

ANGER & AGGRESSION – EMOTION & RESPONSE

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Training & Senior Management Consultant***

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Anger & Aggression – Emotion & Response

An article by Sue Hughes, BA (Hons), Psychotherapist in Advanced Clinical Training & Senior Management Consultant.

This article is part of a series of help & information based articles created for publication for the Manchester Institute for Psychotherapy based in Chorlton, Manchester. The aim of this series of articles is to provide information that will help individuals who feel they want to explore the differing options in relation to treatment of their issues, with or without seeking professional help.

The aim of this article is to explore the many ways that anger takes hold in our lives & what you can do about it. Understanding anger is very important, as it helps reduce the levels of fear & anxiety that can build up around a lack of understanding & also help with the feelings of lack of control that often go hand-in-hand with feelings of anger. In this article, I have explained what anger is, how anger can manifest itself in your life, what you can do to help yourself, & what help is available for you.

This article will hopefully be a useful starting point for you in the management of your anger, whether you choose to tackle it alone, involve friends & family members, or seek medical/professional help (if your anger is very extreme).

I feel angrywhat do I need to think about first?

Anger can be managed – this is the great news....but the longer you leave it to be dealt with, the harder it will be. *Anger is not just a psychological issue.* It can affect you physiologically also.

How can anger affect me/my body?

Physical changes:

Headaches

Stomach upsets or feeling sick

Mental/emotional changes:

Outbursts of anger

Feelings of panic or anxiety

Back pain	Irritability
Trembling	Depression
Sweating	Poor concentration
Difficulties sleeping	Feeling helpless & lack of control
	Lacking confidence
	Not wanting to socialise
	Mood swings

So the initial things for you to think about are:

1. Do I want to live my life in a more fulfilling way for me?
2. Has anyone else ever dealt with their anger issues, & if so, is it possible for me to control my anger?
3. Is anyone available to support me?
4. Am I taking this issue seriously?
5. Do you want to work through this issue for you, not just others, & not just in a tokenistic way?
6. Don't make promises to yourself or others that you can't keep (in relation to you trying to change & manage your anger)

As with dealing with any emotional & behavioural problem, there may be times that you feel like you are not getting anywhere, you might have a bad few days, or a bad week. This can happen. The important thing here is getting back to working through your issues as soon as you practically can.

What happens to me when I get angry?

Before we look at Anger Management, it is important to understand some things about your Anger. This will help you define what kind of anger you have, & some of the other feelings & thought processes that will be occurring when you get angry.

Anger is the feeling, the emotion that humans have in response to frustration or injury. You don't like what has happened & usually you'd like to get revenge. Anger is an emotional-physiological-cognitive internal state; it is separate from the behaviour it might prompt. In some instances, angry emotions are beneficial; if we are being

taken advantage of, anger motivates us to take action (not necessarily aggressive) to correct the situation.

Aggression is action, e.g. attacking someone or a group. It is intended to harm someone. It can be a verbal attack, e.g. insults, threats, sarcasm, or attributing nasty motives to them, or a physical attack (thought of as a justifiable punishment in some cases when you are angry). What about thoughts & fantasies in which we humiliate or brutally assault our enemies? Is that aggression? What about violent dreams? Such thoughts & dreams suggest anger, of course, but are not aggression as I have defined it here.

While aggression is usually a result of anger, it may be "cold" & calculated, e.g. the unfaithful partner's response, the merchant who overprices a product specifically for someone he doesn't like, or an unemotional mugging or another form of physical attack. Some writers have classified aggression as:

- **instrumental aggression** - to get some reward, not to get revenge
- **hostile aggression** - to hurt someone or get revenge
- **annoyance aggression** - to stop an irritant

When our aggression becomes so extreme that we lose self-control, it is said that we are in a **rage**.

Aggression must be distinguished from **assertiveness**. Being assertive is important in life. It is when we tactfully & rationally stand up for our own rights. We generally do not to hurt others when we are assertive.

Anger can also be distinguished from **hostility**. This is a Chronic state of anger (we will look at Chronic Anger further below in the article). Anger is a temporary response, which we all have, to a particular frustrating situation. Hostile individuals can work through their hostility, but only usually through long term work in changing their behaviour, e.g. attending psychotherapy.

