

Chapter 1

Things You Need To Know About Anger

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining anger
 - ▶ Picking up new ideas and information
 - ▶ Understanding the way anger works
 - ▶ Avoiding the pitfalls of anger
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Anger is a natural survival mechanism and a normal emotion, even if you're usually a calm, optimistic and positive person. Healthy anger usually passes quickly without being intense or happening several times a day. Anger is meant to work as an alarm, warning you about possible threats – to your life, your values and beliefs, people you care about, even your pride. But when your angry feelings distract you from finding answers, anger gets in the way of your potential happiness and damages your health.

In this chapter I give you the basic facts about anger and how it works – this book's for you if you're looking for ideas or ways of changing your anger habits, or for more options for dealing with anger from others. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is tried and tested on anger and many other common human problems. Cognitive simply means thinking – you're using the power of thinking to change your actions. The aim of CBT is not to get rid of your anger but to help you react to anger in less intense, lasting and extreme ways. Instead of acting on impulse or angry feelings, you'll pick up ways to feel calmer and to solve problems without causing new ones.

Grasping Normal Emotions

Research into human nature shows that everyone shares some basic emotions. Studies suggest that having feelings helps the human race survive and thrive. Having feelings motivates you to act and react to what's happening in your life, as well as making it possible to get on with others, to remember events and to sort out what matters to you and why. Wherever you're born and however you're raised, you'll recognise the following six emotions and their associated facial expressions:

- ✓ Anger
- ✓ Disgust
- ✓ Fear
- ✓ Happiness
- ✓ Sadness
- ✓ Surprise

As well as showing in your expressions and body language, emotions also have physical effects. Anger is part of a survival reaction known as 'fight or flight'; in other words, your body gets ready to fight back or run away when you detect a threat. This gears you up to pay attention, think on your feet, or come up with new ways to solve problems – all good for your survival and success. But because anger gets your heart racing and produces a mixture of body chemicals, when it's extreme, lasts for a long time or happens too often, it's not helping your survival at all. Instead, it can lead to serious health problems or even early death, whether you're showing anger or hiding it.

Following the CBT loop

Using CBT helps you understand how your thinking, your body reactions and emotions, and your behaviours link together. When you feel angry, your body's reacting to anger with chemicals like adrenaline, you're thinking angry thoughts, and your actions are affected by anger too – I show how this works in Figure 1-1.

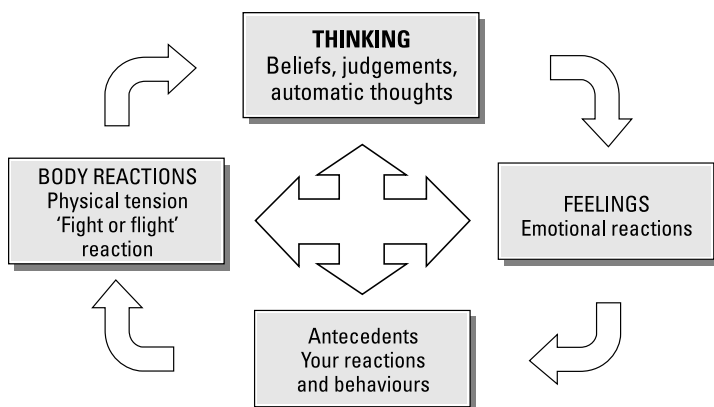


Figure 1-1: The basic CBT loop: mind, body and action.



Your thinking affects your feelings and actions, feelings affect your thinking and actions, and actions affect thinking and feelings. This loop can be a vicious circle, but the great news is that you can break a circle at any point – there's no one right place to start. In Chapter 4 I deal with changing angry thinking, in Chapter 5 I focus on feeling differently and in Chapter 6 I offer ways to calm your angry behaviour.

Feelings about your feelings

Humans can be complicated. As if feeling angry isn't enough, you can feel depressed about how it's ruining your relationships, nervous about whether your angry friend will become violent, guilty about shouting at your child, or be taken over by the desire for revenge against someone who's hurt your feelings. And when you're trying hard to change your angry habits, feeling unmotivated can bring your plans crashing down – leaving you feeling puzzled because you know you'll really benefit from changing.

