

A guide to

# CONTROLLING ANGER



## **Introduction to anger**

Anger is a normal emotion – everyone feels angry from time to time. However, anger becomes a problem when:

- you become angry often
- your anger becomes too strong
- your anger affects your relationships, work, study or home life
- your anger leads to aggression or violence

Here are some experiences of anger:

*Laura is out shopping and she needs help to find something. She looks for a shop assistant but sees them all chatting and laughing. She stands and waits for them to stop and ask her if she needs help, but they continue to chat. Laura becomes more and more angry and she becomes hot, flushed and tense, thinking, “They are lazy and useless, they are wasting my time!” She slams her basket down on the counter and storms out the shop. She is in a bad mood all evening and she doesn’t go home with what she needed to get.*

*James finds a parking space and pulls in to park there when someone nips in front of him. James thinks “how dare he, he has no right to do that!” James feels furious. He winds down his window, shouting and waving his fist at the other driver. He is so angry that even when he finds a space he feels agitated and irritable all day.*

## **How can this booklet help?**

This booklet will:

- help you to understand what the common signs and causes of anger are
- help you to understand when anger is a problem
- provide strategies to help you to control your anger
- give you some helpful links to other organisations or resources that can help

## What is anger?

Here are some of the common signs of anger – tick the signs that apply to you. If you tick several of these and they happen regularly, it may be that you find it hard to control your anger. This leaflet gives you hints to help you control your anger. It also tells you where you can find other help.

## What happens to your body

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> becoming very hot and flushed             | <input type="checkbox"/> tense muscles    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> heart feels like it is pounding or racing | <input type="checkbox"/> sweating         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> tight feeling across the chest            | <input type="checkbox"/> churning stomach |
| <input type="checkbox"/> agitation, restlessness                   | <input type="checkbox"/> legs feel weak   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> having to go to the toilet                | <input type="checkbox"/> pounding in head |

## How you feel

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> furious, enraged         | <input type="checkbox"/> tense, on edge  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> getting irritable easily | <input type="checkbox"/> flashes of rage |
| <input type="checkbox"/> resentful                |  |

## What you do

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> snap, shout or swear at someone       | <input type="checkbox"/> hit out                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> get into an argument                  | <input type="checkbox"/> leave the situation    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> throw objects, slam doors, etc        | <input type="checkbox"/> cry                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> become violent to others              | <input type="checkbox"/> harm yourself          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> say something hurtful                 | <input type="checkbox"/> bottle up how you feel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> drink alcohol, smoke more, take drugs |   |

Anger is an emotion that everyone feels at times. However, for some people, anger can become too extreme. It can happen too often and can last for too long. Levels of anger range from irritation or annoyance to fury and rage. Rage can lead to shouting, screaming and lashing out. Some people might feel shame and guilt after getting angry.

Anger becomes a problem if it affects our work, relationships or other areas of our lives. If we feel let down or believe we have been treated unfairly, this can trigger anger. If we think we are being denied something we are entitled to, this can trigger anger too. Sometimes we believe others have not acted as we might expect them to act. All these feelings can cause problems.

