



Four Steps to Dealing with Anger

Let's start by learning the basics about anger. Anger is almost always a surface emotion. It is what is seen on the outside. Under the anger are other feelings that are much more difficult to deal with. What other feelings may be under the surface?

Anger is simply a way people have of coping. Every human being wants to have a sense of power and control over their own lives. Anger helps temporarily to overcome the under-the-surface feelings. Anger gives people the illusion of being in control of the situation.

There is nothing wrong with occasional, moderate anger. Problems crop up when people's anger hurts themselves or others. Chronic sustained anger has extremely serious effects on health and relationships.



About the Author

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Assess your Patterns



Before we look at the steps to keeping your COOL, take your Anger Temperature. Answer **Y**es, **N**o or **S**orta sometimes ...

- Y S N** When playing a game for fun, I take things very seriously.
- Y S N** When irritated, I often say things I later regret saying.
- Y S N** Waiting in line and waiting for other people annoys me.
- Y S N** I still get upset when I think of bad things people did to me in the past.
- Y S N** I don't always show my anger, but when I do, look out.
- Y S N** I spend a lot of time after an incident thinking about what I could or should have said.
- Y S N** I've gotten into trouble in the past because of my temper.
- Y S N** I get aggravated when people don't behave the way they should.
- Y S N** People say that I fly off the handle easily.
- Y S N** I get mad at myself when I lose control of my temper.

0-2 YES responses → if your Yes answers don't occur on a daily basis, you most likely don't have a problem managing anger

3-5 YES → your expressions of anger may be causing problems

6-10 Your responses suggest you have difficulty managing your anger and it's probably causing serious problems for you

*If you have a number of **Sortas** – monitor carefully.*



He who angers you conquers you.

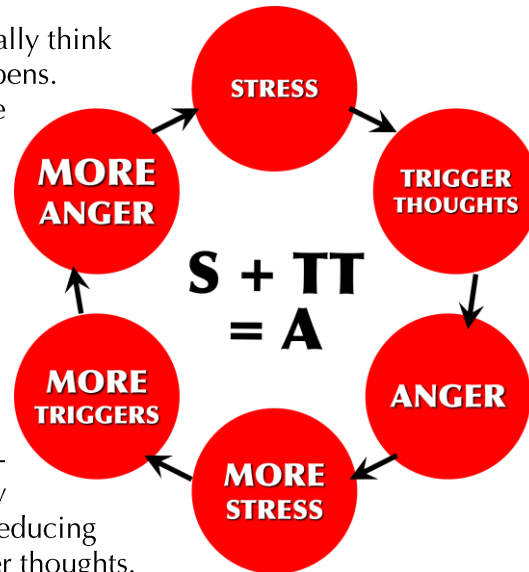
– Elizabeth Kenny



The Cycle of Anger

Human beings usually think that anger just happens. It is the result of the combination of Stress and Trigger Thoughts. Either one alone does not produce anger – they work together in a cycle.

The cycle can be interrupted by dealing more effectively with stress and/or reducing the impact of trigger thoughts.



Trigger thoughts fall into two categories:



BLAMERS

"you did this to me deliberately"

SHOULDs

belief another knows or should know how to "act correctly" and has broken the "rules" of reasonable conduct:

"you shouldn't have ... but you should ..."

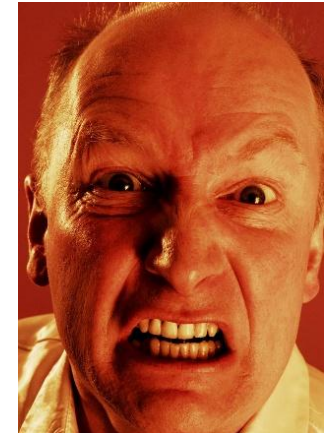
The basic components of most trigger thoughts are ➡ a perception I've been harmed or victimized ➡ a belief the other harmed me deliberately ➡ a judgment that the other was wrong and bad to harm me and should have behaved differently. These thoughts are sneaky and unconscious, coming from some of the oldest parts of the brain. They steal control and reason from you.

The Myth of Ventilation



People who express their anger . . . get angrier!

Yelling or even "talking out" anger doesn't reduce it. What actually happens is that the person is rehearsing for more of the same. Study after study for the last fifty years has shown that ventilation (expression) tends to freeze a hostile attitude or opinion.



It's not the anger that needs to come out but the stress (pain) that underlies the anger. As long as stress persists without remedy, the person will continue to feel tension and arousal. Anger is only one way to cope.

So what if the anger causing you the most trouble is not inside yourself. Dealing with angry or upset people is a real life test of our values. Values are the principles we live by – the beliefs we hold most dear and ideally serve as our "moral compass," guiding actions and decisions.

