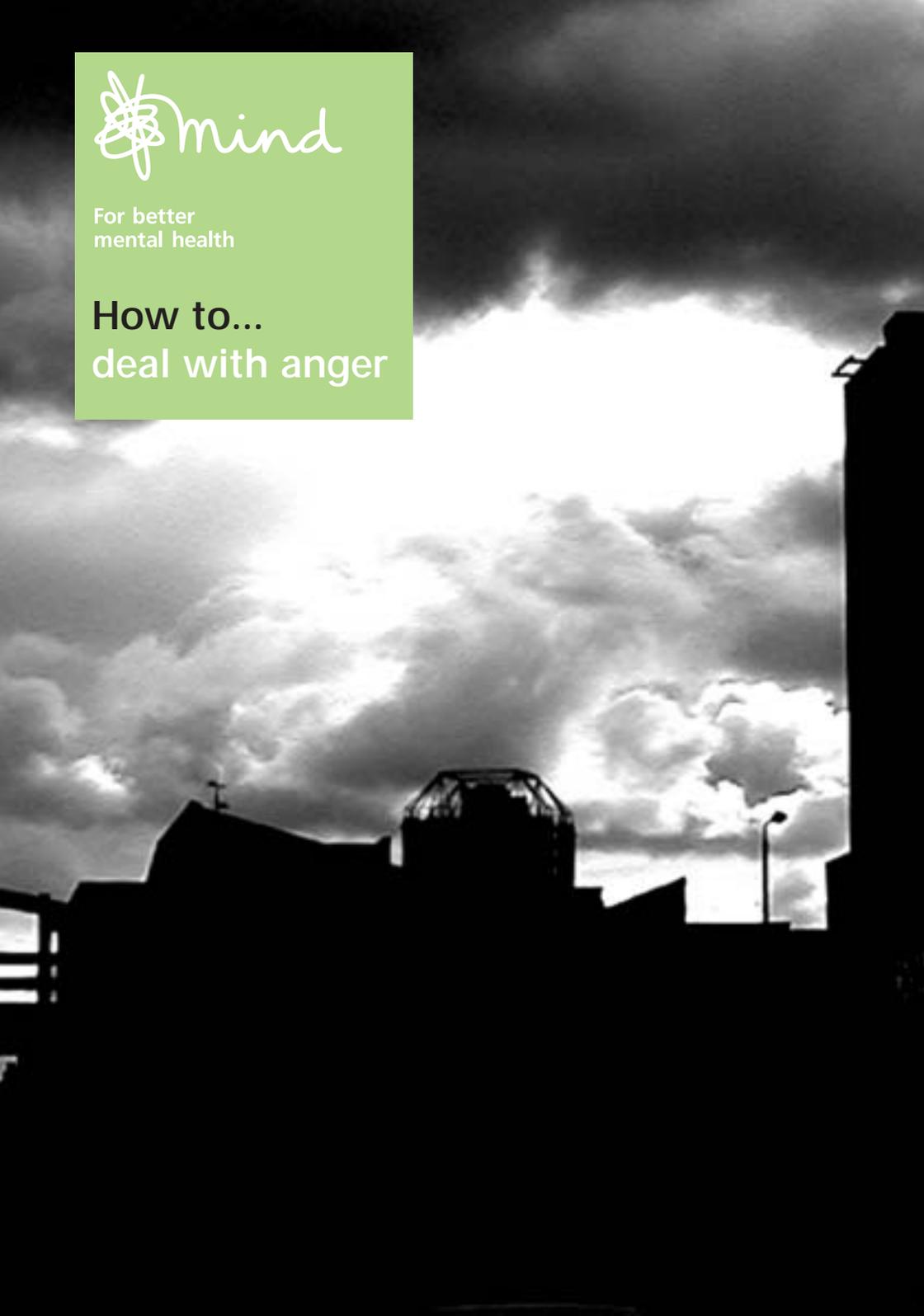




For better
mental health

How to... deal with anger



How to... deal with anger

“““

“I don't think of myself as an angry person, but sometimes I suddenly lose my temper over some little thing. Then, I say and do really hurtful things, and when I've calmed down again I hate myself.”

“No, I don't get angry when I remember the break-in. What's the point? It was just bad luck.”

“In our family, no-one ever shouts or throws things. Sometimes, I wish that they would. They just make snide comments, or sulk, or refuse to talk to each other for weeks.”