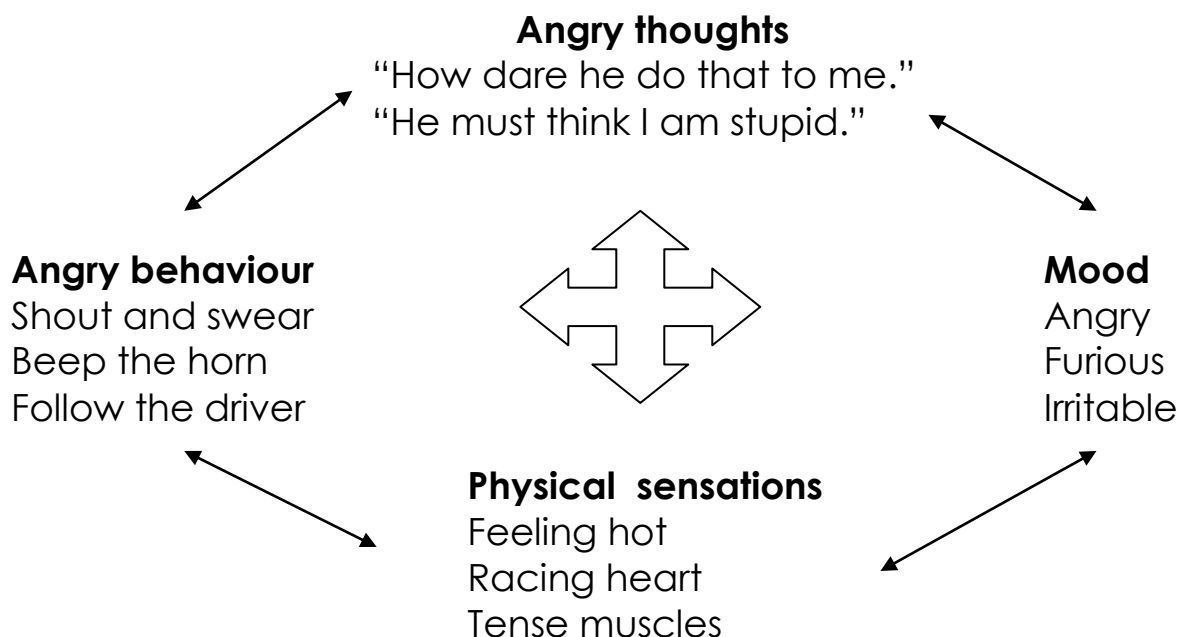
## The vicious cycle of anger

When angry, you may only be aware of your angry mood. You may be able to identify what has triggered your anger. However, we know that anger affects your **thoughts**, **physical sensations** and **behaviour** as well as your mood.

All these things affect one another and can become a vicious cycle. Your **thoughts** can make you feel angrier. Your **physical sensations** can make you feel more out of control and can influence how you behave. Your angry **behaviour** may make a situation worse. Here is an example of a vicious cycle of anger. Try to draw out your own on the blank vicious cycle.

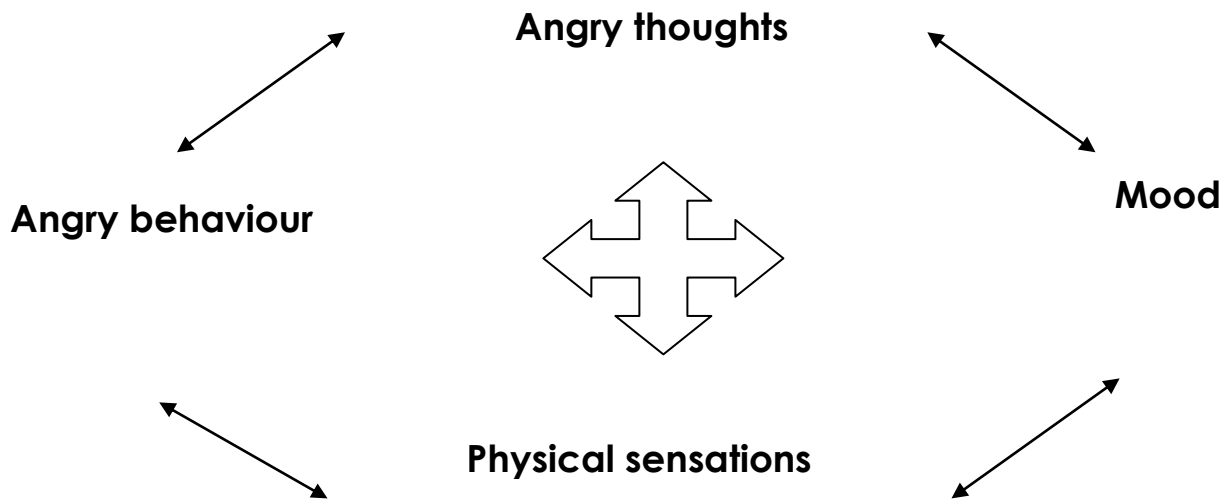
**Trigger** - Someone cuts me up when I am driving

**Leads to .....**



## The vicious cycle of anger

### Triggers



## Causes of anger

Some people are more likely to become angry than others. Some people find they have a low tolerance for frustration. They may not have found helpful ways to express their opinions and feelings.

Some people grow up in families where there is a lot of anger. These families do not always know how to express how they feel. It may be that they have not been able to learn from others about helpful ways to deal with anger.

It can be helpful for you to write down what causes you to become angry – your triggers for anger. Triggers for anger can come from outside or inside you. Outside triggers for anger may be certain people, situations or problems. For example, some people may be prone to road rage. Others may become angry with a situation at work. Inner triggers may include certain memories or thoughts. The thing to remember is that the triggers themselves don't make you angry, but the way you view them does.

