



# Understanding Anger for Your Health and Relationships

Gilbert R. Parra, Associate Professor, Child, Youth, and Family Studies

Jaci J. Foged, Extension Educator

Holly N. Hatton-Bowers, Assistant Professor, Child, Youth, and Family Studies and Early Childhood Extension Specialist

Linda Reddish, Extension Educator

Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator

*Anger is a feeling we all experience. The ways you manage your anger can make a difference for your health and your relationships. This NebGuide discusses the effects that anger has on the human body and provides strategies to help control and manage the anger in your life and keep your cool.*

## Has This Ever Happened to You?

You are finishing one last task while your child is playing with a friend. Suddenly, the friend grabs your child's favorite toy. Your child is upset and starts screaming. At that moment, your cell phone rings. It will be the second time you have missed this call if you don't answer. You reach for your phone, but now both children are screaming. Your frustration is increasing, moving towards anger.

The question is "How do you respond to this situation and deal with all the emotions—particularly the negative ones?"

## What Is Anger?

We all have feelings, and they are very real. Sometimes we act as if feelings are not acceptable or okay, especially anger. Yet, anger is a typical, human emotion that can be intense and occur in response to one of many specific

things. Most often, anger arises because you feel that you are not getting what you want or need. It can also occur when you feel that others do not respect you or care how you feel. Anger can often be felt because of hurt. What makes one person angry may not make someone else feel that way. Some people also have difficulty noticing that they are angry.

Characteristics of individuals easily angered:

- Low tolerance for frustration
- Difficulty taking things in stride
- Quick to anger if the situation seems unjust, such as being corrected for a minor mistake

## Effects of Anger

You may have heard the saying, "Holding anger in is bad for you." While part of this statement is true, venting angry emotions can impact you in many negative ways. Holding in anger and venting are not healthy ways to deal with anger. Doing so can affect your decision-making skills, your health, and your personal relationships.

Some of the ways anger may physically affect you:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Migraines
- Suppressed immune system
- High blood pressure
- Chest pain
- Stomach pains

Some of the ways anger may affect your relationships:

- Drive friends and family away
- Increased problems at work
- Lower satisfaction in your close relationships

## What Triggers Your Anger?

### *Unresolved Anger*

Some people have been betrayed, humiliated, invalidated, neglected, or abandoned by those who are important to them (for example, parents and romantic partners). These experiences often result in anger, hurt, sadness, and fear. Unresolved feelings, especially anger, can make it difficult to trust others, to use effective strategies to manage emotions, and to see the positive parts of ourselves.

What triggers your anger? Work? Children who won't listen? Difficult relationships? Feelings of disappointment or disrespect? Not feeling understood?

Unresolved anger can also contribute to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. If you have been hurt emotionally by someone important to you and you find yourself feeling angry, hostile, and irritable on a regular basis, you may have unresolved anger. Fortunately, strategies for dealing with unresolved anger have been developed. Research shows that *working toward a spirit of empathy and forgiveness* can help resolve persistent feelings of anger. For some, seeking help from a professional who is knowledgeable about unresolved anger is the best strategy for addressing these types of persistent negative feelings.

## Strategies to Help Control Anger and Keep Your Cool

Implement these strategies to help control and manage your anger:

### *1. Practice talking yourself out of anger*

Ask yourself, "Is it really worth getting angry about?"



### *2. Use the thought-stopping technique*

This strategy sounds so simple you may think that it couldn't possibly work, but it does. The moment you start to become angry, say the word "Stop!" to yourself and, if necessary, walk away, so you will not do or say something you will regret. This will give you time to get your anger under control and then come back when calmer. It is okay to tell the other person, "We need to stop this conversation until we both can speak in a calm voice." Then walk away to give each of you time to cool down.

### *3. Reduce artificial stimulants*

Cut back on or eliminate nicotine, caffeine, sweets, and other substances that stimulate the nervous and cardiovascular systems.

### *4. Distract yourself*

When you feel angry, scan your environment for something else to occupy your mind. If possible take a quick walk or listen to some music.

### *5. Be physically active*

Physical activity can help to reduce anger. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.

### *6. Breathe deeply*

Close your eyes, and exhale long and deeply until all the air is out of your lungs. Slowly take in as much air as your lungs will hold. Blow out five short puffs. Breathe in five short puffs through your nose. Hold it as long as you



can. Exhale . . . long and deeply. If necessary, take three deep breaths before speaking.

Breathing may help your body become less tense and lower your feelings of anger. This breathing may also cause you to **respond** to a situation rather than **react**.

### 7. Ask Yourself Three Questions

When you feel yourself getting annoyed, stop and ask yourself three questions before you react:

- Is this issue important to me?
- Is my anger justified?
- Is there anything that anger can do to fix the situation?

If you answered “yes” to all three questions, instead of losing your temper, describe the specific behavior that is

bothering you. Ask yourself why you are feeling angry and try to understand the real cause. Or why you are feeling hurt. Or fearful. Be specific about the behavior you want to be changed. Ask yourself what you can do to change the behavior. Be careful not to place blame on others.

### 8. Confide in a friend or family member

When we feel anger we may be in a state of fight, flight, freeze or faint. Our stress response system is activated. During these stressful states it can be helpful to seek out the support of a friend or family member.

Managing anger can be challenging and takes mental discipline, but the rewards are worth the effort. Do not ignore your feelings of anger. When managing anger, people tend to be on the lookout for mistreatment by others—and their distrust is sometimes enough to create that very behavior. Remember that we usually take our anger out on those we love the most. Ask yourself, “*What causes me to feel angry?*” and then look for ways to develop a spirit of greater trust and cooperation.

### Resources

- American Psychological Association. (2016). *Controlling anger before it controls you*. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/controlling-anger.aspx>.
- Fox, M., Germer, S., Fisher, C., & Rathje, D. (2007). *Survive, strive, and thrive: Keys to healthy family living*. Nebraska Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.
- Sandage, S. J., & Worthington Jr., E. L. (2010). Comparison of Two Group Interventions to Promote Forgiveness: Empathy as a Mediator of Change. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 32(1), 35. University of Nevada, Reno. (2016). *Anger: How to manage your anger and hostility*. <http://www.unr.edu/shc/files/Anger.pdf>.
- Worthington, E. (2005). *The power of forgiving*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.

---

This publication has been peer reviewed. Nebraska Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2018, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.