

A photograph of a person wearing a green t-shirt, with their hands raised in a gesture of communication or explanation. A dark teal box is overlaid on the bottom left of the image, containing the title and subtitle.

Anger

INFORMATION SHEET

What is anger?

Anger is a commonly experienced emotion which can range from mild annoyance to rage. Anger is triggered when a person believes they have been wronged by someone, that something unfair or unjust has happened, or that their wellbeing and social status are either not being respected or are under threat. No person can make us angry, rather anger is influenced by people's thoughts, their interpretations of events and their coping skills and available supports.

Although anger is often seen as a harmful emotion, it can be a healthy emotional response when expressed assertively and respectfully. Sometimes anger can be helpful; it can motivate a person to take positive action to change a situation for the better or to achieve his or her goals.

Frequent experiences of anger should not be ignored. Angry outbursts can cause fear, regret and/or work, relationship, and health problems for both oneself and others. When anger prompts someone to use violence, physical injury and even loss of life can occur. Angry people often report regretting their outbursts and wishing they could have expressed themselves in another way.

Aspects of anger

Problem anger is frequent, intense and long-lasting. The experience of anger involves a person's thoughts, emotions, physical responses and behaviours.

Thoughts

Thoughts can be irrational or exaggerated. When angry, people are more likely to blame others, and not see themselves as playing a role in the situation. Thoughts might also focus on putting the other person down, or wanting to get revenge.

Emotions

Anger also involves an emotional response related to the person's thoughts and beliefs about a situation. It can range from mild annoyance or irritation to more extreme feelings of rage or fury.

Physical responses

The sympathetic nervous system is activated during anger, raising the heart rate, increasing muscle tension and sometimes creating the sensation of feeling hot. Chemicals in the brain which help control mood, sleep, appetite, learning, and memory, are also thought to be involved in our expressions and experience of anger and, as a result, these aspects of our behaviour can be negatively affected.

Behaviours

Problem anger is associated with a range of negative behaviours, particularly aggression and violence, which cause further difficulties for the person and their relationships, including family violence, workplace violence, bullying and

harassment. Road rage, assault and substance-use issues have also been associated with problem anger.

What causes problem anger?

Research is yet to find the cause of anger, however, the way anger is experienced and expressed can become a habit. Therefore, knowing the risk factors for anger can help when trying to choose an assertive and respectful expression. Some of the risk factors for anger are:

- **Anger-related memories and images**, such as those related to the experience of trauma, can trigger and add to the experience of anger.
- **Family and cultural factors** whereby families model what is acceptable behaviour and cultures can shape what is seen as a normal and appropriate response to stress.
- **Fixed ways of thinking** about the world and setting inflexible standards and expectations can increase the likelihood of anger when situations do not happen as expected.
- Anger can be a symptom of some **mental health disorders**, such as oppositional defiant disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and some personality disorders. Frequent outbursts of anger might therefore indicate broader mental health problems and should be evaluated.
- A tendency to respond to stress with anger, hostility or aggression may in part be influenced by **a person's genes**.

Treatment

Problem anger can be addressed by psychological support and therapy by helping individuals change their way of thinking or behaving in response to situations which trigger their anger. Increasing a person's motivation to change is also an important part of treatment.

The most common therapies to treat problem anger are cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation-skills training, and life-skills training. Family- or relationship-based therapy can also improve communication and rebuild relationships affected by problem anger.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) helps the person to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours which can contribute to their anger, and aims to build skills to manage problem anger in an ongoing way. Cognitive reappraisal, where the person changes his or her *interpretation* of an event (e.g., seeing a driver who cuts them off as possibly rushing to an important appointment rather than purposefully holding them up) is particularly helpful in reducing or preventing angry responses.

Problem-solving which helps the person identify problem situations that might trigger an angry response, and finding effective solutions can lead to lower levels of problem anger.

Relaxation-skills training helps to decrease tension in the body, which can be an important first step in addressing anger problems.

Communication-skills training helps the person to learn and practice calmer ways of handling situations which typically trigger an angry response by using real or role-played situations. Such training may focus on skills such as compromise and negotiation, to improve conflict resolution and how to respectfully and calmly express their anger.

Family- or relationship-based interventions can help families, couples or others in a relationship increase their understanding of a person's anger and its negative consequences. Family-based interventions can help improve communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, break cycles of anger and aggression, and increase the sharing of positive emotions, rather than anger.

Seeking help

If anger is affecting your ability to thrive in your daily life, a psychologist can help. Anger will be explored as a normal emotion that has become dysfunctional and harmful when expressed. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in helping people with a range of mental health concerns, including problem anger and other conditions that affect your anger such as anxiety, depression or substance use. A psychologist can help you manage your anger using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The Australian Psychological Society Limited
PO Box 38, Flinders Lane, VIC, 8009

Telephone: (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497
Fax: (03) 9663 6177
Email: membership@psychology.org.au
Web: psychology.org.au

Find us on social media   

ABN 23 000 543 788 © 2021