

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The Experience of Anger

Anger is a fundamental emotion that everyone experiences from time to time. From a very early age, people learn to express anger by copying the angry behavior they see modeled around them, and by expressing angry behavior and seeing what they can get away with. As our culture has an uneasy relationship with anger expression, many people are brought up to think that it is inappropriate to express anger directly; that it must not be tolerated, that it is always dangerous. Such people learn to distrust anger, to bottle it up and ignore it, to express it only in indirect ways or to use it as a weapon.

The idea that anger is dangerous is not without merit. Angry people are capable of great violence. However, while anger can certainly be abused, it is more than a simple destructive force. Anger is also a critically important part of what might be called the self-preservation and self-defense instincts. People who are incapable of getting angry are also incapable of standing up for themselves. It is important then that people learn how to express anger appropriately. People need to learn healthy and socially respectful ways to express angry feelings, and to not to let anger get out of control to the point where it negatively affects relationships, employability and health.

If you are reading this article, there is a good chance that you (or someone you care about) have an anger problem. An anger problem exists when people become dependent on anger as a primary means of expressing themselves; when they inappropriately use anger or the threat of violence as a weapon to get their way. Inappropriate and uncontrolled anger is harmful for both targets of anger and the angry person as well. Inappropriate anger destroys relationships, makes it difficult to hold down a job, and takes a heavy toll on angry people's physical and emotional health.

Help for anger problems exists in the form of anger management programs, which are coordinated interventions, designed to help angry people learn and practice methods of bringing their anger under control.

This document reviews what is known about anger and anger management. It starts with a discussion of the nature of anger and anger's effects on people's social, emotional and physical welfare. Reasons and motivations for pursuing anger management are discussed, and then specific techniques used in anger management courses are described. The document concludes by describing ways motivated people can use anger management techniques to learn to control their anger so as to protect their health, promote the quality of their relationships and become more socially effective.

Anger is a basic 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.

The experience of anger varies widely; how often anger occurs, how intensely it is felt, and how long it lasts are different for each person. People also vary in how easily they get angry (their anger threshold), as well as how comfortable they are with feeling angry. Some people are always getting angry while others seldom feel angry. Some people are very aware of their anger, while others fail to recognize anger when it occurs. Some experts suggest that the average adult gets angry about once a day and annoyed or peeved about three times a day. Other anger management experts suggest that getting angry fifteen times a day is more likely a realistic average. Regardless of how often we actually experience anger, it is a common and unavoidable emotion.

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Anger can be constructive or destructive. When well managed, anger or annoyance has very few detrimental health or interpersonal consequences. At its roots, anger is a signal to you that something in your environment isn’t right. It captures your attention and motivates you to take action to correct that wrong thing. How you end up handling the anger signal has very important consequences for your overall health and welfare, however. When you express anger, your actions trigger others to become defensive and angry too. Blood pressures raises and stress hormones flow. Violence can ensue. You may develop a reputation as a dangerous 'loose cannon' that no one wants to be around.

Out of control anger alienates friends, co-workers and family members. It also has a clear relationship with health problems and early mortality. Hostile, aggressive anger not only increases your risk for an early death, but also your risk for social isolation, which itself is a major risk factor for serious illness and death. These are but two of many reasons why learning to properly manage anger is a good idea.

Anger is a natural and mostly automatic response to pain of one form or another (physical or emotional). Anger can occur when people don't feel well, feel rejected, feel threatened, or experience some loss. The type of pain does not matter; the important thing is that the pain experienced is unpleasant. Because anger never occurs in isolation but rather is necessarily preceded by pain feelings, it is often characterized as a 'secondhand' emotion.

Pain alone is not enough to cause anger. Anger occurs when pain is combined with some anger-triggering thought. Thoughts that can trigger anger include personal assessments; assumptions, evaluations, or interpretations of situations that makes people think that someone else is attempting (consciously or not) to hurt them. In this sense, anger is a social emotion; You always have a target that your anger is directed against (even if that target is yourself). Feelings of pain, combined with anger-triggering thoughts motivate you to take action, face threats and defend yourself by striking out against the target you think is causing you pain.