Is anger innate? Certainly most three-year-olds can throw a temper tantrum without any formal training. So is anger therefore something we learn? Why are the abused sometimes abusers? Does having a temper & being aggressive yield payoffs? Sometimes, yes. How do we learn to suppress aggression? How can we learn to forgive others & is it important to forgive others? I raise these questions, as most

overtly angry people usually ask themselves many questions like the above when having an angry outburst.

Helpful Tip:

It may help you to think of, & write down, some of the questions you ask yourself when you are feeling angry, & what you then say to yourself in reply. Do you then make a decision about yourself or the action you will take? Take a few minutes to think about this & write down your reply.

Anger can be the result of hurt pride, of unreasonable expectations, or of repeated hostile fantasies. Besides getting our way, we may unconsciously use anger to blame others for our own shortcomings, to justify oppressing others, to boost our own feelings about ourselves, to conceal other feelings, & to handle other emotions (as when we become aggressive when we are afraid). Any situation that frustrates us, especially when we think someone else is to blame for our loss, is a potential trigger for anger & aggression.

So, what is **frustration**? It is the feeling we get when we don't get what we want, when something interferes with our gaining a desired & expected goal. It can be physical (we miss the bus because we were late getting to the bus stop), our own limitations (paralysis after an accident or not being able to do physical things we could do when we were younger & fitter), our choices (an unprepared for & failed exam, or being in a marriage with someone we don't like any more), others' actions (parental restrictions or torturing a political prisoner), others' motives (deception for a self-serving purpose), or society's injustice (born into poverty & finding no way out).

Helpful tips:

- a. Don't underestimate what you are feeling.
- b. Don't put reasons or excuses in the way of you getting help, e.g. I'll be ok when I've had a holiday or a decent night's sleep... There is always a "good" reason why people can't help themselves. Your behaviour may be the key to why you feel the way you do, so give yourself a break, & go & get some help & ask for support today.
- c. Write down how you are feeling on different days & at different times. This will help you remember what is going on for you. Many people who suffer from

anger issues often forget how they are feeling in that moment or soon afterwards, so writing things down is very useful.

- d. Take one step at a time. Anger can often make you feel rushed. Take a breath & sit for a while, calming yourself while the wave of anger passes over you.
- e. Don't let the problem escalate. Deal with it NOW, before you get to a position where you become ill & probably need to take a long period of time to recover.
- f. If you start to feel angry, try the following Grounding exercise:
 Sit with your feet firmly on the floor, so you are in a strong postural position.
 It is good to have your feet roughly shoulder width apart,
 Feel the solidity of the ground underneath you,
 Close your eyes & imagine that your feet are rooted to the floor, & you feel strong & stable,
 Breathe deeply through your nose & out of your mouth, slowing your breath,
 Imagine you are exhaling the frustration you have felt through the day,
 Breathe normally now,
 Open your eyes & still feel your feet on the floor & the stability of your posture,
 Repeat this exercise as needed. It can be done with your eyes open, if you need to do it at your desk.

Are there different types of Anger?

Yes, there are 2 defined types of Anger; **Manifest Anger & Latent Anger**, & Latent Anger has 2 types within its category. You will find information about these types below. Consider which type you think you may be.

Manifest Anger:

Manifest Anger is very obvious Anger. A person with Manifest Anger is aware of his/her anger issues & will be prone to regular outbursts of anger no matter whether the setting is an appropriate place or not. Others will know an individual with this type of anger as an angry person. Responses will often include slamming doors, stamping, raising one's voice, clenching fists, & very visible displays of aggression will occur.

Manifest anger can be **transient** or **chronic**. Transient anger is normal, appropriate emotion & dissolves in a short space of time usually.

Chronic anger has 3 main attributes:

1. *Pathological* – it can contribute to physical illness, & tends to envelop the person's life
2. *Excessive* – the response out-weighs the issue (over-reaction)
3. *Irrational* – no reasonable or logical idea or association for the anger

Other signs & symptoms associated with Chronic Anger are:

- Impatience
- Constant hurrying
- Speaking in a harsh & abrupt manner
- Egotistical & self-centred behaviour
- Inability to relax readily
- Inability to play or enjoy holidays
- Verbally aggressive most of the time

Latent Anger:

Latent Anger is anger that has been repressed to an unconscious level, & often the individual is not aware of it. Individuals who have Latent Anger will occasionally lose their temper for no reason, e.g. when driving & being very critical of other's on the road who are really doing nothing very wrong.

