Anger and Chronic Pain

What is anger?

Anger is a natural emotional response that everyone experiences from time to time. It is an emotion that can range from mild irritation to intense rage.

The experience of anger is related to the way we think about something that happens. When we are feeling threatened anger prepares us to attack or defend ourselves. This is why anger is called an adaptive response.

Anger and pain

A higher expression of anger is linked with:

- an increase in pain intensity
- a decreased pain tolerance
- an increased disability
- an increase in negative coping behaviours such as smoking, drinking, overeating or drug use
- poor sleep quality
- greater interpersonal conflict
- less social support
- higher levels of anxiety and depression
- poor treatment outcomes
Pain / Anger Cycle

How your body responds to anger (physiological changes):

- Increased heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased rate of breathing
- Release of adrenaline
- Tightening of muscles
- Senses more acute, which means you are more aware of what is going on around you

The body preparing for “Fight or Flight” — response to perceived threat
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costs of Anger</th>
<th>Benefits of Anger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• causes discomfort</td>
<td>• a signal that something is wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• makes it difficult to inhibit damaging/unfortunate actions</td>
<td>• provides energy to right a wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• impairs performance and efficiency at higher levels of anger arousal</td>
<td>• may trigger problem-solving to resolve real threats/issues that impact our lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• may compromise health</td>
<td>• provides energy to fight illness, do what is necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• carries risk of serious, negative outcomes</td>
<td>• gives us the courage to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• promotes negative self-image as a defective angry person</td>
<td>• if used to fuel self-assertion, may improve self-esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# What does your anger look like?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Behavioural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grit teeth</td>
<td>Feel like running away</td>
<td>Cry/yell/scream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache</td>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>Use substances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweaty palms</td>
<td>Guilty</td>
<td>Get sarcastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizzy</td>
<td>Feel resentment</td>
<td>Lose sense of humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red-faced</td>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>Become abusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach ache</td>
<td>Feel like lashing out</td>
<td>Withdraw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________</td>
<td>__________</td>
<td>__________</td>
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<td>__________</td>
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<td>__________</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

# Does your anger ...

- Last too long?
- Become too intense?
- Lead to aggression?
- Impair relationships?
- Interfere with parenting?
- Interfere with work?
- Creep out in unexpected ways?
- Come too often?
- Flare up too quickly?
- __________
- __________
- __________
### Anger styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traits</th>
<th>Escalator</th>
<th>Stuffer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Escalate into rage</td>
<td>□ Stuff your anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Tries to control but fails</td>
<td>□ Avoids direct confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Blame &amp; shame “provoker”</td>
<td>□ Denies anger to self &amp; others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Leads to abusive situations</td>
<td>□ May not know right to be angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
<td>□ Feeling “I have no other choice”</td>
<td>□ Fear of offending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ To show an image of strength/power</td>
<td>□ Fear of being disliked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ To avoid expressing underlying emotions</td>
<td>□ Fear of being rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Fear of getting close to someone</td>
<td>□ Fear of losing control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Its learned behaviour</td>
<td>□ Feeling its not OK to be angry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Lack of communication skills</td>
<td>□ Feeling unable to cope with such a strong, intense emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ Fear of damaging/losing a relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ Its learned behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ Trying to use a different style than I was raised with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>□ Results may be short-term</td>
<td>□ Anger comes out anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Physical destruction</td>
<td>□ Impairs relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Impairs relationships</td>
<td>□ Compromises physical health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Compromises physical health</td>
<td>□ Compromises mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Legal ramifications</td>
<td>□ Stored up for next time?????</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
<td>□ ____________________________</td>
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</table>
Breaking the cycle of anger and pain

Managing anger

Step 1: Develop Awareness

a) **Environmental Awareness** – be aware of triggers in your environment

- Verbal/physical abuse, sarcasm
  - Is there a person who knows just what to say to make you angry?
- Annoyances and Irritations
  - Is there excessive noise, interruptions?
- Common frustrations
  - Are you prevented/block from something you want, disappointed?
- Perceived injustices
  - Do you feel you have been treated unfairly?
b) **Physical Awareness** – be aware of physical changes in your body that serve as a warning signal for your anger

- Heart racing
- Muscle tension
- Jaw or fist clenching
- Flushed face

c) **Behavioural Awareness** – be aware of changes in your behaviour as they can determine whether anger will fade or continue to get worse.

- Pacing back and forth
- Stiff posture
- Tapping foot or finger

**Step 2: Modify Internal Responses**

a) **Physical** – use relaxation strategies to counter the physical changes:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Meditation/imagery

b) **Cognitive** (thinking) – Use strategies to counter the environmental and behavioural triggers of anger:

- Try to consider the feelings of others. We often become angry because we are making assumptions of what others are thinking and feeling.
- Think about your own feelings are you really angry, or are you feeling something else?
- Use humour to take the edge off and diffuse the situation.
c) Use cognitive restructuring techniques:

- Identify the automatic thoughts behind the feeling of anger — “she did that on purpose”, she doesn’t care about me”.

- Avoid traps that increase your anger — believing that everyone is out to get you, think you must have everything your way, exaggerating the importance of an event.

- Challenge your cognitive errors/negative thoughts and generate other options of events.

- Replace unhelpful negative thoughts with more positive coping thoughts.

Step 3: Respond Assertively

- Refer to Communication Handouts.

Thoughts to help manage your anger

You have the right to be angry. It is legal. It is what you do with your anger that is important. You can make it work for you, or you can let it work on you.

People/events do not make you angry. It is your feelings about people/events that create your anger. It is the meaning you attach to a person or situation that determines your emotional response.

Frustration results from unmet expectations. Do you need to rethink your expectations?
Keep your remarks focused on the action, not the person.

Use ‘I’ statements to let the person know how you are feeling. Blaming, or pointing the finger can make them defensive. This prevents either of you from identifying a solution.

Make sure you are angry with the right person or situation. We often stuff our anger and then up “losing it” over something little.

Be careful of words like ‘always’ and ‘never’. These types of words are overgeneralizations. They are not usually accurate and can lead to continued feelings of resentment.

Retaliation or ‘getting back’ is unlikely to help you achieve your goals. The satisfaction you may feel will be short lived.

Resentment towards others hurts you more that it hurts them. Often they do not even know that you are holding resentment towards them — it is your energy being consumed, not theirs.

Always ask for an explanation or clarification first. Miscommunication can fuel a lot of anger unnecessarily.

Recognize when you have achieved your goal. Do not continue to hold onto your anger or resentment after the person has apologized or attempted to fix the situation.

I am allowed to have a ‘time out’ as long as I return within an appropriate amount of time to finish the discussion. Walking away and not returning will lead to continued resentment.
Thoughts to help manage your anger

Questions to ask your self when angry:

• What are my thoughts?
• Do I have a reason to be angry?
• Is my anger targeted at the right person?
• Is my reaction appropriate or am I over reacting?
• What thoughts would be more appropriate?

Things I can do to help manage my anger more effectively

• Count to 10 before I react.
• Ask myself “is this really important?”
• Go for a long walk.
• Listen to music.
• Do some meditation or relaxation.
• Tell the other person how I am feeling using ‘I’ statements.
• I will not attack the other person (using insults or put downs).
• I will work on finding a compromise or a common middle ground.
• Other ways ________________________________