

How Can I Deal With My Anger?

When Tempers Flare

Do you lose your temper and wonder why? Are there days when you feel like you just wake up angry?

Some of it may be the changes your body's going through: All those hormones you hear so much about can cause mood swings and confused emotions. Some of it may be stress: People who are under a lot of pressure tend to get angry more easily. Part of it may be your personality: You may be someone who feels your emotions intensely or tends to act impulsively or lose control. And part of it may be your role models: Maybe you've seen other people in your family blow a fuse when they're mad.

No matter what pushes your buttons, one thing is certain — you're sure to get angry sometimes. Everyone does. Anger is a normal emotion, and there's nothing wrong with feeling mad. What counts is how we handle it (and ourselves) when we're angry.

Tools to Tame a Temper: Self-Awareness and Self-Control

Because anger can be powerful, managing it is sometimes challenging. It takes plenty of self-awareness and self-control to manage angry feelings. And these skills take time to develop.

Self-awareness is the ability to notice what you're feeling and thinking, and why. Little kids aren't very aware of what they feel, they just act it out in their behavior. That's why you see them having tantrums when they're mad. But teens have the mental ability to be self-aware. When you get angry, take a moment to notice what you're feeling and thinking.

Self-control is all about thinking before you act. It puts some precious seconds or minutes between feeling a strong emotion and taking an action you'll regret.

Together, self-awareness and self-control allow you to have more choice about how to act when you're feeling an intense emotion like anger.

Getting Ready to Make a Change

Deciding to get control of your anger — rather than letting it control you — means taking a good hard look at the ways you've been reacting when you get mad. Do you tend to yell and scream or say hurtful, mean, disrespectful things? Do you throw things, kick or punch walls, break stuff? Hit someone, hurt yourself, or push and shove others around?

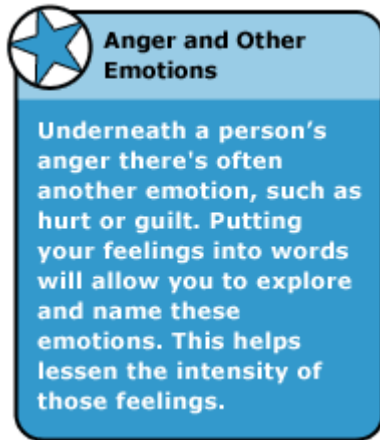
For most people who have trouble harnessing a hot temper, reacting like this is not what they want. They feel ashamed by their behavior and don't think it reflects the real them, their best selves.

Everyone can change — but only when they want to. If you want to make a big change in how you're handling your anger, think about what you'll gain from that change. More self-respect?

More respect from other people? Less time feeling annoyed and frustrated? A more relaxed approach to life? Remembering why you want to make the change can help.

It can also help to remind yourself that making a change takes time, practice, and patience. It won't happen all at once.

Managing anger is about developing new skills and new responses. As with any skill, like playing basketball or learning the piano, it helps to practice over and over again.



The Five-Step Approach to Managing Anger

If something happens that makes you feel angry, this approach can help you manage your reaction. It's called a problem-solving approach because you start with the problem you're mad about. Then you weigh your choices and decide what you'll do.

Each step involves asking yourself a couple of questions, then answering them based on your particular situation.

Let's take this example: There's a party you're planning to go to, but your mom just told you to clean your room or stay home. The red-hot anger starts building.

Here's what to do:

- 1) **Identify the problem (self-awareness).** Start by noticing what you're angry about and why. Put into words what's making you upset so you can act rather than react.

Ask yourself: What's got me angry? What am I feeling and why? You can do this either in your mind or out loud, but it needs to be clear and specific. For example: "I'm really angry at Mom because she won't let me go to the party until I clean my room. It's not fair!" Your feeling is anger, and you're feeling angry because you might not get to go to the party.

Notice that this is not the same as saying, "Mom's so unfair to me." That statement doesn't identify the specific problem (that you can't go to the party until you clean your room) and it doesn't say how you're feeling (angry).

- 2) **Think of potential solutions before responding (self-control).** This is where you stop for a minute to give yourself time to manage your anger. It's also where you start thinking of how you might react — but without reacting yet.

Ask yourself: What can I do? Think of at least three things. For example, in this situation you might think:

- (a) I could yell at Mom and throw a fit.
- (b) I could clean my room and then ask if I could go to the party.
- (c) I could sneak out to the party anyway.

3) Consider the consequences of each solution (think it through). This is where you think about what is likely to result from each of the different reactions you came up with.

