

Anger at Work

Everyone gets angry from time to time. The anger addressed here is “everyday anger”, which is to say anger not marked by serious hostility or dangerous behaviors that threaten one’s safety or that might require a 911 call. The anger of interest here is non-threatening anger, anger expressed by or to a friend that is not intended to threaten, manipulate, or cause harm. In this friend-based context, if someone expresses anger to you and it interferes with your feeling comfortable at work at Cornell or at home then you may wonder what you can do to respond differently in the moment to that person to feel better and to prevent hard feelings. If your expression of anger is problematic in relationships, then you may identify serious needs to express your anger differently for better outcomes.

How much control do people really have over expressing or receiving anger? Why do reactions vary so widely between people or even day to day for the same person? What are the benefits and drawbacks of expressing ourselves when we’re angry and upset? Understanding anger and learning how to control it in others as well as in ourselves are important steps in appreciating our responsive options for handling this powerful and complicated emotion.

"Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal."

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

What is anger?

Anger is a fundamental human emotion that is experienced by all people. Typically triggered by an emotional hurt, anger is usually experienced as an unpleasant feeling that occurs when we think we have been injured, mistreated, opposed in our long-held views, or when we are faced with obstacles that keep us from attaining personal goals. Anger is similar to the anxiety caused by stress in that feeling angry is also an emotional reaction to a perceived stressor. Although the focus here is on the expression of anger that causes discomfort, it’s useful to point out that if taken in a positive sense, being angry is synonymous with being lively and healthy. Conversely, people who express no anger are generally non-assertive and may have difficulty meeting personal needs and setting limits. Anger is a part of human behavior and nature, and useful if it aids our understanding of each other and assists with needs attainment. Mismanaged anger, on the other hand, is counterproductive.

Anger has three components:

1. ***Physical reactions***, usually starting with a rush of adrenaline and responses such as an increased heart rate, blood pressure, and tightening muscles; often known as the “fight or flight” response.
2. ***The cognitive experience of anger***, or how we perceive and think about what is making us angry. For example, we might think something that happened to us is wrong, unfair, and undeserved.
3. ***Behavior, or the way we express our anger***. There is a wide range of behavior that signals anger. We may look and sound angry, turn red, raise our voices, clam up, slam doors, storm away, or otherwise signal to others that we are angry. We may also state that we are angry and why, ask for a time-out, request an apology, or ask for something to change.



There are a variety of internal and external influences on how each of us experiences and expresses anger; here are a few to consider:

- Culture ... The country and culture we are born in defines the way we view, mirror and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and behaviors.
- Tolerance ... low frustration tolerance sparks easy irritation and lights a short fuse.
- Family background ... people who are easily angered may come from families that are disruptive, chaotic, and not skilled at emotional communication.
- Gender ... women tend not to be as aggressive as men in expressing anger and tend to talk about their anger more than men.
- Stress level ... added stress from work overload to car trouble can cause 'distress' making anyone anger-prone.
- Life experience ... the presence or absence of major loss, personal trauma, mental illness, etc.
- Age ... anger slowly decreases with age and differences in how anger is expressed between men and women decreases for those older than 50; men are still more likely to be aggressive and women are still more likely to have longer episodes of anger.
- Personality disorders ... disruptive and harmful anger expression is often a defining aspect of personality disorders.
- Lack of communication skills ... anger may be the only means of communication for someone with a limited emotional vocabulary; anger may signal un-named fear, rejection, insecurity, disappointment, frustration, anxiety, and shame.

Tips on how to handle someone who is angry

- Often our immediate gut reaction to being confronted with someone's anger is to become defensive because we react as if that person is a true threat. If the person is truly not an enemy then there is no need to be defensive, remain calm and remind yourself that no 'flight or fight' response is needed for the situation.
- Instead of becoming defensive (by saying something like, "I think you're over-reacting" or "I didn't do that") LISTEN, listen, listen. Listening requires less energy than being defensive while it validates and calms the angry person.
- Listening sends a win-win message; defensiveness on the other hand will send an unconscious message of aggression to the person who's already angry and will usually make them angrier. A defensive message can start a win-lose dynamic which is counter-productive.
- By listening you will usually retain your power and control in a situation in which you are coping with someone's anger, this essentially means you're saying "I don't want to fight" or "I will help you feel better."
- When you use this listening approach the other person will usually find it difficult to remain angry while you're calm and carefully listening.
- You do not have to accept insults or disrespect, let the other person know that your listening to them depends upon their honoring you in this respect.

Consider these additional tips for facing an angry person at work

- Use a mediator like HR or your supervisor – if you don't feel comfortable sharing your issue with HR, then talk to your antagonist in a calm way that reflects how you want to be treated professionally. Seek FSAP help as warranted.
- Avoid provocations. A little respect can prevent anger from building in the first place, so the best way to keep tempers cool is to follow the Golden Rule.



- Meet anger with compassion. If someone on your team member does erupt, try to choose compassion over punishment. A Temple University study found that when managers gave additional support to angered subordinates, workplace tension dissipated. But when angry employees were punished or even fired, the researchers at Fox School of Business found no positive effect on office morale.

Source: Robert J. Bies, PhD, professor of management at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business

Here are some extra suggestions for controlling or at least reducing your anger:

- Try non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises to relax your muscles and make you feel much calmer and practice daily. Learn to use them automatically when you're in a tense situation.
- Over time change the way you think. Overly angry people tend to curse, swear, or speak in highly charged terms that reflect their inner thoughts. When you're angry, your thinking can get exaggerated and overly dramatic. Thinking guides feeling, if you think in flaming ways then you'll feel rage.
- Remind yourself that getting hysterically angry is not going to fix anything
- Use "silly humor" to help you get a more balanced perspective. When you get angry and call someone a name or refer to them in some imaginative phrase, stop and picture what that word would literally look like. If you're at work and you think of a coworker as a "dirtbag" or a "single-cell life form," for example,
- picture a large bag full of dirt sitting at your colleague's desk, talking on the phone, going to meetings; humor can always be relied on to help unknot a tense situation.
- Give yourself a break. Make sure you have some "personal time" scheduled for times of the day that you know are particularly stressful.

Seeking help

According to the Anger Research Consortium, most people feel a little angry a few times a week and as many as a third of us feel angry daily. Anger is not a bad emotion, not all anger is destructive, and anger does not automatically lead to aggression. Anger is powerful and uncomfortable. If you're negatively impacted by someone else's anger, or find your own anger problematic, you may want to find fresh approaches to finding a comfortable partnership with anger. Take advantage of FSAP's experience and professional expertise in providing coaching in this area.



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