Remember that angry people we encounter – customers, co-workers, neighbors, friends, family – may actually be dealing with a lot of pain. Folks today are juggling many demands and stresses. What comes across as anger could simply be how this individual is expressing deeper feelings of worry, loss, grief, sadness, fear. Don't take it personally.

This is the time to translate what you believe inside to actions on the outside. Show your caring and compassion. Learn to let go. It's a waste of your time and energy to hold on to bad feelings. It can have a toxic effect on relationships – and on your health.



The Four COOL Steps

Anger doesn't just happen. Nobody can make you mad because emotions are inside you and only you have control over them. Take control by taking positive action. Adapt the four steps to fit your situation ...



Catch your breath



Open your mind



Outsmart your reactions



Look for solutions . . .

**Man is disturbed not
by events but by
his view of them.**

- Epictetus



Catch your Breath

Rarely do we get a warning that we're going to have to deal with stressful situations and people. They seem to come out of the blue when we least expect it. We tend to react quickly, falling back on old habits. Unfortunately these habitual behaviors are not always the best ones to use. They often are responses that come from one of the oldest parts of the brain. This section is the one that tells you, *fight back!* or *run for your life!* Needless to say, these reactions are not likely to fit with keeping your cool.

The first step in keeping your cool is to interrupt the automatic response that pops up when we feel threatened in any way. The idea at this point is to slow your reaction. Take a minute to stop and catch your breath . . .

- * Lay on the floor or sit with your hands on your abdomen – your belly should expand and fill when you inhale and empty completely when you exhale. Try **Box Breathing***: start by counting to 4 at a medium pace ... visualize a box ... picture each four-count as a side of the box and complete a side with each step ... inhale for a count of 4 ... hold for 4 ... exhale for 4 ... hold for 4 ... repeat the cycle four times.



- * As you exhale, use your COOL comment – a calming word or phrase (*relax – easy – balance – I'm cool*) ...
- * Have a soothing image in your mind (gentle ocean waves, mountain stream, floating in a pool, colors)

* check out YouTube for videos on Box Breathing

You can also use a tried-and-true solution to getting control of your automatic response → **count to 10** (or 147). Counting moves your mental activity from the fight-flee-freeze amygdala to the pre-frontal cortex – your thinking brain.



Open Your Mind

It is often difficult to keep cool because we get caught up in wanting to win. Keeping your COOL means giving up the idea of winners and losers. Open your mind. Work to see things from the other person's point of view.

Remember that anger is often a surface emotion covering up deeper feelings underneath. The angry individual may really feel scared or lonely or sad or worried or guilty or whatever. Beware of the labels you use – they carry tremendous power.

Labeling the behavior in front of you as “anger” prompts a response inside yourself. Your brain interprets anger as threatening and dangerous. It will respond by telling you to defend and protect yourself.

If you label the **exact same** behavior as loss or loneliness or fear, how might your reaction to the person be affected?

We are quick to guess at other's feelings and intentions.

Recognize that these are simply guesses.

We can never know exactly what someone else meant or felt. As long as we're guessing, why not guess something that works to understand this individual's world ... something that is more compassionate ... or at least something that is easier for you to deal with?



Apply these same principles to your own anger. Open your mind to the possibility that there is something else going on. What other feelings might be hiding under your anger?

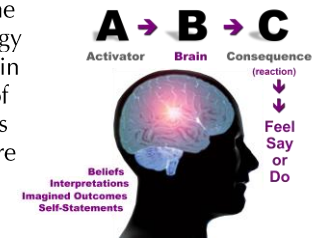
Outsmart your Reactions



*But I couldn't help losing my temper.
After all, he made me mad ...*

Don't let others' anger control you. You don't have to get upset just because someone else has chosen to be angry. You can learn to control and change your reactions to stressful situations and people. Take positive steps to interrupt automatic, unconscious reactions.

Focus on your A-B-Cs to understand the source of your reactions. Put your energy into challenging the stuff that happens in the **B** step. Your **brain** is the source of your reactions. What irrational beliefs are contributing to your anger? How are you interpreting the situation? What do you imagine happening? Finally, what are you saying to yourself?



What **Trigger Thoughts** (*Blamers* and *Shoulds*) might pop into your brain and, combined with the stress you're under, create an angry response inside you?

Talk back and talk smart to yourself. Come up with short, punchy coping self-statements that make sense to your brain.

– you can handle this – this, too, shall pass –
– what's the worst that can happen? –
– does this really matter? – choose your battles –
– tomorrow is another day – let it go, move on –

If this is something you're going to laugh about in five years, why wait?