“I was so angry after that weekend, visiting my parents, that I came home and ate a whole pot of jam!”

“When I was little, my Dad used to shout and hit out sometimes, especially when he'd just come back from the pub. We'd be really scared. And then my Mum would go all tight-lipped and give him the deep-freeze treatment for days. But they never talked about whatever it was that he was angry about in the first place.”

Many people have trouble managing their anger. This booklet is for anyone who wants to learn how to deal with it in a constructive and healthy way.

Is it always bad to feel angry?



Anger is a natural response to feeling attacked, injured or violated. It's part of being human; it's energy seeking expression. Our anger can be our friend. It helps us survive, giving us the strength to fight back or run away when attacked or faced with injustice. In itself, it's neither good nor bad, but it can be frightening.

Angry feelings can lead to destructive and violent behaviour, and so we tend to be frightened of anger. The way we are brought up, and our cultural background, will very much influence how we feel about expressing anger. You may have been punished for expressing it when you were small, or you may have witnessed your parents' or other adults' anger when it was out of control, destructive and terrifying. Or you may have been frightened by the strength of your own bad temper. All of this encourages you to suppress your anger.

When something makes you angry, you feel excitement in your body and emotions. Your glands are pumping your blood full of the hormone adrenalin, preparing for fight or flight. You are full of energy, alert, ready for action. Tension builds up, but is released when you express your anger. The release is good for you, helping to keep body and mind in balance and able to face life's challenges.

As long as the build-up of tension is usually released in action or words, you should be able to cope with feeling frustrated occasionally! But if, as a rule, you have to bottle up your feelings, the energy has to go somewhere. It may turn inwards and cause you all sorts of problems. Suppressed anger can have very negative effects, physically and mentally.

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Physical effects

Anger might affect your:

- digestion (contributing to the development of heartburn, ulcers, colitis, gastritis or irritable bowel syndrome)
- heart and circulatory system (leading to blocked arteries)
- blood pressure (driving it too high)
- joints and muscles (resulting in inflammations, such as in arthritis)
- immune system (making you more likely to catch 'flu and other bugs, and less able to recover from operations, accidents or major illnesses, such as cancer or AIDS)
- pain threshold (making you more sensitive to pain).

Emotional effects

These might include:

- depression (when the anger is turned inwards)
- addictions (to alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs)
- compulsions (eating disorders, such as excessive dieting or binge-eating, overworking, unnecessary cleaning and any other behaviour that is out of control, including sexual activities)
- bullying behaviour (especially expressing racist, sexist or homophobic views)
- ill-thought-out political activity. (A terrorist blowing up a bus, or a pacifist on a prison hunger-strike could both be 'acting out', on a bigger stage, their personal difficulties with anger.)

All of these will damage relationships with other people, and this is likely to lower your self-esteem further, and make you more depressed.



Is there a healthy way to let out my angry feelings?

It's much healthier to recognise when you are feeling angry and to express it directly in words, not in violent action. Expressing anger assertively in this way:

- benefits relationships and self-esteem
- allows fuller and richer communication and intimacy
- defuses tensions before they get to 'explosion' point
- helps to keep people physically and mentally healthy.

For example, Pat shouts angrily at her husband, Andrew, 'How could you treat me like that, you bastard?'. Andrew feels attacked for no good reason, and shouts back with more abuse. Pat may then feel helpless and victimised. Neither of them will feel happy with the exchange. Yet, if Pat were to say to Andrew, 'I'm angry with you because you haven't done any washing-up for weeks!', he will know why she is angry, and there will be a chance for them to talk about the washing-up, and work out a solution. Pat will feel better about herself, and the tension between them is less likely to build up to the point of violence. Andrew will have more information about what annoys Pat, and they will communicate better.

If you have spent a lifetime squashing your feelings, it will take time and effort to get into the habit of expressing anger in an assertive, but not aggressive way! But the following tips will help.

Assertiveness training

Learn about anger and assertiveness. Read about them and if possible, find an assertiveness training or other personal development group. (You could try your local authority adult education classes; details of these and other classes should be available at your local library.)

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Caring for yourself

Look to your general health, especially diet and exercise. Lack of certain nutrients can make people feel irritable and weak. Exercise increases our self-esteem, as well as our fitness and muscle tone. Find pleasurable ways to let off steam involving vigorous physical activity, dancing, chopping wood, jogging, or whatever you feel like. This will prevent tension building up in your body in a destructive way. Nurture your self-esteem: treat yourself kindly and give yourself regular treats.