These feelings about your feelings add to what's bothering you about being angry, making it all feel worse. CBT helps you find ways to get to the bottom of why and how you get angry, to leave feelings about feelings aside, and to understand what you can do to start swimming instead of sinking.

Feelings about feelings also include other emotions hiding behind anger; for example, picking a fight after hearing sad news, because you're not keen on crying and it's easier to be annoyed that life is unfair. Sometimes, your anger seems to come out of nowhere but, looking back, lots of small frustrations were building up before something or someone pushed you over the edge into sudden temper. You can find much more on dealing with your real feelings in Chapter 5.

Knowing More About Anger

Understanding that anger is normal is your starting point. Anger is a natural human feeling – it's how you use it and express it that counts. Healthy anger is an energy, motivating you to speak up, stand up for yourself or get people together to make changes for the better.

Having more information about anger helps you to sort anger myths from the facts and to make good choices about how to turn angry feelings into helpful actions. Finding out the facts can help you feel better about problems you're having with anger. Talking about anger as though it's a sign of being unwell, nasty or in the wrong is a signal to stop and look for new information here. Facts about anger will help you to:

- ✔ Know how anger is different from aggression and violence.
- ✔ Spot how anger is affecting your body, your health and even how long you'll live.
- ✔ Understand anger triggers and situations better.
- ✔ See differences between unhealthy and healthy anger.
- ✔ Learn new ways to change angry habits.

Everyone knows what it's like to feel angry and to face anger from others. Studies show that most people feel angry several times a week, if you include everything from irritation right through to fury. As much as 60 per cent of the time, this involves shouting or screaming, but only about 7 per cent involves mild physical aggression – for example, throwing a phone or pushing someone – and less than 2 per cent leads on to violence. So how do you know when anger is useful and normal or when it's a problem, if it happens so much?

Unhealthy anger:

- ✓ **Lasts a long time:** For around 30 per cent of people, unhealthy anger lasts more than a day.
- ✓ **Happens a lot:** Unhealthy anger occurs more than five or six times a week.
- ✓ **Escalates out of proportion to the trigger:** You may smash your phone after losing reception while you're chatting, for example.
- ✓ **Gets out of hand, bringing trouble:** Being expelled, arrested or convicted are all examples which have bad effects on your health, relationships and at work.
- ✓ **Involves using poor coping strategies:** You may be coping by means of using swearing, insults or shouting, and calming down using drink or drugs.

Studies show that letting anger take over your thoughts and actions every time you feel it trains your anger to become stronger. Instead of becoming more angry, with some CBT tips and techniques, you can choose to *practise healthy ways* to make your anger work *for* you by:

- ✓ **Keeping your reactions in proportion to triggers:** Rage about missing a train means you can't react much more strongly to something *really* awful.
- ✓ **Choosing actions instead of just reacting:** Using angry feelings as a warning that you need to discuss a problem or make some changes, instead of getting your own back on the quiet or boiling over.
- ✓ **Letting anger go as soon as you've got the message that there may be a problem:** Living without suppressing anger ('I don't want to talk about it'), denying it ('I'm not angry at all – really'), or throwing your weight around ('I'll show you').
- ✓ **Learning to accept and forgive:** Life isn't perfect, and neither are people. No matter how much you want life to go well or believe it should be fair, getting wound up by problems rarely helps you to find the best answers.
- ✓ **Spotting unhelpful beliefs which turn irritation into fury:** Teaching yourself to see every situation in life as having positives as well as negatives.



Improving your anger management means focusing on negative feelings that cause you trouble, just for now. Because this can increase other negative emotions too, including depression, anxiety, guilt, revenge, worry or jealousy, it's worth being ready for this in advance. Whatever CBT exercises, tips or techniques you try out from this book, remember to get a cool-down tactic ready first. As soon as you've finished an anger management exercise, swap your focus to something positive – for example, upbeat music which quickly improves mood, or mindfulness exercises to help you move away from angry thinking.

Discovering the point of anger

Maybe people say 'There's no point in getting angry.' But this isn't true. Your body has an inborn *fight or flight* reaction, protecting your survival.

