

# Anger management FAQ: The good, the bad, the ugly

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You've probably heard the joke: *"I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out."*

Certainly, it seems like there are more brawls than ever at sporting events these days, that nearly everyone has been subjected to road rage, and that you may have to tiptoe around co-workers who seem constantly on edge.

But it's not anger itself that's a problem — it's how you handle it. Robert T. Zackery is a licensed independent clinical social worker at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., who provides counseling and runs anger management classes. Here, he offers insights into the nature of anger, when it can be helpful, how to manage it, and what to do when you're confronted by someone whose anger is out of control.

## What is anger?

Anger is a feeling of displeasure or hostility. It's a normal, healthy emotion, just like any other feeling you have. Anger has several components:

- **Psychological.** This is the emotional component of anger, how you feel, such as sadness, disappointment or frustration.
- **Physiological.** This is how your body responds to anger, such as developing muscle tension or an increase in heart rate and blood pressure as your body releases adrenaline — the fight-or-flight hormone.
- **Cognitive.** This is what you think as you experience anger, such as acknowledging that it's OK to be frustrated, or, on the other end, thinking that the world is out to get you or that your spouse "never" does what you ask.



In essence, anger is a **warning bell** that tells you something is wrong in a situation. It's a natural response to perceived threats.

## So it's not 'bad' to feel angry?

No, being angry isn't a bad or negative thing. Being angry can motivate people to listen to your concerns. It can prevent others from walking all over you. And it can motivate people to change larger societal issues.



## It's anger management that can be a problem.

### Why do some people think that being angry is always wrong?

Some people are uncomfortable with the expression of anger. A lot of it depends on their own personal experiences with anger. For instance, if they were in abusive situations or if they grew up in a household where anger was used to control their family, any sign of anger can make them anxious. They can feel intimidated by anger, even if it's expressed in an appropriate manner. They may think "nice" people don't get angry, which, of course, isn't true.

## What causes people to become angry?

There's usually an activating event — something in particular that sets you off, such as a disagreement at work, being stuck in traffic or not being able to get through to an actual person on the phone. Some people may be angry about their own personal circumstances, such as financial problems. Most people don't just walk around feeling mad all the time, though, unless it was a learned behavior.



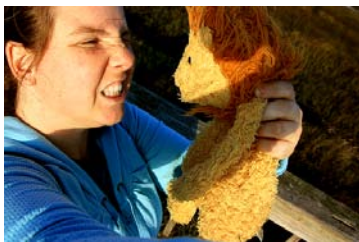
## People aren't born angry.

## What are common methods of handling anger, and which is the healthiest?

There are two basic ways to handle anger:

- **Expression.** This is conveying your anger. Expression occurs along a continuum, from having a reasonable, rational discussion to erupting into out-of-control violence. It's the difference between talking to someone or picking up a baseball bat and hitting them.
- **Suppression.** This is trying to hold in or ignore your anger. You may think you shouldn't be angry or that you'll lose control if you let yourself feel any anger. The danger in this passive approach is that you may not protect yourself when the need arises. You may also become passive-aggressive, where you don't express your anger assertively or directly but scheme to retaliate because you haven't learned how to express anger constructively. Trying to suppress your anger can lead to such health problems as headaches, stress, depression or high blood pressure.

Expressing yourself in an assertive — not an aggressive — manner is the healthiest approach to handling anger. Being assertive means that you state your concerns and needs clearly and directly, without hurting others or trying to exert power over them.



## Why do some people snap over even minor irritations?

Reactions to anger really aren't instantaneous, even if it may appear that someone suddenly "snaps." When someone explodes with anger, there are actually a lot of feelings behind that prior to reaching that boiling point. What happens, though, is that people don't stop to examine their feelings before they explode.

Your personal history feeds your reactions to anger. That's why some people react so angrily to certain situations, like losing a parking space, while others take it in stride. You may have built up years of feeling unheard, ignored, sad, frustrated or disrespected.

From the activating event that initially triggers your anger, you move along a continuum where you feel a number of things, such as intensifying agitation or irritation, and then your personal history comes into play and you may explode, especially if you don't step back to think about where your anger is heading. Also, if you were taught that being angry was negative, you may never have learned how to express anger appropriately.

