



Anger and Mental Health

The transition to adulthood can bring with it many feelings, including anger. One study of over 34,000 adults in the United States found that anger was particularly common among younger adults. Anger is a common emotion that can be harmful when it isn't responded to in an adaptive manner. It is a naturally intense emotion we feel when something has gone wrong or when we believe someone has wronged us. It is typically characterized by feelings of stress, frustration, and irritation.

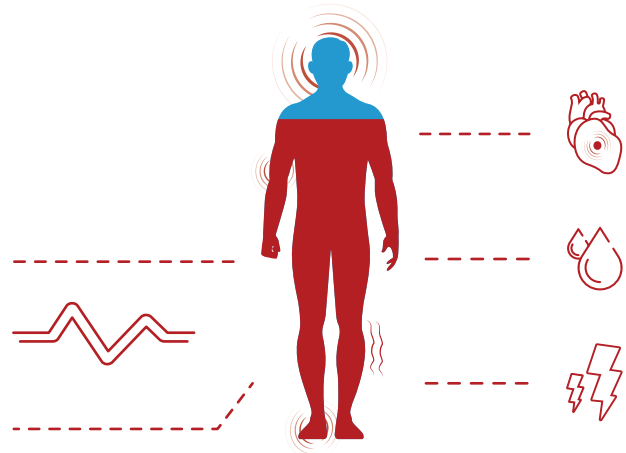
As with any of our emotions, anger can take on an adaptive or non-adaptive role in different aspects of life. It can range in intensity, from a slight annoyance to rage. It can sometimes be excessive or irrational. In these cases, it can be hard to keep the emotion in check and can cause us to behave in ways that are damaging to ourselves or others.

Anger is a normal human emotion, but it's important to find healthy ways to express it. Finding our own healthy expression of anger, or healthy assertiveness, is important for our own mental health, as well as the health of our relationships with others.

The characteristics of anger:

➤ Emotions naturally facilitate biological and physiological changes in our body, including:

- **Increased energy levels**
- **Raised blood pressure**
- **Spike in hormones like adrenaline and noradrenaline**
- **Increase in body temperature**
- **Increase in muscle tension**



➤ Different people express anger in different ways. Some of which include:

- **Raised voice**
- **Clenched fists**
- **Frowning or scowling**
- **A clenched jaw**
- **Physically trembling**
- **Rapid heartbeat**
- **Excessive sweating**
- **Excessive pacing**

➤ When our anger is non-adaptive and out of control, it can be detrimental to our overall emotional and physical health. The biological changes mentioned, when prolonged, can be linked to medical issues and complications such as:

- **High blood pressure**
- **Substance misuse**
- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Insomnia**
- **Gastric ulcers**
- **Bowel disease**
- **Diabetes**

How we evolved to experience anger

If we can understand how and why our painful emotions evolved, then we can start being more accepting and compassionate when they arise both in ourselves, and in others. And if we learn how to tune into and use these emotions, then emotional intelligence will rise, which provides a vast array of benefits.

To keep it simple, we can say that our emotions evolved for 3 reasons:

1. Communicate



2. Motivate



3. Illuminate



1. Emotions Communicate



When we experience a particular emotion, we tend to do certain physical actions. These actions often communicate to others what we are feeling, without us needing to tell them. Since emotions are a private inner experience, it's not the emotions themselves that communicate. It's the physical actions: facial expression, body posture, physical movement, breathing pattern, vocalizations – these physical actions are what we mean when we talk about “expressing your feelings” to others.

Most of us learn from a young age how to modify such physical actions – how to change our facial expression, body posture, physical movement, breathing pattern, and vocalizations – so we can “hide our true feelings” from others. And it's a good thing that we can do this, because there are plenty of situations where that's extremely useful and adaptive.

However, there's a downside to this ability. In some situations, when we “hide our feelings” instead of appropriately expressing them, it is counterproductive. Why? Because it makes it harder for others to intuit what we are feeling, and if they misinterpret it, they may not respond in the manner we hope for.

Sometimes we use anger to replace other emotions we would rather not deal with, like emotional pain, fear, loneliness, or loss. In these cases, anger becomes a secondary emotion. Anger can also be a reaction to physical pain, a response to feelings of fear, to protect yourself from a perceived attack, or in response to a frustrating situation. There can be diverse triggers for our anger and paying attention to these triggers can aid in shifting the anger to a more adaptive form.

When we express our anger in appropriate ways to others in suitable situations, this is what we are likely to communicate:



- Something isn't fair or right
- Our boundaries are being crossed
- We are defending what is important to us

2. Emotions Motivate



The word “emotion” originates from the Latin word “movere,” which means “to move.” Emotions prepare us to move our body in particular ways. They have evolved over countless eons to ready us for action in response to specific stimuli; they predispose us to make certain moves that are likely to be adaptive and enhancing.

The primitive fight-or-flight response originally evolved in fish, to help them fight off or flee from threats. In modern-day humans, our fight-or-flight response gives rise to many powerful emotions: frustration, irritation, anger, and rage (fight); and concern, anxiety, fear, and panic (flight).