Angry emotions:

- ✓ Warn you there's a problem or threat to deal with
- ✓ Warn others you're feeling cross or under attack
- ✓ Show you're protesting about a situation
- ✓ Help others understand what you're bothered about
- ✓ Give you energy to change things

Looking at anger scripts

The world you grow up in, your culture and family teach you what CBT calls a *script* – a set of reactions to anger, recognised as fairly standard. What's considered acceptable and the results you get depend on the culture you're from or living in now. It's not always obvious either – swearing is common on TV and in films, but if you swear in public or in certain situations, other people won't take kindly to it.

Normal reactions to anger include:

- ✓ **Behaviours:** Crying, pouting, slamming doors or throwing objects, walking around, pointing or making gestures are typical actions.
- ✓ **Body:** Inborn reactions include tense muscles, faster heart rate and breathing, feeling hot or prickly. Many animals make noises or displays to warn others that they're

angry; humans share some of these signs, like going red, changing posture or shouting.

✓ **Verbal reactions:** Raising your voice, shouting or screaming, hurling insults, making threats or using a sharp tone of voice all let others know how you feel.

✓ **Thinking distortions:** Typically, anger triggers exaggerated accusations or untrue remarks in the heat of the moment, such as ‘You’re a complete idiot’ or ‘I always get the blame; you’re just out to get me.’

CBT sees these as accidental thinking mistakes, because although at the time you may mean them, they’re interpretations not facts. Beliefs like this distort the truth without solving situations. See Chapter 4 to find out more.

Unhealthy anger is linked to hostile attitudes that are often deeply held, for example believing people mean to be hurtful, perhaps because you were hurt in the past. Making changes to hostility affects anger control – being less suspicious of people helps you interpret what they do as accidental, not deliberate.

Staying in charge with healthy anger

The effects of frequent, intense or hidden anger cause your body great stress. When your anger is not under control, your problem-solving abilities also go out of the window – thinking about the possible results of your choices doesn’t come until after you’ve made the choices. Studies show that you’re very likely to regret what angry behaviour does to your health, relationships, job or criminal record.

Whenever you’re angry without your feelings or reactions causing you more problems, you’re managing anger well. Of course, dealing with anger differently benefits others around you, too, particularly if your behaviour is harmful or if you’re a role model for children. But most of all, *you* benefit from managing your anger well.

Take a look at some patterns of expressing anger, in Table 1-1, and find the ones you think are familiar for you.

Anger is linked to some common reactions. Anger management helps you understand which habits you’re using and offers alternatives with better results. Which of these actions and reactions do you recognise in yourself and others?

Table 1-1 Actions and Reactions Linked to Anger

Step	Tactic				
	Avoidance	Defensiveness	Exaggerating	Mentioning the Past	Having to be 'Right'
Behaviour	Saying nothing	Denying problems, avoiding admitting your contribution to them	Making sweeping generalisations: 'You always ...' and 'You never ...'	Bringing up old troubles Fighting criticism with criticism	Insisting that your views or feelings are the only right ones
Aim	Avoiding stress by avoiding arguments	Avoiding stress by avoiding criticism	Showing how strongly you feel	Reminding others 'It's not the first time ...'	Avoiding feeling Wishing for control
Early Result	Stress increases as tensions rise; resentments fester, and a much bigger argument eventually results	Others fear or dislike bringing problems up, because you 'shoot the messenger' You're seen as touchy You can't say sorry	Others feel you blow things out of proportion	Throwing attention off the problem now Causing more problems Showing you can't forgive	Taking other views as personal attacks Feeling small or useless Feeling defensive and misunderstood
End Result	Exploding with an outburst of feeling, being angry and hurtful Undermining, sabotaging, sulking or retaliating	Problem grows Others feel ignored	You're seen as foolish, unreasonable or dishonest	You've thrown around new insults You've muddled the waters with old news	Being seen as rigid, inflexible, stubborn, unreasonable and suspicious
Alternative Behaviour	Discussing and solving conflict, or deciding it's too minor to spend energy on	Listening with interest Finding each objective point or fact Answering each concern Reaching agreed solutions	Checking your facts, keeping calm and focused	Resolving a problem and letting it go	Agreeing to disagree Recognising that two views can both be right Seeking compromise