Ask yourself what or when are the times that you are most likely to get angry. Write these below.

**Outside triggers (certain people, events or situations)**

e.g. *When my son doesn't listen to me.*  
*When I am put on hold on the phone.*

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**Inner triggers (memories, worries, thoughts)**

e.g. *When I think, "He is taking advantage of me."*  
*When I am reminded of times I was treated badly.*

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

It is important to remember that getting angry will not make you feel better. It can get out of control. It is important to understand why you get angry and to gain some control over this.

**Learning to control anger**

**Angry thoughts**

The way we think has a big effect on our mood, physical sensations and behaviour. These work together to create the vicious cycle of anger. It can be hard to identify your thoughts when you are angry, but with practice it becomes easier. Here are some common thoughts that people experience when they are angry:

“She is trying to make a fool of me.”

“How can they be so selfish?”

“I am going to get him back for that.”

“I need to stand up for myself.”

“Everyone is out to get me.”

Are any of these thoughts familiar? Or do you have any similar angry thoughts? Try to think of a time recently when you felt angry. What was running through your head? Write down some examples of your angry thoughts here:

### **My angry thoughts**

## **Unhelpful thinking patterns**

Our thoughts often follow certain patterns, called **unhelpful thinking patterns**. Below are some common unhelpful thinking patterns that can happen when a person is angry. See if you can identify with any of these.

## **Mind-reading/jumping to conclusions**

Some people become angry when they think someone is thinking something negative about them. They may guess what others might be thinking about them. For instance, Sam heard people laughing on the bus and thought, "They are laughing at me, they think I'm stupid." Sam did not have any evidence to base this on, but he guessed what they were thinking and this made him angry.

## **Taking things personally**

People who have problems with anger often think the way other people act is because of them. They take things personally and feel hurt by it. For instance, Tom's colleague came into work and sat at his desk quietly without saying hello in his normal way. Tom thought his colleague didn't like him and was being rude. But Tom's colleague could have been upset about a personal matter and nothing to do with Tom.

## **Ignoring the positive**

People who have problems with anger often don't see positive things that happen, and focus on negative things instead. For example, Jane got angry when her daughter forgot to put her school things away. She did not think about the fact that her daughter had put her things away every other day that week.

## **Perfectionism**

People who have problems with anger often set high standards for themselves or others around them. They expect a lot and feel upset or let down if these standards are not met. For example, Peter became very angry because his friend was late to meet him. Peter did not think of reasons why his friend might have been late or that this was not something that happened often.



## Black and white thinking

This means thinking that something can only be good or bad, and nothing in between. Angus became frustrated if he made a mistake at work. He believed that if he did not do everything right he was a complete failure.

Do any of these patterns sound familiar? Try to identify when you are thinking in one of these patterns.

## Balanced thoughts

Our thoughts are opinions, not facts. They can sometimes be mistaken. They can also be unhelpful. Try to identify your thoughts when you become angry. Then take a step back and try to look at it a different way.

Here is an example of angry thoughts and more balanced thoughts. Try to write some of your angry thoughts and come up with a more balanced perspective too. It can take a bit of practice, especially when you are feeling angry. But it can be really helpful in reducing your feelings of anger. After some practice, you can then try to balance your own angry thoughts as soon as they pop into your head.

Angry thought	Balanced thought
<i>I bet they are laughing at me.</i>	<i>I don't really have any reason to think they are laughing at me. There are lots of other reasons why they could be laughing.</i>
<i>He always lets me down; he doesn't care about me at all</i>	<i>He has let me down in this situation, but he doesn't normally act like this. I know he does care about me really.</i>

Angry thought	Balanced thought

## **Some unhelpful beliefs about anger**

Some people have beliefs about anger that makes their anger harder to control. These beliefs may have developed as they were growing up. They could relate to personal values. People may have had these beliefs for a long time and consider them to be completely true. Below are some common unhelpful beliefs about anger.

### **I can't help it; I am powerless to change it.**

People may believe that anger is automatic and they have no way to control it. It is true that some people are more likely to become angry. But even if you are more likely to become angry than others, you can learn to change this. You can change the way you interpret and respond to people and situations.

### **I need to vent my anger or I will explode.**

Some people feel that becoming angry or aggressive is a helpful way to vent their anger. However, people who shout, scream or hit out often just become more angry. These people will often feel a sense of shame, guilt or sadness afterwards.

