn't allowed outward expression, your anger can turn inward—on yourself. Anger turned inward may cause hypertension, high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression.

Another method for controlling anger is to calm yourself down inside. This means not just controlling your outward behavior but also controlling your internal responses, such as taking steps to lower your heart rate, calming yourself down, and letting your feelings subside.

Anger Management

Anger management reduces your emotional feelings and the physiological changes that anger causes. You can't get rid of, or avoid, the events, objects, or people that make you angry, nor can you change them; however, you can learn to control your reactions to them.

Anger is normal, and a universal emotion that everyone experiences from time to time. When you are angry, you experience strong feelings that can propel you into inappropriate or destructive behavior. Anger, if left unchecked, can easily spiral out of control and lead to violence. The people in Figure 7.1.1 can easily become destructive if their emotions are not managed.

Key Note Term

anger management – learning to control and manage the emotion of anger; managing your anger so it comes out in a healthy and constructive way

Your response to anger, however, is completely within your control. Mastering the techniques of anger management will help you keep calm in a tense situation and avoid violence.

Anger management skills must be practiced throughout your lifetime. After you have gained control over your anger, you can work toward resolving conflict in a nonviolent way.

What Makes People Angry

You probably have met someone who is more “hotheaded” than others. This person gets angry more easily than others, and is more intense than the average person. There are also those who don’t show their anger by raising their voice but are irritable and grumpy. Easily angered people don’t always yell and throw things; sometimes they withdraw socially, sulk, or get physically ill. People who are easily angered can’t take things in stride, and they’re particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust, such as being corrected for a minor mistake.

So why do some people get angrier than others? Genetics might have something to do with it. There is evidence that some children are born irritable, touchy, and easily angered, and that these signs are present from a very early age. Another reason may be sociocultural, where anger is looked at as a negative emotion. Those who aren’t taught that it’s perfectly normal to express anger in a healthy way don’t learn how to handle it or channel it constructively.

To deal with and manage anger, it’s best to find out what triggers angry feelings and then to develop strategies to keep those triggers from tipping you over the edge.

Strategies for Managing Anger

There are several ways that you can manage your anger and express it in a positive and constructive manner and end up with the results you want. These strategies include learning to relax, changing the way you think, solving problems, and learning to communicate better. The following sections cover these strategies.

Figure 7.1.1: Anger can be either a constructive or destructive emotion.

Courtesy of Donna Binder/Impact Visuals.



Using Relaxation to Manage Anger

Relaxation techniques can include deep breathing and relaxation imagery. It can help to breathe deeply from your diaphragm while slowly repeating to yourself a calming word or phrase such as “easy does it” or “relax.” You can also use relaxation imagery, such as using a soothing experience from your memory to calm yourself down. Try to imagine a calming picture in your head—maybe a day at a beach or listening to your favorite music—to help get your emotions under control. Learn to use these techniques whenever you’re in a stressful or tense situation.

Changing Your Thinking

As a general rule, angry people swear or speak in highly colorful terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you’re angry, your thinking can become exaggerated and dramatic, and you may tend to see situations as absolutes. Try to avoid using words such as *never* or *always* when talking about yourself, someone else, or a specific situation. Instead of thinking that the situation is terrible and your life is ruined, try telling yourself that the situation is annoying, but it’s not the end of the world. Keep in the front of your mind that getting angry is not going to fix anything, that it won’t make you feel better, and that it may actually make you feel worse.

Change Orientation

Change orientation is a reflection of your level of satisfaction with your current behavior. Your view of how satisfied you are with yourself and the world around you is an important starting point for planning personal change. To engage in personal change and get your anger under control, you need to understand personal change, feel good about making personal changes, and choose healthy ways to make those changes. Some areas of self-reflection include the following:

- **How you feel about yourself as a person**
- **How you relate to your family**
- **If you are satisfied with the way you manage your time**
- **If you are satisfied with your leadership ability**
- **If you are satisfied with the way you handle personal relationships**
- **If you are satisfied with the way you relate to people**

Change orientation can be a tremendous tool in converting powerful emotions into positive change.

Solving Problems

Sometimes anger and frustration are caused by real problems; not all anger is misplaced, and is often a healthy, natural response to difficulties. Many people believe that every problem has a solution, and it can add to your frustration to find out that this isn’t always true. In situations that seem unsolvable, the best attitude to bring is not to focus on finding the solution but rather on how you handle and face the problem.