Other people will generally not identify individuals who have Latent Anger as "Angry". They will often be very calm individuals, usually very reasonable, gentle in nature, generally willing to help others usually before helping themselves, & generally self-sacrificing. They will not describe themselves as angry & will not, or cannot access angry feelings about things. Sometimes individuals with Latent Anger will not feel passionate about anything or have differing views to others. They will be happy to please others & not themselves, & this will have been a pattern of behaviour they will have carried since childhood usually. Individuals who have Latent Anger often feel very shocked when they do have an angry outburst.

Latent Anger is often one of many underlying issues in Chronic Depression.

Is Anger increasing?

There is evidence to show that Anger is on the rise, especially Latent Anger. This is because Anger & the behaviour associated with being Angry, is not deemed acceptable in our society a lot of the time. People who display anger are often perceived to be out of control, a “loose cannon”, aggressive, too passionate, & not able to hold their emotions in & display a “tight British upper lip”.

So demonstrating you are angry can be & often is a very risky thing. This is possibly why there has been a sharp increase in road rage incidents for example. Many researchers have suggested that Latent Anger, therefore anger that is buried, is increasing also because we no longer feel it is ok to be Angry in the workplace. With the decline of Union presence in many workplaces, it is hard for individuals to feel supported in having a voice. In addition, open plan offices encourage the suppression of emotion also. Suppressing emotion can increase stress levels, & increasing stress levels creates more emotion...therefore a vicious circle is established.

Therefore, learning to manage your anger is very important for you, for your health & welfare.

Causes of Anger

There are many things that you can do that will help you cope with anger. We will look at these further along in this article. We can encounter angry feelings from one or a mixture of the following situations. This list gives you a general idea of areas of possible anger (& is not exhaustive):

Relationship problems:

Compatibility with partner/friends
 Money issues
 Feeling dissatisfied in your relationship(s)
 Conflict with partner/friends
 Bereavement, separation or loss
 Unresolved issues from childhood

Family problems:

Conflict within family
 Problems with parents/children
 Money issues
 Responsibilities being avoided
 Bereavement, separation or loss
 Unresolved issues - childhood

Workplace problems:

Unrealistic & unachievable targets being set
 Bullying or harassment
 Conflict with work colleagues or managers
 Working too many hours
 Disputes over pay & conditions
 Too few staff to cope with workload

Health problems:

Feeling unwell regularly
 Feelings of lack of control
 Lack of understanding of illness
 Poor communication by doctor
 Limited or no support
 Pressure from work to return

Environment problems:

Unsuitable living arrangements
 Financial pressures
 Excessive noise/smell/disturbance
 Feeling unsafe at home
 Moving house
 Feeling angry when driving

Gender differences & anger

Boys have far more temper tantrums than girls--& their tantrums last longer. Boys & men, in general, recover from an irritating experience more slowly than females, partly because they have stronger physiological reactions to frustration than women. It is the action that differentiates males from females, e.g. there is research to show that men & women apparently feel angry about the same things & to the same degree (Averill, 1983). However, beginning at age 3 or 4, boys are more aggressive than girls. Boys are also aggressed against & punished more than girls. For example, women who cut into line receive less hassle than men. Men kill & are killed four or five times more frequently than women. Boys, but not girls, are encouraged to be physically aggressive. About 70% of parents say it is good for a boy to have a few fights as he grows up. How many parents think that about their daughters?

As culturally prescribed sex roles fade in our culture, however, the gender differences in aggressiveness may decline. But will men become less aggressive or women more aggressive or both? The crime rate for women is increasing much more rapidly than for men. Women seem to have a different reaction than men to being aggressive. Apparently, boys & men to expect acting aggressive to pay off, girls & women don't.

Anger Management Tips

Below are some helpful tips for you to manage your Anger: There are many ways you can help yourself.

1. **Exercise more:**

Doctors don't just recommend exercise because it can help with weight control, getting exercise really helps in controlling anger.