### **If I don't get angry, I will just be a complete pushover.**

This is an example of black and white thinking because it is an extreme way of thinking. People can still make their needs and wants known without becoming angry. You can be firm, in control, clear and assertive without becoming angry or aggressive.

### **I have every right to get angry when people have treated me badly.**

It is natural to feel angry if you have been treated badly. However, it is not helpful to let past experiences affect how you are acting now. Consider what effect your anger is having on you and your life now.

## **Controlling the physical sensations of anger**

Relaxation is an important way to improve your mood and help you unwind. Try to take part in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing.

Here are some examples:

- exercising (e.g. yoga, walking, cycling)
- reading a book
- watching your favourite television programme or film
- listening to relaxing music
- going to the cinema
- calling or visiting a friend or relative
- having a bath
- doing something creative – paint, write poetry, draw

Try to find time each day to do one of these activities that you find relaxing.

There are also specific relaxation techniques that you can use when you feel angry. Relaxation techniques can help to ease some of the physical sensations of anger. The more you practise these techniques, the easier it will be to use them when you need to.

## Controlling breathing

When you become angry, you may notice some changes in your breathing. You may start to breathe more quickly or you may find yourself gulping in air – this is called over-breathing. When you over-breathe you can feel dizzy and this can make you feel more tense. This is not very pleasant, but it is also not dangerous.

You can learn to control your breathing with a simple exercise. This exercise will help you to reduce the unpleasant feelings in your body. It can help you relax.

**Step 1: Breathe out**

**Step 2: Breathe in slowly to the count of “one elephant, two elephant, three elephant, four elephant”**

**Step 3: Hold your breath for the count of four**

**Step 4: Breathe out slowly to the count of “one elephant, two elephant, three elephant, four elephant”**

- repeat these steps until you start to feel calmer
- take some normal breaths in between the deep ones
- don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe very quickly, or you may start to feel dizzy

## Changing angry behaviours

If you want to break the vicious cycle of anger, it is important to challenge your angry thoughts and control your physical sensations. But no-one is perfect and there may be times that you do not manage to do this. However, you can still break the cycle by changing your behaviour.

Try to identify some more helpful ways that you can behave instead of your angry behaviours. Here are some examples:

- Excuse yourself from the situation and return when calmer.
- Do some breathing exercises to relax.
- Ask the other person what they mean so as to try to understand their point of view.
- Ask someone to sit down and discuss their point of view with you calmly.
- If you tend to get angry at certain times of day (for instance, when you get home from work), choose a different time of day to talk to someone.
- Try to avoid situations that tend to make you angry. For instance, if you get annoyed during busy shopping times, go when it is quieter.
- Count to ten in your head before responding.
- Leave the situation briefly and go for a quick walk.
- Anger can cause a build-up of adrenaline. Exercise can help use this up. Try going for a walk or run.
- Calm yourself. Use statements like “I can keep calm in this situation” or “getting angry is not going to help”.

Ask yourself, “Why is this making me angry?” or “Is this important enough to make me feel angry?”

Try keeping a record of what happened when you tried out your new behaviour:

<b>Trigger for anger</b>	<b>Initial thoughts</b>	<b>New behaviour</b>	<b>What happened after</b>
<p>Colleague at work asked me to do something I knew he had been asked to do.</p>	<p><i>“He is making a fool out of me – he is just being lazy”.</i></p>	<p><i>Took a deep breath and asked colleague calmly why he was unable to do it.</i></p>	<p><i>Colleague explained that he had been asked to do another big task. Felt calmer after identifying the reason why he had asked for my help.</i></p>
<p>Someone cut me up when I was driving.</p>	<p><i>“I am going to show him not to cut in front of me like that!”</i></p>	<p><i>Counted to 10 and told myself “I can stay calm in this situation”</i></p>	<p><i>I felt calmer and I did not upset my family in the car by getting angry.</i></p>
<b>Trigger for anger</b>	<b>Initial thoughts</b>	<b>New behaviour</b>	<b>What happened after</b>

## **Communicating with others**

This leaflet talks about thinking errors that some people make that can cause angry outbursts. Effective communication can help prevent these thinking errors. Here are some things to think about when communicating with others:

### **When listening to others:**

- Listen to what the other person has said. Let them finish speaking before you jump in.
- Try not to jump to conclusions about what another person is thinking. If it is not clear to you, ask.
- If someone seems to be critical, try to understand what has made them speak like that. They may be hiding feelings of hurt, fear or frustration.