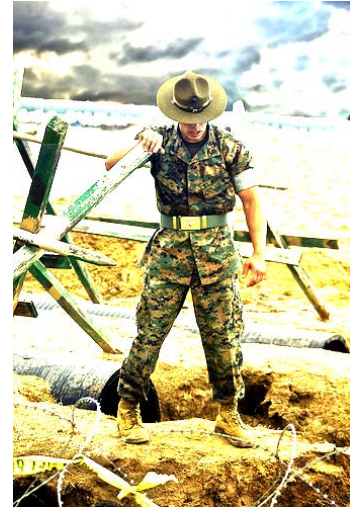
### **How can you stop your anger from turning into a violent outburst?**

Out-of-control anger is a learned behavior, so you have to unlearn it. Consider, for instance, someone who was in the military and basically taught to kill. Then he leaves the military, but with every confrontation or challenge, he goes back into that military mode and responds aggressively — not assertively, but with aggression or hostility. He has to realize that no one is trying to fight with him, and that his reaction is out of proportion to the situation.

Some anger management techniques he can practice include:

- Self-talk to remind himself he's not in the military anymore and to keep himself aware of his reactions
- Walking away from the situation until he calms down
- Remembering to treat other people like he'd want to be treated
- Agreeing to disagree, and leaving it at that

He may also need professional help or a qualified anger management class to help him unlearn these behaviors.



### **What is an anger management class, and how does it work?**



An anger management class is a way to teach people how to express their anger in a controlled, healthy way. We teach people about what anger is, how to recognize their anger triggers, how to become aware of their own feelings of anger, and how to keep their anger under control. We also discuss what other feelings they may have going on, such as depression. We can do this individually, with spouses or families, or in groups.

So, for the person who was in the military, for example, we would work with him on realizing that he doesn't need to yell and scream and get aggressive when he's angry. We'd also work with him on issues he may have with his upbringing, such as being in an abusive household.

### **How do you know if you might benefit from an anger management class?**

Not everyone who gets angry needs an anger management class. You may get ticked that your television remote control doesn't work and throw it across the room. Do you have an anger management issue if that's about the extent of your anger? Probably not. But if you have run-ins with the police, you physically harm someone, people are afraid of your reactions, or you try to intimidate someone with your anger, you could probably benefit from an anger management class.

### **Some people blame their outbursts on others, saying things like, 'You bring out the worst in me.' Is that a valid excuse?**

Someone can make you angry, but how you express that anger is your responsibility. In a marriage or family, does your spouse or your kids know which buttons to push that will set you off? Sure they do. They know your vulnerable spots. That's a natural part of family dynamics.

This happens to me with my teenage daughter sometimes. She may repeatedly ask to go out with friends I don't want her to be with, and I get mad at her. But what I'm really feeling is afraid for my child. Is her behavior making me angry? Yes, sometimes it is. But you have to remember that we're responsible for our own feelings and reactions to what other people do. Recognize that you have a conflict and see how you can handle it appropriately.

### **Can anger harm your health?**

There is some evidence that inappropriately expressing anger can be harmful. Whether you're overly passive and keep your anger pent up, whether you're prone to violent outbursts or whether you're quietly seething with rage, you may have headaches, sleep difficulties, high blood pressure or digestive problems. There's even some evidence that stress and hostility related to anger can lead to heart attacks. That's another reason it's important to learn how to express anger constructively and appropriately — it's good for your health.



### **It seems as if so many people are on the verge these days. Is society becoming angrier?**

Many people today are faced with multiple stressors — bills, drugs, peer pressure, racial conflicts, health care issues, war. There's a lot of stress in society in general. There are so many things to feel threatened about, and some people respond in a negative way. Or maybe they're just not satisfied with life. They're not content. And they haven't learned how to handle their anger constructively.

### **What can you do if you're confronted by someone whose anger is out of control?**



Usually the most rational thing to do, if possible, is to ***just walk away***. If you stay, the situation may escalate into violence. It's important to take reasonable precautions to protect yourself if leaving the situation is difficult or impossible, and to not engage the other person in a manner that's likely to provoke an escalation in their angry behavior.

That's not to say you should never confront someone. If someone is doing something you don't want them to do, and you confront them about it, you now have a conflict. You have to know how you're going to handle that conflict, though. Size up the person you're confronting, and be ready to protect yourself, especially if it's a stranger.