Ask yourself: What will happen for each one of these options? For example:

- (a) Yelling at your mom may get you in worse trouble or even grounded.
- (b) Cleaning your room takes work and you may get to the party late (but maybe that adds to your mystique). With this option, you get to go to the party *and* your room's clean so you don't have to worry about it for a while.
- (c) Sneaking out may seem like a real option in the heat of anger. But when you really think it through, it's pretty unlikely you'd get away with being gone for hours with no one noticing. And when you do get caught — look out!

4) Make a decision (pick one of your options). This is where you take action by choosing one of the three things you could do. Look at the list and pick the one that is likely to be most effective.

Ask yourself: What's my best choice? By the time you've thought it through, you're probably past yelling at your mom, which is a knee-jerk response. You may have also decided that sneaking out is too risky. Neither of these options is likely to get you to the party. So option (b) probably seems like the best choice.

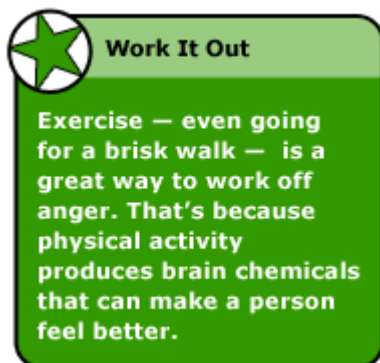
Once you choose your solution, then it's time to act.

5) Check your progress. After you've acted and the situation is over, spend some time thinking about how it went.

Ask yourself: How did I do? Did things work out as I expected? If not, why not? Am I satisfied with the choice I made? Taking some time to reflect on how things worked out after it's all over is a very important step. It helps you learn about yourself and it allows you to test which problem-solving approaches work best in different situations.

Give yourself a pat on the back if the solution you chose worked out well. If it didn't, go back through the five steps and see if you can figure out why.

These five steps are pretty simple when you're calm, but are much tougher to work through when you're angry or sad (kind of like in basketball practice when making baskets is much easier than in a real game when the pressure is on!). So it helps to practice over and over again.



Other Ways to Manage Anger

The five-step approach is good when you're in a particular situation that's got you mad and you need to decide what action to take. But other things can help you manage anger too.

Try these things even if you're not mad right now to help prevent angry feelings from building up inside.

- **Exercise.** Go for a walk/run, work out, or go play a sport. Lots of research has shown that exercise is a great way to improve your mood and decrease negative feelings.
- **Listen to music (with your headphones on).** Music has also been shown to change a person's mood pretty quickly. And if you dance, then you're exercising and it's a two-for-one.
- **Write down your thoughts and emotions.** You can write things in lots of ways; for example, in a journal or as your own poetry or song lyrics. After you've written it down, you can keep it or throw it away — it doesn't matter. The important thing is, writing down your thoughts and feelings can improve how you feel. When you notice, label, and release feelings as they show up in smaller portions, they don't have a chance to build up inside.
- **Draw.** Scribbling, doodling, or sketching your thoughts or feelings might help too.
- **Meditate or practice deep breathing.** This one works best if you do it regularly, as it's more of an overall stress management technique that can help you use self-control when you're mad. If you do this regularly, you'll find that anger is less likely to build up.
- **Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.** Lots of times there are other emotions, such as fear or sadness, beneath anger. Talking about them can help.
- **Distract yourself.** If you find yourself stewing about something and just can't seem to let go, it can help to do something that will get your mind past what's bugging you — watch TV, read, or go to the movies.

These ideas can be helpful for two reasons:

1. **They help you cool down when you feel like your anger might explode.** When you need to cool down, do one or more of the activities in the list above. Think of these as alternatives to taking an action you'll regret, such as yelling at someone. Some of them, like writing down feelings, can help you release tension and begin the thinking process at the same time.
2. **They help you manage anger in general.** What if there's no immediate problem to solve — you simply need to shift into a better mood? Sometimes when you're angry, you just need to stop dwelling on how mad you are.

When to Ask for Extra Help

Sometimes anger is a sign that more is going on. People who have frequent trouble with anger, who get in fights or arguments, who get punished, who have life situations that give them reason to often be angry may need special help to get a problem with anger under control.

Tell your parents, a teacher, a counselor, or another adult you trust if any of these things have been happening:

- You have a lasting feeling of anger over things that have either happened to you in the past or are going on now.
- You feel irritable, grumpy, or in a bad mood more often than not.
- You feel consistent anger or rage at yourself.
- You feel anger that lasts for days or makes you want to hurt yourself or someone else.

- You're often getting into fights or arguments.

These could be signs of depression or something else — and you shouldn't have to handle that alone.

Anger is a strong emotion. It can feel overwhelming at times. Learning how to deal with strong emotions — without losing control — is part of becoming more mature. It takes a little effort, a little practice, and a little patience, but you can get there if you want to.

Reviewed by: Matthew K. Nock, PhD
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