Our social emotions, such as guilt and shame, evolved much later and are found only in mammals. All the emotions we experience today incline us to act in certain ways and do things that have been adaptive in our evolutionary past:



- Anger motivates us to stand our ground and fight
- Fear motivates us to run away and hide
- Sadness motivates us to slow down, withdraw, and rest
- Guilt motivates us to make amends, repair social damage
- Love motivates us to be caring and nurturing

3. Emotions Illuminate



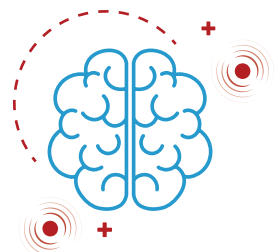
Our emotions illuminate what is important. They alert us that there is something going on that matters, something we need to attend to. They “shine a light” on our deepest needs and wants, as follows:

- Anger illuminates the importance of defending our territory, protecting a boundary, or standing up to fight for what is ours.
- Fear illuminates the importance of safety and protection.
- Sadness illuminates the importance of rest and recuperation after a loss.
- Guilt illuminates the importance of how we treat others and need to repair social bonds.
- Love illuminates the importance of connection, intimacy, bonding, caring and sharing.

The Connection Between Anger and Depression

There is some evidence that suggests the imbalance of neurochemicals in the brain during periods of depression (also known as serotonergic dysfunction) can lead to increased irritability and anger. For this reason, medications used to treat depression may also help to alleviate symptoms of anger.

Inwardly turned anger during periods of depression may also reflect an overly critical and negative inner voice. This can make it hard to move past feelings of shame and increase feelings of low self-worth. Staying angry at ourselves may protect from the underlying sadness and hurt, but in the long-run will prolong feelings of depression as the inner-critic may prevent us from engaging in healthy outlets or healing the deeper pain.



Outwardly turned anger is also common during depression. When we are depressed, we are more likely to feel irritable, which can lead to overreaction over trivial events. Depression can strengthen negative emotions in the moment, making it difficult to harness them and likely leading to remorse after the event. This can lead to a troubling cycle in both personal and professional life. For example, if you are struggling to deal with stress in your workplace or academic environment, you might lash out in anger at colleagues, classmates, and even friends or family members. Over time this can lead to loss of relationships.

Expressing our anger: from Passive-Aggressive to Openly Aggressive



Passive-Aggressive Anger:

This is when we try to repress our anger to avoid dealing with it but typically end up expressing it in unhealthy and undermining ways.

Assertive Anger:

This is the healthiest way to express our anger. It involves handling anger in a controlled manner by using our words to proactively and calmly explain what boundary has been crossed. In this form, anger is expressed in a non-threatening way and allows for situations to be diffused.

Openly Aggressive Anger:

This type of anger tends to be accompanied by physical or verbal aggression such as hitting, screaming, or treating others in a diminutive manner. The aim of this type of anger is typically to hurt the person who is the target of the anger emotionally or physically.

Ways that we can transform our relationship to anger



Basic Coping Strategies for immediate relief:

Identify the Cause: The first step to coping with anger is identifying the root cause of your anger. It could be another emotion—maybe one of fear or loneliness. It could be an altercation you had or an unpleasant thought that came to mind.

Let It Out: Don't bottle your anger up. Instead, find an outlet to release the anger that is not going to harm you or others, like punching or screaming into a pillow. Expressing your anger when you feel it is the healthiest way to get through it. Bottling up the emotion is most likely to cause a sudden and intense outburst when you least expect it.

Avoid Triggers: If you are quick to become angry, it's useful to try to identify and avoid your triggers. If you are often triggered when having a conversation with a particular person or about a particular topic, avoid them or that topic until you've learned how to have better control over your anger.

Work Out: Exercising isn't just great for your physical health—it's also beneficial for your mental health. It's also a way to channel emotions like anger in a useful and productive way. Exercise allows the accumulated energy built up from the physiological response of anger to be released.

Practice Breathing Exercises: Just as with anxiety, anger will fuel itself if you let it. For this reason, it may be helpful to learn breathing exercises to help you calm yourself down in the moment when you become angry. One such exercise that you may wish to try is called 4-7-8 breathing developed by Dr. Andrew Weil. This breathing technique is based on the yoga technique known as pranayama, which helps yogis to control their breathing. Breathing helps to bring your body into a state of relaxation and to increase the oxygen flow in your body. This helps to get control of the fight-or-flight reaction that you might experience when your anger is triggered.

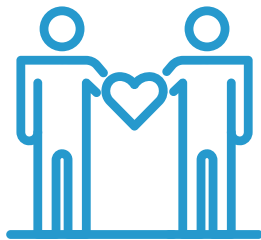
Practice Mindfulness and Meditation: Meditation is very beneficial in helping to control human emotions. You can start with simple meditation techniques like deep breathing exercises. When faced with a situation that makes you angry, take a second before reacting. Noticing the thoughts that may be lurking behind the anger will allow for an opportunity to disrupt them.

