

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

Anger Management

for
dummies[®]
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Distinguish between
healthy and unhealthy anger

Practice mindfulness
to keep anger in check

Help angry children and
teens learn to stay calm

Laura L. Smith, PhD

Clinical psychologist and
Keeper of Calm



Anger Management

3rd Edition

by Laura L. Smith, PhD

**for
dummies**
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Anger Management For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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Introduction

Anger is part of life — no less than memory, happiness, and compassion. Anger says more about you, including your temperament, how you view the world, how balanced your life is, and how easily you forgive others, than it does about other people. You don't have to be a victim of your own anger; you can actually *choose* how you respond when the world doesn't treat you the way you want it to.

In fact, you have just as much choice about how you express your anger as you do about what color shirt you wear, what you eat for breakfast, or what time you go jogging this afternoon. Although it often *feels* like you don't have a choice about feeling angry, you do. You also have a choice about how much of yesterday's anger you carry into the future and how much anger you're likely to experience tomorrow.

No one is exempt from problematic anger. Anger is a very democratic emotion; it causes problems for men and women, kids and the elderly, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, people of all colors and ethnic backgrounds, believers and nonbelievers. Tens of millions of human beings needlessly suffer from *excessive anger* — anger that literally poisons — each and every day of their lives.

Anger isn't something that can or should be cured. But you'd be well advised to *manage* it at home, at work, and in your most intimate relationships. This book tells you how to manage your anger by focusing on the positive, get a good night's sleep, change your perspective on life, transform conflicts into challenges, and much more. Anger management has moved far beyond the simplistic (albeit well-intentioned) advice of years past to count to

ten or take a couple of deep breaths every time you get angry, and that's good news!

About This Book

How do you know when you have too much anger? Do you determine that for yourself, or do you let other people make that call? If you're not physically aggressive — physically hurting other people or poking holes in walls — does that mean you're not angry? Does it really help to vent, to get things off your chest, or are you better off keeping your mouth shut to keep the peace? Can angry people really change, or do they have to go through life suffering because that's just the way they are? And what should you do if you're on the wrong end of someone else's anger? These are all important questions that *Anger Management For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, answers for you.

This purpose of this book is to present you with new ways to look at anger:

- » Anger is more than a four-letter word; it's an extremely complex emotion that has meaning well beyond the crude and hurtful words people use to express it.
- » Anger can, and does, adversely affect your life when it occurs too frequently and is too intense.
- » Managing anger is something that is within your power — if you're willing to make the necessary lifestyle changes outlined in this book: changes in thinking, behaviors, communication, and habits.

Fortunately, there are many skills for managing difficult situations without excessive anger. You may want to focus on the area in which you're having the most trouble controlling your temper — at work, for example.

Or you may want to head straight for a chapter on jump-starting anger management. You don't need to read the whole book. That's up to you.

Note: Sidebars in this book contain interesting information, but they aren't essential reading. If you're someone who likes to cut to the chase, go ahead and skip the sidebars.

Foolish Assumptions

Here are a couple of assumptions that I have about you as the reader:

- » **You may or may not have a problem with anger, but if you don't have a problem with anger yourself, you know or love someone who does.** If you didn't buy this book for yourself, you bought it for your husband, wife, partner, brother, sister, son, daughter, father, mother, friend, or co-worker. Or one of those people bought it for you.
- » **You don't want to know everything there is to know about anger; you just want to know what you need to know to manage anger effectively.** Scientists have studied anger for years, but you won't find a bunch of scientific mumbo-jumbo in these pages. The book focuses on proven strategies to help you manage your anger, and that's it.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are those little pictures in the margins throughout this book, and they're there to draw your attention to certain kinds of information:



REMEMBER This icon alerts you to important ideas and concepts that you'll want to remember and that you can use even when you don't have *Anger Management For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, in hand.



TECHNICAL STUFF Every once in a while, there's an interesting bit of information that may be a bit more than you need to know. You can read these paragraphs if you want, but the information they contain isn't essential to your understanding of the topic at hand.



TIP The Tip icon suggests practical how-to strategies for managing anger.



WARNING This icon appears when a cautionary note is in order, when you should pay particular attention to potential problems, or when you need to seek professional help.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, *Anger Management For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. No matter how much you gain from what you read, check out the free online Cheat Sheet for additional ideas and tools. Just go to Dummies.com and type

“Anger Management For Dummies cheat sheet” in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

You don't have to read this book from start to finish to benefit from it. Each part and chapter is meant to stand alone in its discussion of anger management. Feel free to choose a topic that interests you, and dive in.

