



### What is anger?

What is anger? Anger is a natural defensive response to a threat, injustice or violation. It is the 'fight' in our 'flight and fight' response. The adrenaline that is released causes the physical symptoms of anger, such as a racing heart and sweaty palms. Although it's a protective response, it can, if not appropriately expressed, lead to further difficulty.

Anger can be a positive response, motivating us to take action against injustice. Our experience of anger varies from person to person: for some, their response to angry sensations is to yell, others may cry in frustration, still others will withdraw or sulk. How we experience anger is governed to a large extent by our upbringing: in some families and cultures emotions are allowed to be expressed unchecked, regardless of the damage they cause; in other families hardly any display of emotion is permitted and the children learn to suppress emotions. Our anger response is to a lesser degree affected by our genetic make-up.



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Despite these differences, there are common elements to our experience of anger: We may feel that what's happening is unfair; we can feel that we or those we care about are vulnerable and under threat; we might feel violated; we may feel that an important goal is blocked; we may feel shamed or victimised; we can feel inadequate; anger is also common following bereavement or significant loss. Situations that remind us that an important goal is blocked; we may feel shamed or victimised; we can feel inadequate; anger is also a common stage of bereavement. Situations that remind us of a time in the past where we felt under attack can trigger our anger response too.

### Anger responses

There are four main anger responses: aggressive - anger is outwardly expressed often without restraint; passive/aggressive - anger is expressed indirectly through actions or subversion; passive - anger is internalised which can result in low self-esteem or self-harm; assertive - anger is appropriately managed and communicated effectively when required. This is the healthy anger response.

### Managing anger

We need to pay attention to our feelings of anger. Unresolved anger can leave us in a continual state of alert, anticipating the next attack, or it may leave us feeling helpless and defeated. These feelings can damage our relationships and our physical and mental health. Expressing our rage outwardly may give a feeling of control, but as well as damaging relationships and our reputation, it can leave us feeling ashamed and out of control. Therefore, we need to learn a healthy assertive response to angry feelings. This involves stepping back from our anger response and taking a breath. When we are consumed by anger, our judgement is clouded and our perceptions are distorted. You could try asking yourself questions such as:

- What am I reacting to?
- What is it that's really pushing my buttons here?
- Am I getting things out of proportion?
- How important is this really?
- How important will it be in six-months' time?
- What harm has actually been done?
- Am I expecting something from this person or situation that is unrealistic?
- Am I jumping to conclusions about what this person meant? •

Is there a compromise?

- What would be the consequences of responding angrily?
- Is there another way of dealing with this? What would be the most helpful and effective action to take? (for me, for the situation, for the other person)
- Visualise yourself dealing with the situation in a calm, non-aggressive but assertive way, respecting the rights and opinions of all others involved.

The following tools may be helpful in the longer term:

- Slow, deep breathing can help reduce your physical symptoms as can physical exercise
- Learning to identify situations where your anger is more likely to be triggered and if unavoidable, have some strategies in place to help you maintain your control.
- Taking steps to reduce stress levels, as stress can make anger control more difficult • Learning to stand up for yourself in a calm and assertive way
- Focusing on areas in your life where you have control • Setting appropriate boundaries in your relationships
- Avoiding excessive alcohol or drug intake as these make self-control much more difficult
- Try to set realistic expectations of yourself and others • Try not to personalise situations, adopting a problem-solving approach instead
- Learn when to let go

### **Displaced or suppressed anger**

Chronic anger can be a mask for other less comfortable feelings such as fear, sadness or despair. If you think this might be true for you or if you tend to internalise or suppress anger, then you may benefit from talking to a counsellor, friend or pastor about your feelings.

### **Violence and aggression**

Anger can sometimes lead to aggressive behaviour and physical violence often targeted at those close to us, rather than at the person or situation that caused the wrath. This is never a good solution and can lead to domestic and child abuse, break down in relationship and self-loathing.

It is often exacerbated by alcohol. There is a tendency for the perpetrator and sometimes the victim to minimise the seriousness of violence, but it is a criminal

### **Counselling Services**

The Association of Christian Counsellors (ACC) is the only Christian UK-wide counselling organisation holding an Accredited Register with the Professional Standards Authority. For further details see their website:

<https://www.acc-uk.org/>

The website of the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists may also be helpful:

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/>

## Anger and Faith

It's not always wrong to be angry. But it is wrong to allow our anger to control us. Sinful anger alienates us from God. It draws us into acts of selfishness like sullen withdrawal, irritability, hurtful speech, selfpity and bitterness. Psalm 37:8 reminds us "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil." Scripture tells us repeatedly that God is slow to anger (eg. Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Exodus 34:6, Nahum 1:3). James 1:19 says that we should be "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." If we allow anger to fester, it will develop into emotional toxic waste with poisonous impact, damaging ourselves and hurting those around us.

Ephesians 4:31 tells us to "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." Left unaddressed, anger paves the way for bitterness and malice to grow and fester. In the next verse, Paul reminds us: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Anger is an emotion, but forgiveness is an act of the will, and a conscious choice. Jesus taught us to pray "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." (Luke 11:4). Instead of holding onto anger, forgive and pray for the person who angers you. If the ugly spectre of resentment continues to haunt you, keep on praying. Prayer ministry may well be helpful.

We are given a powerful tool in 2 Corinthians 10:5: "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Consciously block and redirect those angry thoughts, turning either to prayer or to focus on a specific verse of Scripture, such as Philippians 4:8. Over time it will become second nature to redirect your thought patterns when your anger rises, or when you slip back into that rut of anger and bitterness

If you struggle with anger, do share honestly and pray with other believers. Speak with those you have hurt. You may well find that others are fighting the same battle. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

### Verses from the Bible

**Ephesians 4:26-27** "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Anger is not in itself a sin—it's what you do with it that matters. If we allow grievances and resentment to fester, we damage ourselves and hurt others.

**Colossians 3:12-13** "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Forgiveness is God's antidote for bitterness, rage and anger. It's an act of will, not dependent on our feelings, on whether or not we want to forgive, or "feel like" forgiving. To combat anger, try to practice the opposite: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Always remember God's kindness to us.

**Romans 12:2** "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." We may need to train our minds to reset lifelong patterns of unhealthy thinking, consciously making our thoughts obedient to Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:5 "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Rather than continuing to fuel our angry emotions with wrong thoughts, we can make a conscious decision to take those thoughts captive with God's help.

**Philippians 4:8** "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— think about such things." Actively redirect your mind when tempted to dwell on feelings of anger and resentment. Evict those ugly thoughts living rent-free in your mind, and replace them with lovelier occupants! Galatians 5:22 "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and **self-control.**" **As we**

address our anger with the help of the Spirit, in time we will see growth in the fruit of self-control.