Step	Tactic				
	Mind reading	Impatience	Trying to 'win' arguments	Blaming	Sabotaging
Behaviour	Deciding you know what others think, feel or need Interpreting without checking, e.g. they don't love me if they forget my birthday	Interrupting, pulling disbelieving faces, thinking about your next comeback	Trying to show others they're wrong Insisting on your point of view as the one right way Playing down others' views and feelings	Criticising and blaming to avoid admitting weakness or mistakes Protecting self-esteem	Talking about someone, not to the person Leaving out other people's viewpoints or feelings Ignoring others when they are speaking Not doing what others rely on you for
Aim	Confirming you're angry feelings	Dismissing what's being said, prioritising your own feelings	Trying to feel in control Showing you're justified	Attack is the best form of defence Shaming others to avoid feeling ashamed	Getting your way without direct conflict Showing disrespect without looking angry or controlling
Early result	Tension and hostility in the air Criticism Misunderstandings	Feeling of control, superiority Telling yourself you're right Protecting yourself from reality	Disrespecting others' feelings Making things over-simple	Others feel attacked Hostility and anger increases on both sides	Being undermining and disrespectful Avoiding your difficulties with compromise Distorting the truth

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

Step	Tactic				
	Mind reading	Impatience	Trying to 'win' arguments	Blaming	Sabotaging
End result	Hostility and alienation, break-up or outbursts	Stopping you hearing others Stopping others hearing you	Everyone loses Relationships suffer You're seen as stubborn or harsh	Relationships suffer Solutions are not found You're seen as hostile or unreasonable	Being seen as dishonest, undermining, hostile, controlling Relationships suffer
Alternative Behaviour	Assertively describing the issue Understanding them by asking to check your opinions out	Listening hard Looking to understand Feeling empathy	Being curious about the view-point you can't see easily Trying to learn something you didn't know, by the end	Seeing the problem as a factual one Analysing the situation to solve it Agreeing your separate responsibilities	Using assertiveness Showing respect by discussing problems

Suffering the Consequences of Anger

Everyone has felt or at least seen anger having unwanted results. Whether you're reading this book for yourself or to help you deal with others, it's likely you have personal experience of a time when anger didn't pay off. Put simply, anger is supposed to work like an alarm clock: lasting, intense anger happening every day, outbursts of extreme anger and long-standing grudges are your warning signs that something's going wrong. Claims that it's better to 'get anger out' are also known to be unfounded: regular outbursts and ranting mean you're practising keeping your anger levels up, which is harmful.

Living an unhealthy lifestyle

A very common problem is the link between alcohol and anger. Over 50 per cent of assaults are linked to drinking excessive alcohol – that's equal to just three drinks per day for men or two for women. If you tend to get angry quickly, aren't able to let grudges go, are highly alert to possible threats or signs of disrespect, or experience high levels of body stress and tension, alcohol lowers your inhibitions about showing anger and increases your chances of being aggressive or violent. This happens because:

- ✓ Drinking distorts your interpretation of situations, so you're more likely to see ordinary behaviours as threats.
- ✓ Alcohol makes resisting impulses harder, so you're more likely to go along with your urges to react, before thinking through possible results.
- ✓ Alcohol makes you repetitive, which means repeatedly going over what's annoyed you, being unable to leave trigger situations, or chewing over old grudges.

It's also risky to feel angry often or intensely when your physical stress levels are already high. Anger raises your heart rate and blood pressure, and so does stress. The combination puts you at much greater risk of heart attack, stroke or high blood pressure. The emotional stress of constant pressure also means you're more likely to burn out, becoming anxious, depressed or just losing your enthusiasm for life or work.

Losing relationships

Constantly angry thoughts and feelings are wearing. Over the years, angry beliefs and attitudes can get stronger, making it harder to mix with, agree with or accept differences in other people. Judging the actions of others as deliberate makes you increasingly likely to consider revenge or to step over the line from imagining what you'd like to do to just doing it. Hostile beliefs, swearing, blaming others or arguing about little things become part of your everyday behaviour with people. When others react by not listening to you, avoiding you and rejecting your views or even your company, this confirms your belief that you're right to keep your guard up. Without exchanging views and compromising, you're more and more likely to be viewed with little respect.

