

Ideas for coping with anger

Anger is a positive and constructive aid to survival. It provides us with boosts of both physical and emotional energy when we are in need of protection and healing. Not only can anger help us to cope with threat, hurt, frustration and violation but if it is channelled carefully it can help us to find courage to recognise and assert our own rights, make changes in our lives, and be creative.

However, many of us find it difficult to express our anger openly, directly and assertively. We fear our anger will get out of control and take over our minds, that we will lose the respect of others or that we might hurt someone. We tell ourselves that anger is best kept hidden. Consequently we may end up harming ourselves.

Sometimes we can be angry without recognising that we are angry. Sometimes we do not recognise fully what it is we are angry about. Sometimes we can be filled with a consuming anger we do not know how to cope with. Sometimes we may forget that any efforts we make to cope and survive with our anger and pain are worthy of respect and this can make us feel more angry. Below there are some suggested methods for coping with anger. If you think any of these might be useful to you, you might like to try some of them. However, the important thing is to find a method which best suits you.

Immediate strategies for coping with angry feelings - Quiet the adrenaline rush

- Breathing deeply and/or physically exerting your body will help to lessen the adrenaline rush. Try yoga or Tai Chi for deep breathing.
- Dancing, fast walking, running or aerobics, etc., will help to calm you down.
- Screw your face up a few times and feel the muscles relax.
- You could also try screaming and shouting abuse at an empty chair.
- Focus intently on a work activity or household chore.
- You might also like to use some of the ideas given below, such as positive self-talk or verbalising feelings, as immediate strategies for coping with anger.

Long term strategies for coping with angry feelings - Use positive self-talk

Make a list of positive statements and affirmations which you can use to reassure yourself when you feel angry. Here are some general suggestions:

- I have a right to feel angry when... I am frustrated / hurt / manipulated / exploited / ignored / let down / when my health, happiness or peace is threatened, etc.
- I have a right to... not know about something and not understand / make mistakes / change my mind / make my own decisions and cope with the consequences / ask for what I want / change myself and be assertive.
- I cannot change the past but I can change how I feel about it.
- My self-esteem can survive without the approval of everyone.

Verbalise your feelings

If you are angry with someone, if possible confront them. Try to start positively. Be direct. 'I'm feeling...' Specify how angry you are. Don't accuse others of making you angry. Instead say 'I feel angry when you...' Share your feeling of threat and fear at revealing how you feel. Acknowledge your responsibility. Avoid putting yourself down. Don't play psychologist, label or moralise. Criticise the behaviour and not the whole person. Be specific and realistic in your requests. Don't threaten with punishments. Try to offer a reward.

Alternatively, talk to someone else you think will listen. If there is no-one to talk to, even shouting at an empty space can be calming and healing.

Take time out

Lie down and listen to some pleasant relaxing music. Perhaps go for a walk to a local park, museum or church to calm yourself.

Meditate

There are lots of books which describe how to meditate or classes where you could learn. Concentrating on your breathing or a specific word or mantra will take your mind off obsessive thoughts and into stillness.

Image making

Picture an ideal or workable resolution to a situation which makes you feel angry. To practice try some of the following:

- Form an image of yourself feeling empowered (eg. imagining yourself as superwoman, or remembering a time when you felt strong and positive about yourself).

- Picture yourself responding to the situation or person that made you angry in a way that would make you proud.
- Remember a time in your past when you handled an anger-producing situation well. What did you do? Could you use that technique in this situation?
- Think of a time in your past when you weren't pleased with your response to an anger-producing situation. Form an image of yourself handling it differently. What specifically could you have done? Can you incorporate any of that into your present situation?
- Think of someone who you think handles situations well. What would s/he do? Could you use that technique in this situation?

Writing

Writing down your feelings in a journal, letter or poem can be an effective way of expressing and discharging feelings.

Analysing your anger

If you feel safe to do so you could try writing about all the times you've been angry. Note major incidents, betrayals and circumstances that angered you in the past, recording your feelings at the time, the result of your actions and whether they were effective. You could also try to identify the things that trigger your anger. Make a list of your fears and insecurities. They may include fears of abandonment, lack of power, economic insecurity, imperfection, falling apart. Compare them with the feelings and emotions you discovered when writing about your anger. Are these themes constants in your life? By finding out what frightens and upsets you, you can begin to work alone or with a counsellor or therapist to understand and overcome them.