### **When expressing yourself to others:**

- Take a second to think about what you want to say before saying it. Think about how other people might feel about what you have said.
- Try not to use an angry, critical or confrontational tone or body language.

## Taking care of yourself

Sometimes problems with anger can develop when there are stressful things going on in our lives. Our lifestyle can sometimes make us feel stressed or can make it harder for us to cope with stress.

- Pay attention to when you start to feel tense. Identify which situations are making you feel this way. Is there anything you could change to make the situation less stressful?
- Try to balance the things you need to do, like household chores and work, with activities that you enjoy. Make time to do something that you find relaxing.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet and take regular exercise. This can help your mood, your health and your ability to cope with problems.
- Make sure you are getting enough sleep. (Read the sleep booklet for advice if you have a problem with this).
- Caffeine can cause symptoms of anxiety if you have too much of it. It affects our bodies for 4-6 hours. Try having less in the late afternoon/early evening.
- Alcohol can affect the way you control your behaviours. It can make it harder for you to cope with stress. It can also act as a depressant. You may think that alcohol can help you sleep, but this is not the case. The body has to work hard to process alcohol and this makes it difficult to get to sleep.



## Summary

- Anger affects the way we feel, think and behave. It also affects what happens in our bodies. Anger is a reaction to certain situations, thoughts or memories.
- We can control anger by learning to identify and challenge the thoughts that cause it.
- Relaxation techniques and relaxing activities can help to control the effect anger has on our body.
- We can identify more helpful ways to behave when we feel angry.
- Better communication with other people can help to ease feelings of anger.
- Lifestyle changes can help us cope better with stress and anger.

## Further help

We hope that you have found this booklet helpful and that you will try out the exercises suggested.

If you feel things are not getting better then you should seek further help. It is best to contact your GP in the first place.

**If you have thoughts of harming yourself or someone else, please see your GP as soon as possible and explain how you are feeling.**

Below are some useful contacts and resources that you might find helpful.

## Helplines

**Samaritans** – confidential support for anyone in a crisis

National Helpline (24 hours a day) Tel: 116 123

Borders Tel: 01750 20000 (local rate)

E-mail Helpline jo@samaritans.org (answer within 24 hours)

Visit Local Branch 21 West Port, Selkirk, TD7 4DG

**Breathing Space** – mental health helpline Tel: 0800 83 85 87

Weekdays: 6pm - 2am

Weekends: Fri 6pm – Mon 6am

## Books

Davies, William. (2016). *Overcoming anger and irritability: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques, Second Edition*. Hachette UK. ISBN: 978-1472120229

Garber, Kathy S (2008) *Stop Anger, Be Happy, Second Edition*. Trafford.

ISBN: 978-1553950950 (Don't be put off by the title. This book gives thorough guidance for managing your anger.)

Lindenfield, Gael (2000) *Managing Anger* Thorsons Publishers  
ISBN: 978-0007100347 (Suggests ways of dealing with our own anger and that of others.)

## **Apps for mobile phone and tablets**

A range of self-help apps are available for your mobile phone and tablet. Some of these apps are free of charge, whilst others have a cost attached depending on the developer. Please use the link below to view some suggested self-help apps for different mental health problems:

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

***To cut out and keep:***



### **Breathing exercises**

STEP 1: **breathe out**

STEP 2: **breathe in slowly** to the count of four, "one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant"

STEP 3: **hold** your breath for the count of four

STEP 4: **breathe out slowly** while counting elephants

**Repeat until you begin to feel calm.**

**Remember, don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe too quickly, or you will become dizzy.**

**Take a few ordinary breaths in between the deep ones.**

## **Booklets/leaflets available on the following:**

Agoraphobia  
Anxiety  
Bereavement  
Depression  
Hyperventilation  
Loss  
OCD  
Panic (short version and long version)  
Phobia  
How to solve problems: a simple DIY technique  
Relaxation  
Self-Esteem  
Self-Harm  
Self-Help Websites  
Sleep  
Stress  
Trauma  
Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available to download/print at:

[nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing](https://nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing)

S Black, R Donald, M Henderson, 2005  
NHS Borders

Revised Jan 2020  
Review Jan 2021  
SH1.10