What could you say to yourself to help keep COOL?

Distanced Self-Talk is most effective:
YOU can rather than *I can*



Look for Solutions ...

Sometimes anger is linked to feeling like you're a victim of the situation and circumstances. Overcome this feeling by making a conscious decision to take action. Work to find a solution to what is bothering you. You can problem solve on your own or get together with others involved to find a solution you can all live with. It often helps to have a structure to keep your thoughts or the discussion on track. Try some **ICED T**:

I Identify the problem

Start by looking at the specifics: what happens, who is involved, when does it usually occur, is the problem unique or recurring? Get input from others. Now is the time to work on sharing concerns and understanding different views. It's essential that you – or the group – agree on the problem definition before moving on.

C Consider alternatives by brainstorming

Go for quantity of ideas. All ideas are accepted. Separate the creative process of thinking up possible solutions from the evaluative process of selecting among them. Don't stop to examine the pros and cons of any suggestion at this point.

E Evaluate the options

Select 3-5 ideas with the greatest potential. Identify the pros and cons of each. Use filters (*cost, time, effort, fit with who I am / we are, acceptance by others involved, etc.*). Look for ways to improve promising ideas. If working with others, ask for preferences. Start by saying: *what I like best about this idea is ... this might it be better if ...*

D Decide on a solution

Choose the best alternative. In a group, work toward a consensus decision. Everyone may not be totally happy but all leave the room agreeing to support and try the solution. Write down the specific details of the agreement: *exactly who is going to do what, when, and how*. Plan now how you'll handle anyone not following through.

T Take action

Put the solution into action. After it's been tried for a while, check back to see how things are going. Sit down as a group and share honest feedback: *How is the solution working out? What adjustments do we need to make to improve the results?*



... and Learn to Let Go



Resentment holds on to what is past. It keeps alive things that should be left to pass on. It makes unresolved anger a steady companion. It robs us of hope and joy and power ... and has an insidious effect on our mental and physical health. We all need to get better at eliminating resentment from our lives.

🌊 **FORGIVE** – the other person and yourself – let people be human beings with generally good intentions and occasionally insensitive behavior

🌊 **LET IT GO** – don't carry the burden of resentment around with you – release grudges, hurt and disappointment – life is too short to hang on to past pain

🌊 **MOVE ON** – face forward and look to the future – let the past go – as the great Western writer Larry McMurty said, *Yesterday's gone down the river and you can't get it back.*



**The art of being wise
is the art of knowing
what to overlook.**

– William James

Some people's angry habit has become a style of living. They are always itching for a fight. They constantly invite others to play their war games. It's easy to get sucked in. Recognize the games and refuse to play. Make a conscious decision to stay in control. When they say things to get a reaction, don't rise to the bait. Stay calm. Take a step back. Disconnect your buttons. Avoid saying or doing anything to escalate the situation. It's a game you can't win.



**Never wrestle with a pig.
You get dirty and
the pig likes it.**



Wise Words to Ponder

Our attitude toward life determines life's attitude towards us.
– *Earl Nightingale*

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the things itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to resolve at any moment. – *Marcus Aurelius*

What we think, or what we know, or what we believe, is, in the end, of little consequence. The only consequence is what we do. – *John Ruskin*

We know what a person thinks not when he tells us what he thinks, but by his actions. – *Isaac Bashevis Singer*

Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly and most underrated agent of human change. – *Bob Kerrey*

Constant kindness can accomplish much. As the sun makes ice melt, kindness causes misunderstanding, mistrust, and hostility to evaporate. – *Albert Schweitzer*

Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless. – *Mother Teresa*



Resources to Learn More



- Burley-Allen, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill*
- Charlesworth & Nathan, *Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness*
- Davis et al, *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*
- Grey, *How to Control Your Anger before It Controls You*
- Helmstetter, *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself*
- Knaus, *The Cognitive Behavioral Workbook for Anger*
- McKay, Rogers & McKay, *When Anger Hurts*

apa.org/topics/anger – *American Psychological Assn*
 psychologytoday.com/us/basics/anger

Why We Get Mad and Why It's Healthy – *Ryan Martin, TED*
 How the Brain Works with Anger – *Urth*
7 Easy Ways to Calm Down Fast – *Dr. Kiki Fehling*

Anger Secrets, Alastair Duhs – *Tips and Strategies*
The Happiness Lab, Dr Laurie Santos – *Stop Negative Self-Talk*
Hidden Brain, Shankar Vedantam – *Reframing Reality*
ReThinking, Adam Grant – *You have More Control Over Your Emotions than You Think with Lisa Feldman Barrett*

and check out the
mini-workbook: **SOS!**
Surviving Our Stress

