



# ANGER MANAGEMENT 101

Blow your top frequently? Chronic hostility can be harmful to your health **Ylva Van Buuren**

**WHEN I TOLD MY THERAPIST** about how I'd finally lost my temper with my good friend and neighbour, Peggy, and thrown warm coffee at her through the hedge that separated our two homes, my therapist actually smiled. "Well, you didn't hurt her," she said. "And, you finally let her know that she can't keep treating you so badly."

Of course, my therapist had heard all about my up-and-down friendship with Peggy, and her response was an important reminder that anger can be a positive thing. In my case, anger finally made me stand up to someone who wasn't treating me well — and the friendship actually didn't survive.

In today's fast-paced world, it seems people are getting mad more often than they used to. And feeling angry is a normal and natural emotion — whether you're stuck in a traffic jam, having an argument with your ex or just losing your patience

at the bank machine because you're overly tired. It's where you go with that anger (and how you react to it) that makes it good or bad.

"Anger's a warning, and it's basically telling us something's not working for us," says Ron Goodine, a licensed member of the Canadian Professional Counsellors Association in Vancouver. Goodine, who created an online anger management program, says well-directed anger can be an opportunity to clarify goals and be assertive about your needs. "It's also a catalyst for change and may bring about positive change." For example, when you get mad yet again because your partner still smokes, instead of lashing out at him or her, you sit down and talk about supporting his or her effort to quit. "But someone who blows up all the time is reactive rather than responsive."

"When anger becomes full-blown rage, then judgment and thinking become impaired, and we're much more likely to do and say things that are unreasonable and probably irrational," says Dr. David Teplin, an adult clinical psychologist in Richmond Hill, Ont.

Physiologically, anger triggers the fight-or-flight response, something our early ancestors needed to survive in the wild. Stress hormones, including adrenalin and cortisol, surge throughout the body, breathing rate speeds up and heart rate and blood pressure rise, too, so you can make your getaway or make your stand.

These high levels return to normal as you calm down, but uncontrolled or unresolved anger can lead to health problems, says Teplin, including backache, headaches, sleep difficulties, high blood pressure and irritable bowel syndrome. At the extreme end of the scale, heart attack and stroke have long been associated with anger.

"Some research has suggested that angry people who continue to be angry on a long-term ongoing basis are more likely to have a heart event," says Dr. Brian Baker, a psychiatrist specializing in cardiac disease and an associate professor at the University of Toronto. Baker, who is a spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation, says that 10% to 15% of adults in the general population tend to be more angry than others.

"There's going to be a small chunk of people who need professional help," says Baker. They should see a counsellor, social worker, psychiatrist or psychologist, who may refer them to an anger management program. (These programs are often associated with correctional institutions.)

A doctor should also rule out coexisting conditions that may increase the tendency to become angry, he adds — for example, mood disorders such as depression as well as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and head injury. Anger may be a symptom of dementia, epilepsy and brain tumours as well. While there is no specific pill for controlling anger, when the emotion is associated with depression or anxiety, a doctor may prescribe antidepressants.

In most cases, however, Baker says people can learn to manage their anger themselves. Here are some ways to do that.



- **EDUCATE YOURSELF** about anger by reading books and accessing online information. Baker recommends *Anger Kills: 17 Strategies for Controlling the Hostility That Can Harm Your Health* by Redford Williams and Virginia Williams (HarperTorch, 1998). This is the much-touted bible on the topic. There are online programs, too, including Goodine's Freedom from Anger webinar program (\$175 for eight weeks), which teaches anger management skills.
- **GET REGULAR AEROBIC EXERCISE** This helps regulate the levels of the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol and releases endorphins, which are natural feel-good hormones, says Baker. The recommended amount of aerobic activity for adults is 150 minutes a week.
- **TAKE RELAXATION TRAINING** such as hatha yoga, meditation or a program that combines meditation, abdominal breathing, imaging (focusing on a calm place) and progressive muscular relaxation. (Your doctor may be able to refer you to a program, or you can search "mindfulness programs" online.) Be sure to practise at least five times a week. According to Baker, research has shown that people who are good at these exercises maintain better control in situations that might trigger anger than those who aren't.
- **LEARN AVOIDANCE METHODS** to practise when you realize feelings of anger are escalating. These methods include stepping away from the situation, changing the subject or delaying your response by counting slowly to 10.

### WATCH YOUR TEMPER

Use this quick checklist from Ron Goodine, a licensed member of the Canadian Professional Counsellors Association in Vancouver, to gauge your anger. Speak to your doctor or another health-care professional if your anger is:

- too frequent;
- too intense;
- lasting too long when it happens;
- leading to aggressive and violent behaviour; and/or
- destroying work and personal relationships.