Key Note Term

change orientation – a reflection of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current emotional skills and abilities

Key Note Term

deference – the degree to which a person uses a communication style or pattern that is indirect and effectual for accurate expression of thought and feeling

Key Note Term

assertion – the ability to clearly communicate personal thoughts and feelings

Make a plan and check your progress along the way. Resolve to give it your best but do not punish yourself if an answer doesn't come right away. If you can approach a problem 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.

Learning to Communicate and Listen Better

Deference is the degree to which an individual employs a communication style or pattern that is indirect, self-inhibiting, self-denying, and ineffectual for the accurate expression of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. It is reflected by communications that are indirect or that convey unclear or mixed messages. Deference can result in effective communications that negatively affect relationships.

Deferential behavior may actually make people angry at times because deference frequently masks suppressed anger or rage. People who are aware of their emotional states recognize anger and use positive self-assertion to negotiate the outcomes they seek. Sometimes deference is just good common sense, such as when you defer to an angry cop. But oftentimes deference takes the place of healthy self-assertion and ends up triggering more inner anger.

When communicating anger, **assertion** is key. Assertive communication is a positive way of talking with people and clearly expressing thoughts and feelings in a way that promotes understanding, caring, and respect. A person who communicates assertively respects the right of others. It enables a person to communicate effectively, even during difficult situations that involve strong and intense emotions. Do you feel that assertive communications might resolve the conflict exhibited in Figure 7.1.2?

When you're confronted with an angry person in a heated discussion, slow down and think through your responses. Don't say the first thing that comes into your

Figure 7.1.2: Fighting is not a constructive way to deal with anger. What other methods of handling anger work for you?

Courtesy of Barbara Burnes/Photo Researchers.



head; rather, 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.

Phrase your responses in as much of a calm and nonthreatening manner as possible. Try to keep from becoming defensive and saying something that will cause the situation to escalate. Many times, if you show **empathy** toward an angry person's concern, that is listening carefully and sharing in that person's feelings, you can help to calm that person and get a volatile situation under control. By remaining calm and staying focused on what you're hearing as well as how you want to respond, you can manage an angry situation much better than just flying off the handle. The following is a quick reference for anger management techniques.

- **Take time to calm down. You need to maintain emotional control to communicate in a calm, even tone. Yelling and insulting will only serve to worsen the situation.**
- **Identify the source of your anger and know what triggers it.**
- **Use words to describe your needs and explain your feelings.**
- **Turn your anger into energy. You could exercise vigorously, write down what is making you angry, daydream about things that make you happy, do something useful for yourself or for someone else, pound or yell into a pillow, or blow up a balloon. Keep a list of the activities that you can do at different times so you do not have to think about what to do when you become angry.**
- **Share your angry feelings with a friend, teacher, parent, coach, counselor, or clergy. This always proves to be an excellent antidote.**

Getting Help

Did you get a payoff the last time you got angry? Did other people give you what you wanted because you were louder, tougher, stronger, and could intimidate them? This question reflects your character and self esteem: "I feel good about making others give in to me by becoming angry."

If you feel that your anger is out of control or you can't figure out where your anger comes from, you might consider counseling to learn how to handle it better. A psychologist or other licensed mental health professional can work with you to develop a range of techniques for changing your thinking and your behavior. Tell a counselor, social worker, or therapist that you have problems with anger; you want to work on getting this emotion under control, and ask about an approach to anger management.

Key Note Term

empathy – the ability to accurately understand and constructively respond to the expressed feelings, thought, behaviors, and needs of others

Conclusion

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion, and it needs to be expressed. Learning how to constructively express anger and how to manage it is a skill that will benefit you throughout your entire life. You can use a variety of techniques covered in this lesson, from relaxation to better communications; but if these methods don't work for you, counseling is a good and healthy option.

In the following lesson, you will learn how to incorporate the skills you learned here when dealing with diversity and resolving conflict.

Lesson Review

1. What physical and biological changes occur in the body when you get angry?
2. Choose a relaxation technique and explain it.
3. How can thinking about what you want to say in a heated discussion help to keep the situation under control?
4. Have you ever been in a situation that has gotten out of hand due to anger? What did you do? How did you handle this?