

# What is Anger?

Anger is a natural, though sometimes unwanted or irrational, emotion that everybody experiences from time to time.

Anger experts describe the emotion as a primary, natural emotion which has evolved as a way of surviving and protecting yourself from what is considered a wrong-doing.

Mild anger may be brought on by feeling tired, stressed or irritated, in fact we are more likely to feel irritated if our basic human needs (food, shelter, sex, sleep, etc.) are not met or are jeopardised in some way.

We may become angry when reacting to frustration, criticism or a threat and this is not necessarily a bad or inappropriate reaction.

We can also feel irritated by other people's beliefs, opinions and actions and hence anger can affect our ability to communicate effectively - making us more likely to say or do unreasonable or irrational things.

Being unreasonable or irrational can lead others around us to feel threatened, resentful or angry themselves and, again, these can all be barriers to effective communication.

Anger can also be a 'secondary emotion' to feeling sad, frightened, threatened or lonely.

It is useful to try to understand why you (or somebody else) is feeling angry at any given time so that the root causes can be addressed and problems solved.

**Anger, however, is not just a state-of-mind.** Anger can trigger physical changes including an increased heart rate, blood pressure and levels of hormones such as adrenaline preparing us physically for 'fight or flight'. Due to these physical effects long-term anger can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.

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## How Anger is Expressed

Anger can be expressed in many ways; different types of anger affect people differently and can manifest to produce different actions and signs of anger. The most common signs of anger are both verbal and non-verbal.

It can be clear that somebody is angry from what they say or how they say it, or from their tone of voice. Anger can also be expressed through body language and other non-verbal cues: trying to look physically bigger (and therefore more intimidating), staring, frowning and clenching of fists. Some people are very good at internalising their anger and it may be difficult to notice any physical signs. It is, however, unusual for an actual physical attack to transpire without 'warning' signs appearing first.

## What Makes People Angry?

At a basic instinctual level anger may be used as a way to help protect territory or family members, secure or protect mating privileges, protect against loss of food or other possessions, or as a response to other perceived threats.

Other reasons can be very diverse - sometimes rational and sometimes irrational. Irrational anger may mean that you have a problem with managing anger or even accepting that you are angry. Some common triggers to anger include:

- Grief and/or sadness, loss of a family member, friend or other loved one.
  - Rudeness, poor interpersonal skills and/or poor service. Tiredness, since people may have shorter tempers and be more irritable when tired.
  - Hunger.
  - Injustice: for example infidelity, being bullied, humiliated or embarrassed, or being told that you, or a loved one, has a serious illness.
  - Sexual frustration.
  - Money problems and the stress associated with debt.
  - Some forms of stress, unrealistic deadlines and things beyond our immediate control such as being stuck in traffic.
  - A feeling of failure or disappointment.
  - Becoming angry as a result of taking drugs or alcohol, or when withdrawing from such substances.
  - Having a crime committed against you or a loved one: theft, violence, sexual offences but also more minor things such as a feeling of being treated inappropriately.
  - Being either physical or mentally unwell, being in pain or living with a serious illness can lead to feeling angry.
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## **Recognising Anger in Yourself and Others**

There are often both physical and emotional symptoms to anger and, by recognising these, you are more likely to be able to control them.

Possible Physical Signs of Anger:

- Frequent rubbing of the face.
- Tightly clasping one hand with the other, or making clenched fists.
- Clenching of the jaw or grinding teeth.
- Shallow breathing and/or breathlessness.
- Increased heart-rate.
- Perspiring, sweaty palms.
- Trembling or shaking lips, hands.
- Rocking motion whilst sitting.
- Pacing.
- Being rude and losing sense of humour.
- Talking louder.
- Increased cravings for tobacco, sugar, alcohol, drugs, comfort food etc.

Possible Emotional Symptoms of Anger

- A desire to 'run away' from the situation.
  - Irritation.
  - Feeling sad or depressed.
  - Feeling guilty or resentful.
  - Anxiety, feeling anxious can manifest in many different ways.
  - A feeling or desire to lash out verbally or physically.
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## **Can Anger Make You Ill?**

When we are angry, our bodies release the hormones adrenaline and cortisol, the same hormones released when we encounter stress.

As a result of these releases in hormones our blood pressure, pulse, body temperature and breathing rate may increase, sometimes to potentially dangerous levels. This natural chemical reaction is designed to give us an instant boost of energy and power and is often referred to as the 'fight or flight' reaction. This means that the body and mind prepare for a fight or for running away from danger.

However, people who get angry often cannot manage their anger effectively and can become ill, just as stress that is left unresolved may make you ill. Our bodies are not designed to withstand high levels of adrenaline and cortisol over long periods or on a very regular basis.

**Some of the health problems that may occur as a result of being angry regularly or for long periods of time can include:**

- Aches and pains, usually in the back and head.
- High blood pressure, which can, in severe cases, lead to serious complaints such as stroke or cardiac arrest.
- Sleep problems.
- Problems with digestion.
- Skin disorders.
- Reduced threshold for pain.
- Impaired immune system.

**Anger can also lead to psychological problems such as:**

- Depression.
- Reduced self-confidence.
- Eating disorders.
- Alcoholism.
- Substance abuse.
- Self-injury

It should be clear, therefore, that, anger can be detrimental to health. If anger is (or becomes) a problem should be managed, see our following pages for how this may be achieved.

**Useful Websites:**

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

[www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)