Exercising helps get rid of the levels of tension & adrenalin that can build up, causing us to feel more stressed & angry if we don't deal with it.

2. **Reduce your frustrations:**

Do you know who you feel angry around, what topics of conversation upset you, the situations that invite your anger? Can you avoid them? Reducing your contact with things that make you angry can help you while you work through learning to manage your anger. It is not a long-term solution, but can help in the short-term. Even if you can't permanently avoid a person or situation, staying away for a few days could help you reduce the anger & think of better ways of dealing with the situation in hand.

3. **Reduce the environmental support for your aggression.**

Whilst you are responsible for your behaviour, how aggressive & angry we are is partly determined by the behaviour of those around us also (this does not reduce your responsibility). Consider what you have & who you have around you? Can you avoid subcultures of violence, including friends who are hostile, TV violence, action movies, etc. More importantly, while you are working on your anger, try to see if you feel different at all by having different people around you, & putting yourself in different environments. Behaviour breeds behaviour, so if your fellow workers are hostile to each other & insult each other behind each other's backs, you are more likely to be aggressive than if you were alone or with more tolerant people. Think about who you surround yourself with. Are they angry?

4. **Learn to relate your anger to what makes you angry:**

Understanding what makes you angry is very important. Start to listen to what happens in your body...the shift of energy that occurs when you start to feel angry. It may take time, but notice what you feel angry about & direct your anger at it, or note it down for later if you can't do that in the moment. This will help you when you get home later & then have an angry outburst. You can then relate your anger to the object that caused the problem for you, rather than exploding about something that is totally unrelated. Awareness then will grow for you, & with awareness you can make choices about how you behave more easily in that moment.

5. **Explain yourself & understand others:**

Help yourself in situations. Making a brief comment like "I am feeling angry" prior to being abrasive & rude is often enough to take some of the weight out of the comments that follow. In doing this, you are learning to relate how you feel about something in that very moment, & you are telling people how you feel (being honest).

6. **Develop better ways of behaving:**

Although we may feel like hitting the other person, using our most degrading & vile language, we usually realize this would be unwise, even though it can be tempting. Research confirms that calmly expressed anger is far more understandable & tolerable than a tirade.

Try out different approaches & see how they work. Almost anything is better than destructive aggression.

- Try quiet tolerance & maybe daily meditation.
- If you like to blame others for your anger, then think about your own behaviour for a moment, using a sentence that is personal to you "I am going to be calm. I am responsible for my own actions" etc....
- If you sulk & withdraw for hours, try saying, "I have a problem I'd like to talk about soon."
- If you like to be physically violent, try hitting a punching bag until you can plan out a reasonable verbal approach to solving the problem, or bash a pile of cushions or pillows with a tennis racket or a bat.

7. **Stop hostile fantasies:**

Preoccupation with the irritating situation, including repeatedly talking about it, may only increase your anger. Having feelings & thoughts that are “left over” from a situation are important to deal with. Tips for dealing with this are:

- Talk it over with someone you know is a calm person until you have finished & there is nothing left over for you
- Put the following 4 headings on a sheet of paper & write/list what is going on for you until you have finished. This task will help you process what is going on for you:
 - I am glad about/that.....
 - I am sad about/that.....
 - I am scared about/that...
 - I am angry about/that

8. **Guard against escalating the violence:**

When we are angry, we frequently attempt to hurt the person who hurt us a lot more. There are two problems with retaliating excessively: the enemy is tempted to counterattack you even more vigorously & you will probably start thinking of the enemy even more negatively (in order to convince yourself that he/she deserved the severe punishment you gave him/her) which makes you want to aggress again. Thus, the saying, "violence breeds violence" is doubly true; violence produces more hate in your opponent & in you.

If you feel physically angry & in need of expelling that anger then here are some simple methods to help release the anger:

- Bash a set of cushions or pillows with a tennis racket or bat, allowing whatever needs to come out of your mouth to be released. Ensure there is nothing around that you can damage & ensure you do not damage yourself or others also in this process. Keep going until all the anger is out & you have felt that release.
- Take some exercise...walk fast, run, dance vigorously. This will get rid of the adrenalin that is in your system & that is keeping your stress response levels on red alert.

