

- Emotions

Keep calm and carry on: tips for taming anger

Recognising and managing your anger can make for a happier and healthier you.

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We all feel angry from time to time. Refereeing the kids' fights, injustices at work or the monotony of household chores. But tuning into our anger and learning to manage it can help reduce its impact.



Anger differs for everyone, and our relationship with it generally stems from our upbringing. “People raised in homes where anger is acknowledged as a healthy response can express it appropriately,” says Diane Young, Psychotherapist, Trauma and Addiction Specialist at South Pacific Private Hospital. For others it’s a different story. “People who grew up being told that anger was unacceptable often have an unhealthy relationship with it and their experience of it is usually passive aggressive. Those who witnessed aggression, and perhaps even violence in their family, grow up believing that anger’s an acceptable form of communication.”

Why am I so angry?

The root causes of anger can often be traced back to trauma from our childhood or teen years. “Anger can surface when we’re triggered by other events,” says Diane. “Triggers can bring up memories that have been suppressed and can occur when a present event or situation takes us back emotionally to an earlier time in our lives.”

Diane advises that seeking professional assistance can help to manage resurfacing memories and overwhelming emotions. “Anger is powerful, and can mask many other emotions, such as sadness, grief,” she says.

“Clients often present with rage and when working through it, it’s apparent that the rage is covering other more deeply embedded emotions.”

Harnessing the power of anger

Anger is often seen as a negative emotion. However, this is not always the case.

“Anger is an inbuilt part of our system that alerts us to a possible injustice or wrongdoing that needs to be addressed,” says Dan Auerbach, Director (and clinical psychotherapist) of Associated Counsellors & Psychologists Sydney.

“Anger signals us for action and is one of our most powerful motivators for change. When we feel angry about a social or political issue, for example, we may be more likely to take action to address it.”

Diane agrees. She notes that anger is a healthy emotion and one which, when used appropriately, gives us strength. It allows us to speak up for ourselves, those we love and those who don’t have a voice.

“Appropriate anger allows us to stay in touch with our own sense of worth and to be true to ourselves and our own beliefs,” she says.

“When utilised properly, anger can be used to affect change for the benefit of everyone and can be a game changer in our personal and professional lives.”

Managing anger

Shouting and screaming in a moment of anger may provide a quick release. But finding constructive ways to manage your anger is important.

“Whether we’re able to control and harness our anger makes all the difference in whether we’re able to meet our needs assertively, or whether we blow up our professional and personal lives,” says Dan.

He notes that one of the main techniques for controlling anger is to become aware of our triggers and the physical sensations that arise with anger. We can then adopt techniques to deal with those feelings.

“Some techniques include learning to calm ourselves by reframing the situation, and breathing techniques,” he says. “Assertiveness training is also helpful as it includes learning to ask for what you do and don’t need.”

Failing to manage our anger can affect us in the long run.

When anger is internalised, it can become rage, which can cause chronic pain, depression and anxiety, as well as other mental health issues including passive-aggressive behaviour, co-dependency issues, intimacy disorders and addictions.

Getting help

When our anger impacts our loved ones, family and friends, particularly when we’re experiencing their disapproval or they’re beginning to withdraw from us, we know there’s a serious problem.

“When blame becomes the norm, rather than a desire to assertively discuss the problems, it signals that we’re ill-equipped to have the hard but essential conversations,” says Diane. “This is when we need professional help.

If we’re not able to speak about this in a safe place, we risk embedding our anger into entrenched rage.”