

Anger Management

Anger: Causes and Consequences

Anger is a normal and basic human emotion. Depending on how it is managed and expressed, anger can have positive or negative consequences. Awareness of angry feelings can be helpful as it can signal when our rights are being violated or our needs are being ignored by others. Anger can also help to energize and motivate us to work to address problems with another person or to change our life situation.

However, there are potential negative consequences of anger when it is not managed or expressed appropriately or effectively. Some people are chronically angry at others, or at themselves. Often, angry people were criticized or abused themselves earlier in life, and react to others in the same manner they were treated. Prolonged or intense anger and frustration contributes to physical conditions such as headaches, digestive problems, high blood pressure and heart disease. Problems dealing with angry feelings may be linked to psychological disorders such as anxiety or depression. Angry outbursts can be a way of trying to cope with unhappiness, or depressed feelings. Chronic anger creates problems getting along with others, and can lead to involvement in physically or emotionally abusive relationships. Having “a short fuse” is often a factor in other problematic behaviors such as “road rage,” accidents, and getting into verbal or physical fights.

While some people openly rage, others have difficulty acknowledging their anger and hold their feelings inside as they avoid the issue that angers them. They may express anger in a “passive-aggressive” way that can take the form of baiting others, or frustrating them. People who express anger in a passive-aggressive manner may fear hurting others or being “a bad person” if they openly express negative feelings. However, they usually end up damaging the relationship because other people usually sense their anger on some level and begin to build resentment toward them. People who are unable to acknowledge anger in themselves often feel hurt by others’ hostility, abusive behavior, or withdrawal from them.

Anger is frequently a result of frustration, or of feeling blocked or thwarted from something we feel to be important. Anger can also be a defensive response to underlying fear or feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness. Many people with anger problems are out of touch with signs that anger is building. Our body gives us important clues to when we are angry, sometimes before we are consciously aware of it. When anger builds, we react as we do to stress. We may feel tension or stress in our body as adrenaline is released, our breathing may quicken, or our heart may start to beat faster.

The following are some possible signs of difficulty coping with anger:

1. You feel (or fear) being out of control when you are angry.
2. You often feel tense, irritable or frustrated.
3. You find yourself frequently gossiping or complaining about others rather than speaking to them directly about what is bothering you.
4. You frequently feel hurt or resentful that others treat you unfairly.
5. You hurt others, especially those you care about, by demeaning or putting them down, cursing at them, or being verbally abusive. You end up regretting something you said or did when angry.
6. You take out your anger on someone or something else rather than the person or situation that is bothering you.
7. You have physically lashed out when angry (e.g. destroyed property, hit someone, etc.).
8. You have lost or are in danger of losing a relationship, job, or something else important to you because of your anger.
9. You have been arrested or have legal difficulties because of your anger.
10. You use alcohol or drugs to try and calm your emotions.
11. Others (e.g. friends, family, professors, academic administrators, bosses) have expressed concern about your anger.

If you have problems with anger, the following strategies may help:

1. Learn to become more aware of what you are feeling, and recognize your anger when it occurs. Notice your particular signs that anger is building (e.g. becoming tense, short with others, developing a headache, etc.).
2. Ask yourself “What is really bothering me?” Notice whether it is an interaction with someone else or something inside you. Avoid displacing your anger toward individuals who are not the cause of your anger.
3. Keep an anger log to identify the kinds of situations that provoke you. Learn to identify what triggers anger (e.g. authority figures, jealousy), what behaviors you do that are problematic (e.g. yelling, criticizing, name-calling, cursing, throwing things, avoiding) and the consequences of your behavior (e.g. others avoid you, disciplinary action, etc.). Learn what underlying emotions might lead you to get angry (e.g. feelings of rejection, powerlessness, etc.).
4. De-escalate with a “time out” when you recognize the signs of anger. Let significant

others know that you may need to walk away to calm down when you're really angry. Take a deep breath. Go to a quiet place, and continue to use deep breathing to calm down.

5. Examine your options for behaving when you are angry, and visualize how you might respond. Recognize that you are responsible for your anger. Situations may contribute to your feeling angry, but you are responsible for how you behave. You may be legitimately and appropriately frustrated with something, but you don't have to be inappropriately hostile or hurtful to others. You are bigger than your feelings and can make choices about how you respond. Work on developing more positive behaviors to replace the negative ones.
6. Learn how to assert yourself, and talk to the person who is triggering your anger. Use the physical and mental energy that is generated from feeling angry to channel your response to the situation. Help the person to see how their behavior is affecting you in a way that they can hear and is not threatening. Use "I statements" that describe how you feel, rather than accusing the other person.
7. Recognize that it's your responsibility to express yourself appropriately to others, but their responsibility to deal with their own feelings in response.
8. Seek support from others when you are struggling with anger.
9. Cultivate a sense of humor. Humor can lighten feelings.
10. Develop activities that help you cope with anger. Exercise can help to diminish feelings of agitation and frustration. Practicing relaxation techniques on a daily basis can also help in coping with anger.
11. Avoid alcohol and drugs if you have anger problems.
12. Anger problems can be related to family experiences. How was anger expressed in your family, and how were you affected by significant others? If anger was expressed in destructive or hurtful ways, think about how you felt when you were physically or verbally attacked, criticized, shunned or ignored. Consider the effect on your present relationships with others if you are perpetuating this same pattern.

For More Information

Counseling can be very effective in helping individuals explore the causes of their anger, and in learning and practicing anger management techniques. Union College students are invited to schedule confidential counseling sessions with an experienced, caring psychologist for help in coping with anger. Appointments can be made by calling (518) 388-6161 or stopping by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.