- Go swimming. Research has shown that being in water calms & soothes us. It is like being back in the womb. Many people who swim release their anger during swimming & forget they are doing so.
- Go somewhere private & shout as much as you need to until you have released that angry energy.

9. **Record the triggers of your anger & consequences of your anger:**

To help you manage your anger, write down:

- What triggers your anger?
- The nature & intensity of your anger?
- Your thoughts & views of the situation immediately before & during the anger?
- What self-control methods did you use & how well did they work?
- The consequences (how others responded & other outcomes) following your emotional reaction?

Recording this information for a week or two can really help you in your steps to managing your anger & can highlight for you that you are not angry all of the time, even though you may feel that at times.

10. **Suppress or disrupt your aggressive responses, find a distraction, or use humour.**

The old adages of "count to 10" or "engage brain before starting mouth" are good basic techniques. Do whatever you can to stop your impulsive aggression. Even a brief delay may permit you to think of a more constructive response. Actually the longer the delay the better, perhaps sleep on it or talk to a friend first. Do something you enjoy, something that occupies your mind. Listen to music, take a bath, meditate, and see a good comedy. Or use comedy if you can control sarcasm.

11. **Stop using your temper to get your way:**

If you are used to shouting to get things, think about why you are doing that? Is it because you feel unseen or unheard? Do you think that you will not get what you want if you don't shout?

Think about the above & try to ask for things in a different way. See how people respond around you differently. You may need to discuss some of your feelings about why you do this with your partner, family or friends in order to help with your change in behaviour, & for them to support you in this.

12. **Reward yourself:**

Think about how well you have done, even in taking small steps to change & manage your anger. It is hard. Reward yourself by doing something nice for yourself. This will help you recognise your achievements.

13. **Meditation & relaxation:**

Meditation or yoga & relaxation can be used to manage anger as well as anxiety. Taking time out to learn to breathe well & properly encourages not only a physical release of tension, but also emotional releases too.

14. **Make constructive use of the energy from anger:**

In contrast to the lethargy of depression, when we are angry, adrenalin flows & increases our blood pressure, & then we have lots of energy. It is a good time to take the dog for a walk, or exercise in other ways. Don't just push away what you are feeling though. Acknowledge the anger, but also say to yourself that you are not going to be beaten by it. You will use the energy for positive means.

15. **Learn to be assertive with others:**

Assertiveness is tactful but firm; it is reasonable. Aggressiveness is inconsiderate, unreasonable, abrasive, & often an unfair angry over-reaction. Obviously, there will be less anger if you can be assertive rather than aggressive.

Depending on your type of anger:

- Learn to express your feelings, to stand up for your rights, to state your preferences & opinions, to immediately negotiate minor inconveniences or irritants. This is assertiveness. Quick effective action avoids the build up of anger, ulcers, & explosions. ..OR
- Learn to reduce your impulsive, hurtful anger, find better tactics for reducing conflicts, &, perhaps, learn ways to be more positive & empathic.

16. **Practice emotional control by role-playing:**

There is no better way to learn new & better ways of interacting in difficult situations than to practice over & over with a friend. Watch how others handle the situation. Try out different approaches, get feedback, & practice until you are ready for real life.

17. **Learn to "fight" fairly:**

Find out the other person's viewpoint & get the facts. Notice how you are feeling & stay with the facts....if you have fantasies about the situation, then express them calmly & say to the person "I just want to check out with you, is this what is happening?"

Stick with the current problem, & don't dig up old grudges. Finally, state your views, hurts, fears, & preferences clearly. See if you can arrive at an understanding, & an acceptable arrangement for the future.

18. **"I" statements express anger constructively:**

There is great skill in knowing when, where, & how to resolve conflicts. Here are some steps to consider when planning how to handle a situation that upsets you:

- An important skill is "I" statements.
 - I feel ___X(angry)___ when ___X happens___& what I would like to happen instead is _X_
 - These statements not only tactfully ask for changes but they also convey that you are assuming responsibility for your own feelings, not blaming others for how you feel.
- Have we chosen a time & place where both of us feel free to discuss our problems? If the other person brings up the problem at a bad time, tell him/her that you are also eager to resolve the problem & suggest a better time or place.
- Have I tried to find out how the other person sees & feels about the conflict? Ask questions to get his/her point of view. Try to be empathic.

