

A PRIMER ON ANGER MANAGEMENT

If you think you have a problem with your anger (or have been told that you do), find out who specializes in anger management and/or family violence treatment in your area, and make an appointment for a consultation. The information outlined below is not a substitute for counseling, but rather a temporary guide until you can obtain professional help. If you are in crisis or think you may be in danger of assaulting someone, call your local crisis line.

How well you manage your anger, and how well your relationships improve as a result, will depend on three factors: effort, consistency and setting priorities. You are trying to change behaviors that have been established over a lifetime, ingrained in your personality, so don't expect them to go away overnight. You can, however, start by taking responsibility for your behavior, including the use of verbal and emotional abuse and physical aggression upon others. Controlling your behavior starts by managing your anger. When you are in a conflict with another person, you must first control your anger before you can hope to resolve the problem. Resolving conflict depends on communicating in a clear and respectful manner, which is impossible at high levels of anger. Trying to go directly from high anger to conflict resolution (A) doesn't work. As the graph shows, conflicts can only be resolved by going through all of the steps (B)

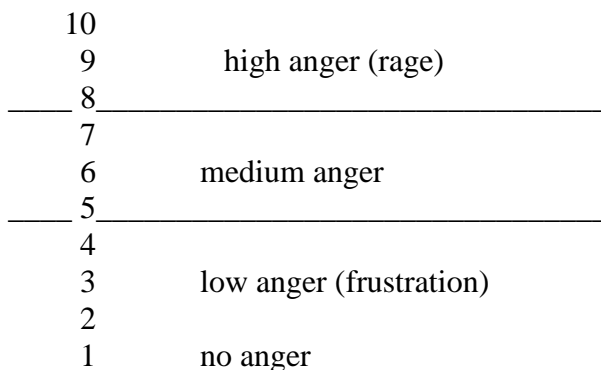
A. -----/

High anger	anger controlled	Communication	conflict resolution
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B.

high anger-----	--- anger controlled ----	---- communication ----	---- conflict resolution
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Make an effort to resolve the problems you can, but don't expect to resolve all your conflicts immediately – certainly not the more difficult ones - until you have learned healthy communication and conflict resolution skills. By managing your anger, you will gain confidence, which will promote more changes, generate goodwill and re-establish trust with your partner. At first, concentrate on two things: awareness and acceptance. You can't control what you aren't aware of, so don't ignore or "stuff" your anger. Too often, by the time you're aware of your anger the conflict has escalated, and the damage has been done. Start by identifying your anger at the frustration level, before it escalates into emotional or physical abuse. You can do this by taking your *anger temperature*, rating anger intensity on a scale of 1 to 10.



Don't discount frustration – frustration *is* anger, just at a lower level. After a busy day at work and a tough commute in traffic, a family member's surly tone of voice or a pile of dirty dishes may be all that is required for your anger to jump from a 4 to a 6, or even higher. By acknowledging that you are frustrated, you can better anticipate what will provoke you, and better respond to the situation. Practice identifying your anger by randomly taking your anger temperature during the day—at work, in traffic, at home, even when you seem to feeling fine.

Anger, like all other human emotions, serves many crucial functions. Anger tells you that others may be mistreating or taking advantage of you. When properly expressed, it may be a way of setting your boundaries and asserting yourself with others. Think of anger as a smoke alarm. When you hear a smoke alarm go off, you are often unsure whether there is actually a fire, or whether someone burnt the meat loaf. When there is a fire, the alarm doesn't tell you how large that fire might be, or how to put it out. The alarm is only a warning – a loud, obnoxious warning, just like anger.

Accepting anger as a normal human emotion is also important. Because the intense energy that goes with anger is often frightening, people tend to either ignore and stuff it, or to let it out in an aggressive, uncontrolled manner, hoping to relieve some of the tension. In their minds, people unconsciously associate anger with aggression, and worry that they'll react aggressively if they let themselves become aware of their anger. But refusing to acknowledge anger is to ignore reality. Stuffing keeps a person from dealing with what they are angry about, and may lead to stress-related physical problems, such as ulcers or hypertension. Also, letting it out as aggression, while sometimes providing tension relief, creates more problems and, ultimately, more tension. Although you can learn how to lessen the frequency and intensity of your anger, you will experience anger long after you complete an anger management program. There will always be occasions when no matter what you do, your anger will remain. Don't panic. Anger may be unpleasant, but you will never “explode” as a result of feeling this emotion. Even if you do nothing, the anger will eventually go away.

Accepting and controlling anger is a greater challenge when the other person is unreasonable, unfair or aggressive. Still, the fact is that while you don't have much control over other people, you have a great deal of control over yourself – especially your *behavior*. The following table illustrates this point, with one's potential level of control arranged from least to most:

MOST	your behavior
	your thoughts, feelings, wants, etc.
	other people's behavior
LEAST	other people's thoughts, feelings, wants, etc.

Until you learn how to alter your thinking and defuse your anger with those who may provoke you, concentrate on altering your behavior. This includes: keeping your lips pressed together to avoid saying something you will regret later; offering an apology when responsible for the conflict; or taking a *time out*, by walking away from the situation.

Take a time out whenever your anger temperature is at 5 or above, or you sense that the argument is getting out of control. If you're becoming too tense and are unable to listen to the

other person, then remove yourself from the situation. Let them know where you are going and for how long. Don't blame them or take a "parting shot" as you leave. Go to another room, walk around the block, or go see a trusted friend. Needless to say, it would not be helpful to drink alcohol or use other mind-altering substances. If your anger temperature is in the "rage" range of the anger scale, don't drive. Walk instead, for at least a half hour, until your anger level has dropped. If you have been physically aggressive in the past, don't return until you are sure your anger is under control. Stay with a friend or relative, or find a nearby motel or hotel. Stay the night, a week or as long as you need.

Taking a time out is not giving in. When you take a time out, you are taking charge of a volatile situation in the best way you can under the circumstances. Keep in mind that your priority is to gain greater control over your anger and to refrain from becoming aggressive. As you get better at this, you will eventually be able to discuss and resolve the most controversial and volatile issues.

If you follow this advice to the best of your ability, good things will happen. Change will be slow at first, and hard-earned, but it will be real - the kind of change that lasts a lifetime. You will sometimes resist this change. Right now, your aggressive/dysfunctional behaviors feel "normal" or "right" to you, but this is only because they are so deeply ingrained, and are literally part of your brain physiology. Although you cannot completely "unlearn" old, dysfunctional behaviors, you can, by practicing new and more appropriate behaviors, build alternative connections in your brain. As these alternative connections replace the old ones, the new behaviors you have been practicing will begin to feel more "normal."

Good luck!

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