



Anger Management

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Why are you doing this course? What do you want to achieve?
How would you like to be feeling, thinking and behaving?
What effect would it have on your life if you achieved this goal?
Try and be as specific as possible.

What is anger?

At a physiological level, anger is a rush of adrenaline to ready us to fight. We are animals, after all. It's a reflex triggered by anything our brain perceives as threatening...but what we perceive as threatening is very personal and depends on our prior experiences. And whether that initial reaction rapidly fades away or becomes a prolonged emotional experience depends on our thoughts about the initial trigger. More on that later...

Parent, Adult, Child Ego States

Our personalities are made up of many sub-parts. And it may be that we can control our emotions and use them effectively most of the time. But, in certain situations it's 'as if we were someone else'. This happens to everyone from time to time, and is entirely normal.

In Transactional Analysis, the personality is considered to consist of three parts.

P - our Parent ego states, where we think, feel and behave just like a parent or other important adult in our childhood. For example, if you find yourself sounding 'just like mum'.

A - our Adult Ego state, where our thinking feeling and behaviour are in response to what is happening here and now, and we have access to all the knowledge, experience and wisdom of our current selves



C - our Child ego states, where we feel, think and behave just like we did at a certain age. So, when you buy an ice cream and race your friend to the swings, elbowing him out of the way to get the best seat, and crowing with delight when you do so- you are in a Child ego state!

So, it may be that in our Adult ego state we are rational and level headed and have a calm professional demeanour. But maybe a particular person knows how to push our buttons, triggering us into a childlike rage, or a sarcastic, critical outburst reminiscent of one of our parents.

So, handling your anger might mean you need to think about how anger was expressed in your family when you were growing up. This can be difficult to do by yourself, so if anger is an issue for you, I would certainly recommend you consider getting some professional help. There are useful links at the end of this talk.

Because we have these Parent, Adult and Child ego states which are part of our personality, sometimes we can be triggered into behaving like someone else- or ourselves as young children. It's entirely normal, and happens to all of us. Retaining full Adult control of ourselves all of the time is actually very very rare. And there is a good reason for this too.

Our brains have evolved to do things on autopilot. That's why you don't need to think about how to drive your car, or ride a bike. This is a way of coping with the completely overwhelming complexity of the world. We automate behaviours and respond automatically to certain stimuli.

Take a few minutes to think about times when you've been angry in last week or two. Can you identify familiar Child or Parent thoughts, feelings and behaviours?

Emotional reactions in our brain are mediated via the amygdala, a walnut sized structure in the midbrain, near the brainstem. It's an evolutionarily ancient system, which we share with many simpler creatures, and it's designed to protect us from threat. So, if you've never found yourself slamming on the brakes in your car before you've even noticed the car in front has its brake lights on, your amygdala has saved you. It detects threat and makes the body act before the incoming sensory signal has even had time to reach the parts of our brain that deal with conscious thought.

So, when we get angry, there is the following chain of command at work:

Stimulus → Response → Conscious thought → Positive or negative feedback to amygdala → further response



But if the initial stimulus has shifted us into a Child or Parent ego state, we may well be thinking with all logical reasoning of a five year old, or the critical judgemental attitude of our mother or first school teacher. So, our thoughts might reinforce the anger rather than helping us to think clearly about what to do to resolve the situation.

So, if you playfully jump out at someone, their initial amygdala mediated response will probably be to jump back. But then they may respond from a Parent ego state “Don't be so ridiculous! I could have dropped my laptop!” or maybe from a Child, screwing their face up into a sneer, just as they would have done to their annoying younger brother if he did the same thing. The content of our ego states are very individual. But we all have them, and they can be very very different personalities.

How do we control/ harness anger?