How can I deal with my angry feelings better?

Examine your behaviour patterns

Get to know your own pattern of behaviour and history around anger. What was your family like when you were growing up? Who got angry, and what happened when they did? If no-one was openly angry, what happened to resentments and differences of opinion or of needs?

What unspoken messages did you receive about anger? Perhaps they were similar to these:

'Only men get angry, but nice girls don't. They grow up to be martyrs and victims.'

'Women's anger is too terrible to be talked about.'

'It's no good getting angry about anything, because they never take any notice of people like us, and it only gets you into trouble.'

'People often lose their tempers and break things, but there's nothing we can do about it. It'll all blow over soon.'

Think about these messages, and how they have affected your life. Do you still believe them? What do you think is possible for you now? Do you tend to bottle things up and get depressed, or do you tend to explode and be aggressive? How do you feel about your current pattern? Find someone to talk to about your feelings – an understanding friend, or a professional counsellor.

Acknowledge past hurts

It's important to acknowledge angry feelings left over from the past, especially your childhood. Nothing can change what happened to you, but your attitude to it can change. Past losses and injustices, big or small, can rankle for years. Painful experiences may include being neglected by your parents, bitter rivalry with a brother or sister, the death of someone close, or growing up in exile.

You may think you have forgotten about them, that it's pointless to go over old bones. But, if something suddenly happens to you in the present, and your response to it is totally over the top, it may become clear that these feelings are not so dead after all! While you remain unaware of them, they can cause unnecessary problems. But, if you can get to know them, you will have a chance of dealing more constructively with present situations.

For example, Sharon attends a parents' meeting at her children's new school. She finds herself increasingly irritated with the person chairing the parent-teacher association (PTA), who behaves in a very domineering way. Sharon comes away feeling depressed.

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The school has requested volunteers to help organise a fundraising event. It is just the kind of thing she usually enjoys, but now Sharon feels that she wants nothing to do with the social side of the school. Then she realises why she didn't like the Chair of the meeting. He reminds her of a bullying teacher, with whom she had some very bad experiences at school. Memories come flooding back of how hurt, angry and powerless she felt at that time in her life.

Sharon talks about this with her friends, and they remind her that she is no longer powerless or friendless – that this is an opportunity to make a different kind of experience of school. Some of her friends have children at the same school, and share her concerns about the style and presence of the PTA Chair. Sharon can separate her old experience of the bullying teacher from her current challenge as a parent. She can have the possibility of a more constructive engagement with this dominant person. She feels free to join in the fundraising event, and plans with her friends and other parents how they might change the way the PTA is run!



What should I do when I feel myself getting angry?

Stop and think, if at all possible! There is a traditional saying, which is very sound, that goes: 'Hold your breath and count to ten before you say anything.'

Walk away from situations

It's a good idea to ask yourself, 'Am I so angry I can't think?', and, 'Am I wanting to lash out and hit someone?'. If the answer to either of these is yes, then walk away from the situation. Tell the other person that you are too angry to speak to them at this moment, if you can. Go away somewhere to calm down.

If necessary, let out the desire to lash out by hitting a cushion, breaking crockery if you have to, shouting, screaming or making some kind of angry noise where it will not alarm anyone.

Resolve unfinished business

'Why am I so angry?'. Finding the answer to this is important for the next step. Are you angry because of something that is happening now, that threatens you, your life, your loved ones, your work, someone or something that you value? In other words, is your anger justified and in proportion? Or is it that some of the anger that you feel is not really due to the person and situation that you are facing now, but to some unfinished business from the past?

If your anger turns out to be more to do with the past than the present, then think about how to address that before, or as well as, dealing with the current situation.

The way to find out about this is by talking it over with another person, preferably someone who is not involved, personally. Once you are clear that the anger is about the here-and-now, prepare to tell the other person that you are angry!

What is the best way to tell someone I'm angry?

Before you meet

- Get clear in your head what your rights are, and be realistic. What do you want to happen? What are you entitled to? What might happen when you tell the person you are angry? Can you do anything about that? Can you live with the consequences?