Don't counter-attack. Put yourself in his/her shoes. Understanding will replace anger.

- Have I asked the other person to listen to my point of view? Be specific & accurate (no self-serving exaggerations) about what was said & done, explaining why you are upset. You should talk about your feelings (you *are* the expert here). But, do not blame, "analyse," or "psychologize" about the other person's motives, feelings, or negative traits (you are *not* the expert here).
- Tactfulness & respect are important, so clearly communicate your needs & preferences but not your rage & resentment. There are ways of constructively communicating your unhappiness without going into an accusatory tirade.
- Have I made it clear to the other person exactly what I want done differently? (Making it clear that you are willing to change too.)
- Have I asked the other person to tell me exactly what he/she would like me to do differently? (Without implying you will do whatever he/she wants).
- Have the two of us agreed on a mutually acceptable solution to our difficulty? Am I sure he/she knows exactly what I have in mind? Do I know exactly what he/she thinks the plan is? (Better put the agreement in writing.)
- Have we planned to check with each other, after a given time, to make sure our compromise is working out?
- Have I shown my appreciation for the positive changes the other person has carried out?

19. **Challenge your irrational ideas:**

Anger-generating irrational ideas or beliefs come in various forms: your own impossible, perfectionistic standards make it impossible for anyone to please you; you feel a person is despicable when he/she lies about you or deceives you; you believe that others *make* you mad but really you are responsible for what you feel; it may seem perfectly clear to you that some peoples' behaviour is immoral & disgusting; you feel sure that certain kinds of people or groups are causing serious trouble for all the good people in the community & these people should be severely punished. All these ideas may generate anger; look for the "shoulds" in your thinking. They are *your* ideas causing *your* anger. Write them down & consider them. Do you agree with what you have written down or are they someone else's view-point that you have just taken on?

26. **Congratulate yourself for working through your issues & for trying:**

Working with anger issues is hard. Try to reward yourself & acknowledge how much you have done, or are doing to work through your problems.

What other help & information is available to me?

Below is a list of organisations that you can contact for help & advise. Please note that it is worth checking with the organisation whether there will be any costs around the help they can offer you. Many may only be able to offer you support in the form of sending you information, rather than practical or one-on-one support.

International Stress Management Association (ISMA)

www.isma.org.uk

Tel: 07000 780430

PO Box 348, Waltham Cross, EN8 8ZL

A registered charity, promoting sound knowledge & best practice in the prevention & reduction of stress. Sets professional standards.

Mental Health Foundation

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Tel: 020 7802 0300

Email: mhf@mhf.org.uk

83 Victoria Street, London SW1H 0HW

Researches into mental health issues & produces information sheets & other publications.

Mind

www.mind.org.uk

Info line: 08457 660 163 (Mondays to Fridays 9.15am-4.15pm)

Campaigns for better mental health services in England & Wales through its variety of offices. Publishes leaflets & books. Local groups offered.

Ex-Services Mental Welfare Society (Combat Stress)

www.combatstress.org.uk

Welfare Support Teams available 9-5 Mondays -Fridays Tel: 01372 841600

Broadway House, The Broadway, Wimbledon SW19 1RL

contactus@combatstress.org.uk

Have regional offices in: Hollybush, Ayrshire, Manchester, St Ives, Cambridgeshire, Belfast, Cheddar, Somerset, Alton, Hampshire & Worcester. Ring main number for other numbers/contact details.

Websites for seeking a therapist in the UK:

www.therapyindex.com

www.uktherapists.com

Bibliography & References

Books:

“*Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- 4th Edition*”, American Psychiatric Association. 2000, American Psychiatric Association

Magazines/Other articles:

“*The Science of Meditation*”, Time Magazine, October 17th 2003 edition

Websites:

www.ask.co.uk

About the author of this article

Sue Hughes has an established clinical practice at 3 locations in Manchester area & works from Manchester Institute for Psychotherapy for part of each week. Sue has both personal & professional experience of dealing with Anger Responses as a client, patient, therapist & consultant, & has used her knowledge from all of these perspectives to create this article. In addition to being a therapist, Sue has considerable experience as a Senior Management Consultant, advising companies in relation to Stress & other employee & management issues.