Whether you read *Anger Management For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, in its entirety or not, if you still find that you're struggling with anger, seriously consider getting the help of a professional. Anger management is a niche market, and you need to find someone who is both a licensed professional and has credentials (for example, PhD, MD, MSW, MA) and expertise in this area.



TIP Even if you benefit from this book, many people find that anger management classes help too. You get the extra benefit of having other people share their stories and hear yours. Class members usually give useful feedback to each other as well.

Part 1

Getting Started with Anger Management

IN THIS PART ...

Understand the different types of anger.

Find out when anger helps.

Figure out if it is time to change.

Take a look at the downsides of anger.

Chapter 1

Understanding Anger

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » **Identifying anger and where it comes from**
 - » **Examining the myths about anger**
 - » **Understanding how emotions work**
 - » **Finding help when you need it**
-

What in the world is happening on airplanes? Instances of air rage have increased dramatically. Being a flight attendant has become a dangerous occupation, not because of plane crashes, but because passengers are attacking flight attendants. Despite a zero-tolerance policy, passengers are losing their minds on airplanes. Although alcohol is a factor in about half of cases of air rage, the other half of rage comes from supposedly sober passengers. What is going on?

For starters, the world is coming out of the largest pandemic in a century. Politics have never been more divisive. Economic disparity has never been greater. Changes in climate have produced more natural disasters. People feel frightened, stressed, and very, very angry.



REMEMBER Anger forms part of the survival mechanism of human beings. When faced with a threat, humans, not unlike other animals, either run away, freeze, or attack. Anger fuels attacks. Angry people experience a surge of energy that helps them repel adversaries.

But anger can also have the opposite effect and lead to an untimely demise. Too much anger can cause heart attacks, precipitate disabling work injuries, ruin relationships, and lead to a variety of unintended negative consequences. Anger truly is a double-edged sword.

FINDING THE KEY TO ANGER MANAGEMENT

You'd probably like a simple answer to the question "Why am I so angry, and what's the single, most effective thing I can do about it?" You're hoping that one chapter in this book will provide that answer. But, alas, that's not the way it works.

Anger is a complex human emotion. By reading this book, you can come to understand where your anger comes from — that is, which and how many of those factors that are unique to you are at work here. It may be that you need better coping skills, to cut down on drinking, increase your social outlets, enhance your sense of purpose and meaning in life, or look for a new job. A few of these items, all of them, one of them, or perhaps more, may cause problems that result in your anger. The important thing at this point is to find the right recipe for your anger management and to use the information and resources in this book to bring your emotional life to a better place.

Defining Anger

If you're like most people, you know what anger is, or at least you think you do. For example, maybe your gut tells

you that a friend of yours feels angry. So you ask him if indeed he feels angry, and he responds, “No, not at all.” Of course, your gut could be wrong, and your friend really isn’t angry. But usually your intuition will serve you well in such instances. You can tell by your friend’s tone of voice, posture, and body language.

Anger is an emotion that involves certain types of thoughts that focus on other people’s intent to hurt you, unfairness, threats to your self-esteem, and frustrations. Anger expresses itself in the body (for example, muscle tension, loud voice, and restlessness) and behaviors (such as threatening actions, pacing, and clenching). Anger is a strong emotion that attempts to express displeasure and disapproval.

Choosing Anger

Humans are the only animals that have a choice about how they view the world. Cats, dogs, squirrels, hamsters, goldfish — they’re all creatures of instinct, which means they respond in predictable ways that are prewired into their nervous systems. Instincts are universal, so if you scratch a Goldendoodle’s tummy, he’ll instantly begin shaking his hind leg. All Goldendoodles do it, and they don’t have a choice in the matter.



REMEMBER The miraculous thing about being human is that you’re not ruled by instinct. Not only do you have *choices* about how you respond to the world around you (for example, when someone mistreats you), but even before that, you also have a choice about how you *perceive* or think about that person’s actions.

Do you think she did that on purpose? Was it an accident, or did he do it deliberately? Is the mistreatment specifically directed at you alone? Do you view this as a catastrophe or a life-altering event? Is this something that you think shouldn't have happened? These questions are all ones your mind considers, albeit unconsciously, before you have a chance to react — or, better yet, *respond* to provocation. Consider the following:

You might say that **Mike** is a born pessimist, but actually that's not true. Human beings aren't *born* with attitudes; those attitudes come from life experience. What *is* true is that Mike is the product of an alcoholic home, where things could be going well one minute and fall into complete chaos the next. He found out as a child not to expect the good times to last and that he and the rest of his family were always just one beer away from a family crisis.