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- Question your conclusions. You may believe that if you tell your boss that you're angry she'll sack you, but this belief may not be true. It may even be part of a depression; your way of keeping yourself powerless! If in doubt, talk to someone about your fears. It's important to clear up any doubts before the meeting, or you may sabotage your chances of being heard.
- Set the scene. Choose a time and a place that will suit you, and where you think the other person is more likely to listen and hear what you have to say. Make sure you won't be disturbed; warn other people not to interrupt you for a set period.
- Choose a setting that allows you to feel that you are both equal and that you both matter. Either sit in chairs at the same height, or both stand up. Have the light coming in at a sideways angle, not behind one of you (people get anxious if they can't see the face of the person they are talking to). Make sure there are no physical obstacles (such as a pile of papers) between you.

During the meeting

- Keep your body language assertive; alert, relaxed, keeping direct eye contact, with your feet firmly on the floor.
- Keep breathing! This will help you to keep calm.
- Be specific. Say, 'I feel angry with you because...' This avoids blaming anyone, and shows that you are taking responsibility for your half of the problem. The other person is less likely to feel attacked.
- Listen to the other person's response, and try to understand their point of view. Treat them with the same courtesy and attention you want from them.
- Ask for more time or another meeting, if things can't be resolved at once.
- Finish by thanking the other person for their time and attention, whatever the outcome.

After the meeting

- Give yourself a pat on the back and a treat for the time and effort you have put into managing your anger assertively!

Following these tips won't mean you never get angry, but it will help you feel better about yourself.

What if I'm angry about a public issue?



Sometimes, people are angered by political issues; by sleaze in public life, by the treatment of people in mental hospitals, or by the invasion of one country by another, for instance.

Anger can be an important fuel to campaigns for social justice. But, as with personal issues, it's important to think about what you are doing and to use your anger assertively. In a healthy society, participation in public campaigns for justice in a non-violent and responsible way would be seen as evidence of maturity and good citizenship.

There's a well-known prayer that asks, 'Lord, give us the courage to change what needs to be changed, the strength to bear what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference'. Being in touch with your own anger is a potent source of that knowledge and wisdom.

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Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or Mindinfoline on 0845 766 0163.

Alcoholics Anonymous

PO Box 1, Stonebow House, Stonebow, York YO1 7NJ
helpline: 0845 769 7555
web: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

National network of local Alcoholics Anonymous groups. Look for 'Alcoholics Anonymous' in any telephone directory

Andrea Adams Trust

Hova House, 1 Hova Villas, East Sussex BN3 3DH
tel. 01273 704 900, web: www.andreaadamstrust.org
UK charity dedicated to tackling workplace bullying

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

The Globe Centre, PO Box 9, Accrington BB5 0XB
tel. 01254 875 277, email: babcp@babcp.com
web: www.babcp.com
Full directory of psychotherapists available online

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG
tel. 0870 443 5252, web: www.bacp.co.uk
See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

Careline

326–328 High Road, Ilford, Essex IG1 1QP

counselling line: 020 8514 1177

email: careline@totalise.co.uk web: www.carelineuk.org

Crisis telephone counselling service on any issue

Depression Alliance

35 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JB

tel. 020 7633 0557, fax: 020 7633 0559

email: information@depressionalliance.org

web: www.depressionalliance.org

Information and support for anyone affected by depression

Everyman Project

1a Waterlow Road, London N19 5NJ

helpline: 020 7737 6747

Counselling for men who want to stop their violence

Supportline

PO Box 1596, Ilford, Essex IG1 3FW

helpline: 020 8554 9004, web: www.supportline.org.uk

Helpline for problems, including child abuse, bullying, depression, anxiety, domestic violence and sexual assault

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

167–169 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PF

tel. 020 7436 3002, web: www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Umbrella organisation for psychotherapy in UK

Women's Aid

PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS

helpline: 08457 023 468, email: info@womensaid.org.uk

web: womensaid.org.uk

National domestic violence charity

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Further reading

- The anger control workbook: simple, innovative techniques for managing anger and developing healthier ways of relating* M. McKay, P. Rogers (New Harbinger Press 2000) £13.99
- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- A bright red scream: self mutilation and the language of pain* M. Strong (Virago 2000) £9.99
- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- Good mood food* M. Van Straten (Cassell 2002) £10.99
- Heal the hurt: how to forgive and move on* A. Macaskill (Sheldon Press 2002) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2002) £1
- Manage your mind: the mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, T. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £13.99
- Managing anger: dealing positively with hurt and frustration* G. Lindenfield (Thorsons 2000) £7.99
- The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2003) £1
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Overcoming anger and irritability* W. Davies (Robinson 2000) £7.99
- Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Understanding bereavement* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2002) £1
- Understanding self-harm* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:

autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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