Ways that we can transform our relationship to anger



Ways that we can support someone with their anger

Stay calm: Though you may be having some feelings of your own in response to their anger, keeping your cool will help to prevent the anger from escalating



Set boundaries: Let the angry person know what kind of behaviour and speech won't be tolerated during the course of your conversation with them and consider what actions you will take if those boundaries are crossed.

Understand where they are coming from: Try to allow the angry person to speak uninterrupted, so you can get a better sense of why they are feeling that way. Sometimes what is presenting as anger could represent some other emotion being experienced under the surface, such as pain, fear, or sadness.

Validate their anger: Let the angry person know that you have heard them and that you understand the reasons behind their anger. Validation is one of the fastest ways to resolve anger.

Give them space: If you have tried to communicate with the angry person but they are not responding appropriately or it is making matters worse, give them some space to calm down and think. Time away from the conversation will also likely be beneficial for you as well.

Feel free to check out our [Infosheet](#) on how to support a student who is disruptive in class

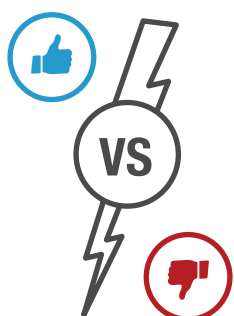
Anger on the Internet: The Psychology of Internet and social media rage

To understand extreme anger and rage on the internet, we can look to previous research on the topic of ‘road rage’. It is common for many of us to get a lot angrier on the road with other drivers than we do with people in other aspects of daily life. While driving, the relative anonymity and physical separation from others allows our anger to be less contained. We tend to dehumanize others and there are fewer consequences for the actions of our anger in these situations. In addition, we have very little context as to the other person’s actions. All we see is that they cut us off and not all the possible challenges in their day that led them to driving in that manner that led to cutting us off.

If we stick with the idea that separation and anonymity increase the potential to act with rage, let's imagine the impact that increased anonymity and dehumanization of the internet has on virtual interactions. Studies have shown that most internet commenters' intentions are rooted in correcting an error, adding to discussion, giving personal perspective, and representing their views. So, when do these intentions become filled with rage?



One possible explanation is that the subjects of discussion tend to be ones that people feel affect them personally. It is likely the commenter knows something about the topic being discussed, and their personal experience does not align with the viewpoint of the author. This may lead them to doubt the credibility of the author. When a commenter identifies personally with the topic, the strength of their emotional response (often anger) can be amplified, potentially leading to stronger language than they would normally use in the real world.



This may also be connected to a principle in psychology known as the “backfire effect” – people tend to become more entrenched in their position when presented with data that conflicts with their beliefs. Following this principle, hostile or aggressive comments are often formed out of defiance rather than ignorance of evidence presented by the author.

Another psychological phenomenon, the hostile media effect, may explain online aggression. This principle refers to the tendency of individuals with strong opinions on an issue to perceive media coverage as being biased against their side. A person may read an article which focuses on one area or issue, but have their attention derailed by a strong emotional response that was provoked by the headline or early on in the article. Many internet headlines and articles are written to intentionally elicit such emotion (click-bait) in order to gain additional page views. This can lead many readers to immediately feel attacked or misrepresented by information when it may not have been the article’s sole objective or focus.



With these factors being considered, we can understand how the internet can pull many of us into emotional states and feeling threatened. There is little we can do about how others write headlines, articles, or comments on the internet, but we can choose how to interact with it. Simply being aware of how we may be susceptible to reacting to content on the internet can help us shift our emotional reactions to such content or seek to change our relationship to it.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2012). How to recognize and deal with anger. <http://www.apa.org/topics/anger/recognize>
- Aricak, O. T., & Ozbay, A. (2016). Investigation of the relationship between cyberbullying, cybervictimization, alexithymia and anger expression styles among adolescents. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55(Part A), 278–285. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.09.015>
- Firestone L. (2017, October 9th) The role of anger in depression. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/compassion-matters/201710/the-role-anger-in-depression>
- Okuda, M., Picazo, J., Olfson, M., Hasin, D. S., Liu, S. M., Bernardi, S., & Blanco, C. (2015). Prevalence and correlates of anger in the community: results from a national survey. *CNS spectrums*, 20(2), 130–139. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1092852914000182>
- Perloff, R. M. (2015) A three-decade retrospective on the hostile media effect. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(6), 701-729. DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2015.1051234
- Plencner, A. (2014). Critical thinking and the challenges of Internet. *Communication Today*, 5(2), 4-19.
- Staicu M., Cutov M. (2010) Anger and health risk behaviors. *J Med Life*. 3(4):372-375.
- van Eck M, Berkhof H, Nicolson N, Sulon J. The effects of perceived stress, traits, mood states, and stressful daily events on salivary cortisol. *Psychosom Med*. 1996 Sep-Oct;58(5):447-58. doi: 10.1097/00006842-199609000-00007. PMID: 8902896.
- Williams, R. (2017) Anger as a basic emotion and its role in personality building and pathological growth: the neuroscientific, developmental and clinical perspectives. *Front. Psychol*. 8:1950. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01950