So for all his adult life, Mike has expected that most things will eventually turn out badly, given enough time. No matter how loving his wife is or how cooperative his children are, in the back of his mind he harbors this expectation that any minute things will change for the worse, and he's ready to react in anger when that moment comes. Why will he get angry? It's Mike's way of defending himself against chaos, a way of feeling in control, which is a response that's different from when he was a child, hiding under the bed while his alcoholic father ranted and raved well into the night.

Mike is unaware of how his early childhood influenced his view of the world. Like most children of alcoholics, he figures that because he survived those unpleasant years (physically at least), he's okay. He also has no clue why he loses his temper so easily.



TIP

Many people with anger problems have troubled childhoods. Their anger during childhood usually made sense at the time as a way of coping with the difficulties they faced. However, they bring their anger into the present when it usually doesn't work very well. You can acquire new, more effective ways of coping, but it takes patience and work.

Dispelling Common Anger Myths

Before you can manage your own anger, you need to be aware of what anger is and isn't. Unfortunately, myths about anger abound. Here are some of the myths to dispel from the get-go:

- » **If you don't express anger, you just might explode.** The truth is, the more often you express anger, the more likely you will feel angry in the future. On the other hand, appropriately, carefully expressed anger can help you. So keep reading!
- » **Males are angrier than females.** If by angrier you mean how often people experience anger, it's simply not true that men are angrier than women. Surveys show that women get mad about as frequently as men. Men and women may express anger a little differently, but research has been inconsistent on that issue.
- » **Anger is bad.** Anger serves a variety of positive purposes when it comes to coping with stress. When *controlled*, it can energize you, improve your

communication with other people, and defend you against fear and insecurity.

- » **Anger is good.** When it leads to domestic violence, property damage, sexual abuse, drug addiction, ulcers, and self-mutilation, anger is definitely not good.
- » **Anger is only a problem when you openly express it.** Many angry people either suppress their anger (“I don’t want to talk about it!”) or repress their anger (“I’m not angry at all — really!”). People who express their anger are the squeaky wheels who get everyone’s attention; people who repress or suppress their anger need anger management just as much (see [Chapter 3](#) for more information about the costs of anger).
- » **The older you get, the more irritable you are.** It’s the other way around: As people age, they report *fewer* negative emotions and greater emotional control. People, like wine and cheese, do tend to improve with age.
- » **Anger is all in the mind.** When you get mad, that emotion instantly manifests itself in muscles throughout your entire body, the hairs on the back of your neck, your blood pressure, your blood sugar levels, your heart rate, your respiration rate, your gut, and even your finger temperature (it warms up!) long before you’re fully aware of what’s happening.
- » **Anger is all about getting even.** The most common motive behind anger has been shown to be a desire to assert authority or independence, or to improve one’s image — not necessarily to cause harm. Revenge is a secondary motive. A third motive involves letting off steam over accumulated frustrations — again with no apparent intent to harm anyone else.

- » **If you don't express anger, you'll be seen as weak.** Not so. In fact, a calm, measured, assertive response (see [Chapter 8](#) for more information about assertiveness) not only works better but also is quite powerful.
- » **People with anger problems have low self-esteem.** In fact, sometimes they do. However, a much more common companion of anger is excessively *inflated* self-esteem (see [Chapter 7](#) for more information about the role of self-esteem and anger).

ALEXITHYMICS: PEOPLE WITHOUT FEELINGS

Alexithymia is a word used to describe people who appear to lack emotions — including anger. Alexithymia is thought to be a fairly stable personality trait but isn't a formal, psychological diagnosis in and of itself. Although alexithymics actually do have feelings, they appear unaware and unable to learn from them. Alexithymics tend to

- Have difficulty identifying different types of feelings
- Appear stiff and wooden in relating to others
- Lack emotional awareness
- Lack enjoyment
- Have trouble distinguishing between emotions and bodily feelings
- Appear overly logical when it comes to decision-making
- Lack sympathy for others
- Appear perplexed by other people's emotions
- Be unmoved by art, literature, and music
- Have few, if any, emotional memories (for example, memories of childhood)

Don't disconnect from your feelings to manage your anger. You *want* to have emotions but you want to be in control of those emotions. You want to let anger move you to write a letter to the editor in your local newspaper about some social injustice. You want your anger to move you to stand up for yourself when your talents are being exploited in the workplace.