So, we need to try and develop a safety mechanism, which ensure that beyond our initial response, we act with Adult awareness. This can be hard to do. But here are a few top tips:

- When you feel angry, walk away. If you are very angry you may need a long walk to burn off the adrenaline and start to calm down.
- Do some slow breathing exercises. Slow deep breathing sends a message to our brain: ‘there's no threat here’. Breathe in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4.
- Write a “shitty first draft”. Write down exactly what you'd like to do, what you think and how you feel.
- Chances are, once you've done this, you have a better idea what's going on. It may become clear that you need to draw (or hold!) certain boundaries with another person, or acknowledge there is a larger problem that you need to consider in more depth.
- After writing a SFD (shitty first draft) you're more likely to be able to see how to behave calmly and resolve the situation. When you are ready to tackle the issue with the other person as a comrade rather than a combatant, you're ready to negotiate.

Ok so let's recap. When you feel angry:

- Walk away to safely CONTAIN your anger
- Write a SFD to LISTEN to yourself fully
- Wrestle with the problem to IDENTIFY the deeper problem and set BOUNDARIES



- Work with the other person: NEGOTIATE!

What happens if we try to suppress anger?

Do NOT ignore anger. If you suppress it, it becomes stored in your body as tension and can lead to muscle pain, especially in the shoulders and neck, headaches and in the longer term causes immunosuppression and also increases risk of heart attacks. As these physiological effects accumulate, it is harder to shake off negative experiences and respond with all our Adult faculties, so we become less in control of our anger.

Chronic anger and resentment

If you have a large backlog of unresolved anger and resentments, and will need to dedicate some time over a few weeks, to getting them out safely. This is where working with someone - a counsellor or therapist - can be most beneficial. If you don't, you can expend enormous amounts of energy keeping a lid on your feelings. But feelings can 'leak out' when we are tired, hungry or with people in our power.

If you try to sort things out by yourself, the very best thing you can do is to write about it. It doesn't need to be neat, punctuated or spelled correctly, or even particularly legible. What matters is that you get it down. Because thinking is actually very difficult. Ideas move around, we can't pin them down. Just writing down how we feel starts to clarify it. And we can go back later and look at what we wrote.

Get used to separating out facts and interpretations

"He didn't make dinner" is a fact.

"He's a miserable lazy sod who takes me for granted" is an interpretation.

You can get quite surprising answers if you just ask a question ("why didn't you make dinner tonight?") with curiosity rather than accusation in your voice. Ask accusingly and there is probably only one way the conversation will go- downhill fast.



What does healthy anger look like?

People with healthy anger might still have the initial outburst at whatever is the trigger. But they are then able to rapidly go think “there could be a perfectly justified reason for this...” and apologise for their outburst and proceed calmly. And if it turns out that they are being messed around, they will think it over, and make it clear what they will (or won't) do if the same thing happens in future. And at no stage will they feel inadequate or guilty for being angry, needing time to think it through, and saying what is and is not ok with them.

Anger Prevention

You are much less likely to be triggered to anger if you do these things daily:

- Get a consistent 8hrs sleep a night
- Eat a high fat/ protein breakfast
- Practice breathing exercises (try alternate nostril breathing https://youtu.be/3E_-M-3Mt9c)
- Spend time outside in nature
- Have a good laugh

What one thing are you going to take from this presentation and keep in mind?

What habitual feeling, thought or behaviour would you like to substitute for something more effective?

Write it down now, and then there is more chance you'll remember to do that next time you get angry.

Want to learn more?

I prescribe books:

These books are not specifically focussed on anger, but contain some very useful stories and advice.

Rising Strong by Brene Brown

- Contains some funny stories about the use of ‘shitty first drafts’.



12 Rules for Life by Jordan Peterson

- Has some excellent advice on consulting your resentments and standing up for yourself.

If you want professional help

To find a local counsellor or therapist, a good place to start is: <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/>

Most counsellors/ therapists will offer a free initial session or phone call so you can see if you like and feel comfortable with them. Speak to a few people to find one you click with.

EXCEL CPD