These patterns are difficult in your general life, but often impossible to bear in a close relationship with your partner, spouse or child. Divorce is rated the second most stressful life event after the death of a partner. With the divorce rate currently at over 50 per cent, and divorces in second marriages running as high as 70 per cent, taking care of the family issues resulting from your anger is important.

If you're the partner of someone with an anger management problem, dealing with the other person by remaining a good role model instead of getting dragged into constant conflict is crucial to your health. Many people looking for information about anger management face anger from others regularly. Considering attending local classes on assertiveness or meditation are other useful options to help you keep yourself steady when it's hostile at home.

Struggling at work

The most obvious results of anger at work are those of being disciplined or fired. But plenty of evidence suggests that a whole range of other effects are also possible. Anger at work is linked to dissatisfaction, grievances, burnout and passive resistance to company goals. Blaming others, feeling a lack of respect and wanting to get revenge often result in behaviours at work labelled as bullying or that cause you to be sidelined as others try to avoid dealing with you.

The effects of working with someone who's constantly angry, argumentative or resistant to other views can be draining, because:

- ✓ Agitated or argumentative behaviour disrupts everyone's focus on goals.
- ✓ Workmates become involved in grievances or affected by the stress.
- ✓ Angry workers are often unreliable timekeepers or don't deliver on time.
- ✓ Anger is linked to poor physical performance and can be dangerous in manual work.

Dealing with ill-health

Anger is partly physical – of course, it's affecting your health. Taking a quiet look at how you're living gives you some idea of how much risk you're running. If you experience more than two of the signs below, consider taking some steps to reduce your stress levels before starting to work on anger at all:

- ✓ High blood pressure
- ✓ Feeling surges of adrenaline when you face new or unexpected situations
- ✓ Panic attacks, excessive sweating or irregular heart beats
- ✓ Neck pains, sharp muscle pains or frequent headaches
- ✓ Finding it hard to fall asleep, waking in the night or waking early
- ✓ Noticing your mind going over and over old grudges or problems
- ✓ Having a drink or taking drugs to relax at the end of most days



'Caffeine headaches' are on the rise. The increased popularity of coffee shops, large size of typical servings and habits like adding extra shots of espresso may be a treat in your week. As a rough guide, three standard mugs of real coffee a day is your maximum before your body starts suffering side effects. That's without counting colas, tea, cold remedies and so on. Possibly you're not really irritable – you're overdosing on caffeine!

Falling short of your potential

Success can come in all kinds of ways. But whether reaching your true potential involves skilful physical performance, mental or intellectual concentration, coming up with new ideas or living within loving and supportive relationships, anger should be a driving force in your life – a positive energy and not a positive nuisance.

You always have the potential to turn anger to your advantage. Even people with lifetime anger problems can turn their habits around – if you’ve learned habits, you can relearn new ones.

Using New Tactics to Manage Your Anger

CBT offers lots of ways to swap old tactics for new ones that can change your anger management habits:

- ✔ **Behaviour:** Acting and reacting differently to old anger triggers. Action is the bottom line in changing your habits. How you behave affects you and everyone around you. Changing for the better brings you better results in life.
- ✔ **Emotions:** Knowing your real feelings. Being angry when you’re feeling frightened, sad or uncertain doesn’t help. Instead of getting something you need, you end up dealing with your own anger and its results. Working out your real needs helps you fulfil them or cope with not having an answer.
- ✔ **Physical aspects:** Looking after yourself. Being tired, hungry and unwell or in pain can lower your tolerance to anger triggers. Being hyped up on adrenaline or suffering the after effects of drugs, alcohol or caffeine can undermine your ability to cope. A quick guide that’s often used in recovery from addictions is HALT – Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. This is a great way of reminding you that checking your physical state before you face challenging or frustrating situations heads off anger that you never need to go through.
- ✔ **Thoughts:** Spotting your triggers and thinking mistakes. Getting better at understanding how thinking and beliefs can sidetrack you into anger helps you develop positive automatic thoughts and healthy anger management.