Anger that says to your spouse, “Hey, something is not working here” is good for a marriage. But if your anger only moves you to hurt others — or yourself — then you definitely have a problem. Think of anger as a tool that can help you throughout life if you know how to use it — and think of *Anger Management For Dummies* as a reference on how to use that tool.

- » **Only certain types of people have a problem with anger.** You can easily find angry truck drivers, college professors, physicians, grandmothers, lawyers, policemen, career criminals, poor people, millionaires, children, the elderly, and people of various ethnicities, nationalities, and religions. Anger is a universal emotion.
- » **Anger results from human conflict.** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. People get angry by being exposed to foul odors, negotiating traffic jams, aches and pains, computer problems, and hot temperatures — none of which involve (or can be blamed on) the direct, intentional actions of others.

Examining Emotions

Emotion can be thought of as a compound word. The *e* stands for “energy” and the *motion* means exactly what it says: “movement.” Emotions *move* you to act in ways that defend you from threat, lead to social attachments and procreation, cause you to engage in pleasurable pursuits, encourage you to reattach after some type of meaningful loss, and push you to explore your environment. Without emotion, life would stand still.



REMEMBER

Emotions are, by their very nature, meant to be brief, transient experiences. Typically, they come and go throughout the day, moving you in various directions, as evidenced by changes in your behavior. Not acting on an emotion like anger is unnatural and, in some instances, can be unhealthy. Emotions reflect changes in physiology — elevations in blood pressure, heart rate, blood sugar, and muscle tension — that are usually harmless because they're short-lived (that is, if you express them in a reasonable way). Emotions that aren't expressed remain trapped within your body, causing a sustained state of physiological tension — and that can be deadly.

Suggesting that anger is either expressed or unexpressed is actually untrue. All anger is expressed. The question is how. You probably think that you're expressing your anger when you do so in a way that other people can see, hear, or feel. Otherwise, you figure, you're not expressing it. But the reality is that *all* anger is expressed — some of it in ways that aren't observable right away. For example, you may not *look* or *sound* angry, but your anger may be expressing itself in your cardiovascular system (through high blood pressure or migraine headaches), your gastrointestinal system (through irritable bowel syndrome [IBS] or a spastic colon), or your musculoskeletal system (through TMJ [temporomandibular joint pain] or tension headaches).

Or anger may express itself in negative attitudes — pessimism, cynicism, hopelessness, bitterness, and stubbornness — or some form of avoidance behavior (giving people the silent treatment), oppositional behavior (“I don't *think* so!”), or passive-aggressive

behavior (“I’m sorry, did you want something?”). Anger may also sour your mood and leave you feeling down or depressed. You suddenly lose the enthusiasm you had previously.

Dr. Paul Ekman developed a list of seven primary emotions seen in all cultures around the world. [Table 1-1](#) lists these emotions and some of the ways they express themselves.

TABLE 1-1 The Seven Primary Emotions

<i>Emotion</i>	<i>How It's Expressed</i>
Sadness	The eyelids droop; corners of mouth turn down; people withdraw from others; thoughts focus on negative, pessimistic issues, losses, and inferior self-views; body temperature rises; and heart rate increases.
Joy	Corners of the eyes wrinkle; smiles and corners of the mouth turn up; thoughts dwell on positive enjoyment; laughter.
Surprise	Eyes widen and become rounder; the mouth opens; expression occurs and recedes rapidly in response to an unexpected event; thoughts focus on the unexpected aspects of what occurred and why.
Disgust	The nose wrinkles; the upper lip curls; also a rapid response to something that looks, smells, or tastes unpleasant; thoughts focus on avoiding or removing oneself from the disgusting object.
Contempt	The muscles in the cheek pull back, which results in a “half” smile or sneer; the head often tilts a bit back; thoughts focus on the inferiority of others.
Fear	The eyes open wide; lips stretch out; heart rate increases; body temperature drops; thoughts dwell on how to deal with danger — whether to fight, flee, or freeze; posture slumps.
Anger	The eyes glare and narrow; lips press together; body temperature and heart rate increase; posture puffs up; thoughts focus on issues such as unfairness, revenge, injustice, attacking, and getting even.

Getting the Help You Need