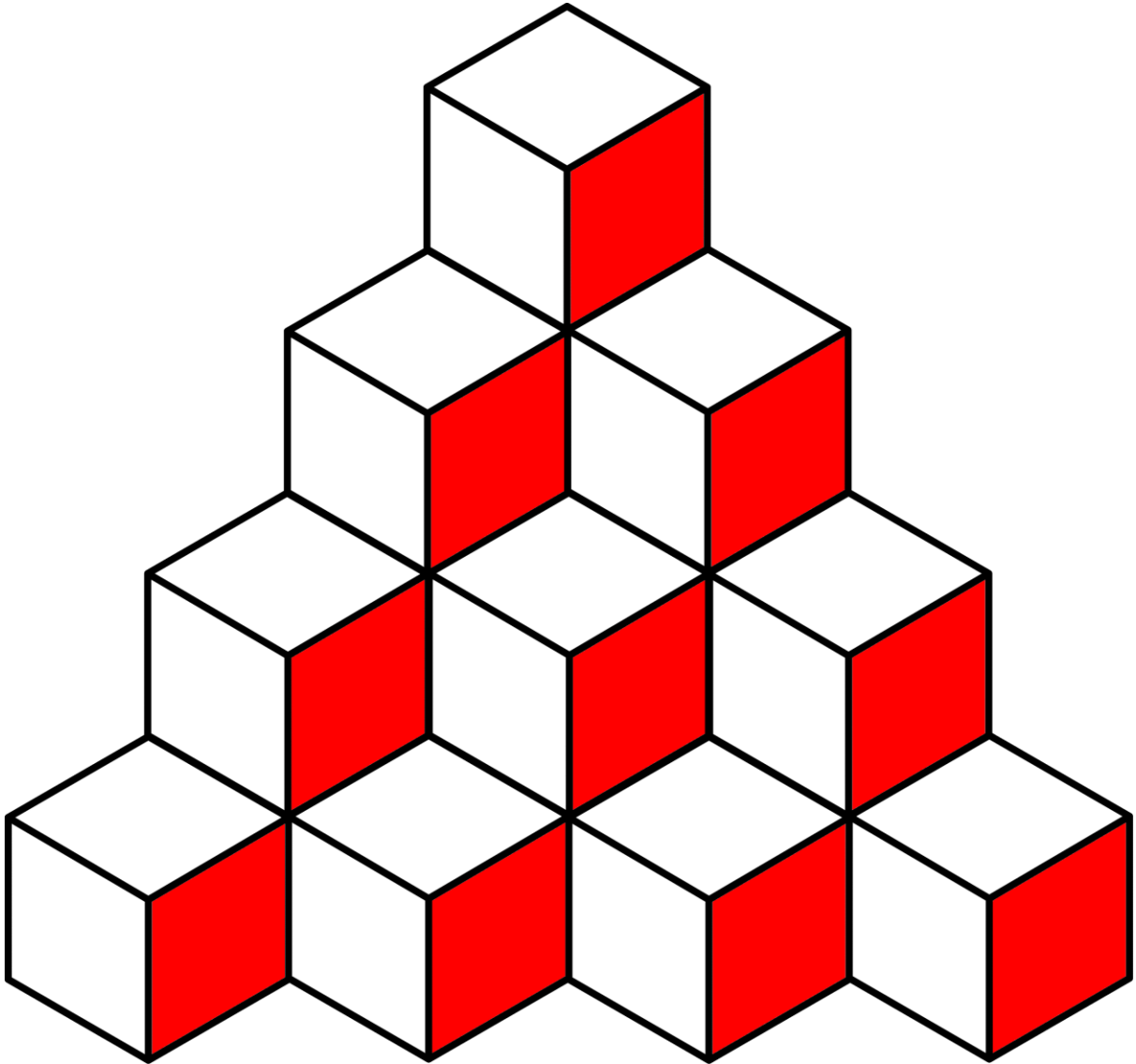


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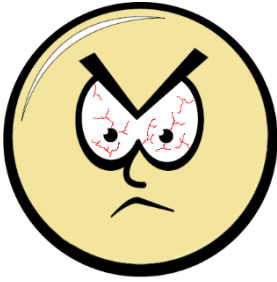
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We all get angry sometimes



Anger is a natural response to feeling threatened, insulted, deceived or frustrated. Anger may be one of the causes of, as well as the result of, conflict in your relationships with your family, at work and with friends.

Anger, however, is important. Like all emotions, anger has a function. Anger lets us know something needs to change and provides the energy we need to protect ourselves, our loved ones, or to drive change.

Anger can be useful, but it can also be frightening. When we get angry adrenaline causes the body to prepare for 'fight or flight', giving us energy and making us feel tense and alert. Releasing this tension and energy can be healthy, but it can be hard to do in a way that's constructive. Fighting or running away ('fight or flight') often isn't helpful, and anger can sometimes make things worse, not better.

Being angry by itself isn't usually a problem. It's how we deal with our anger that's really important. We shouldn't try to 'get rid of' anger. Not feeling angry at all can be a problem in itself, while suppressing anger can lead to problems later on. If we find our anger is a problem, we can learn to manage it better.

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Anger and aggression

It's easy to confuse anger and aggression.

Anger is an emotion, while aggression is a behaviour driven by anger.

Aggression is something we do, perhaps resulting in harm to another person.

Aggressive behaviour can be physical (non-verbal), verbal, or both. Alcohol and certain street drugs can make it more likely we'll become aggressive when we feel angry.

Anger becomes a problem when:

- We feel **too angry** (the emotion is out of proportion to the situation)
- We feel angry for **too long** (we have chronic anger – over time the emotion may evolve into an angry, cynical or mistrusting mood)
- We feel angry with the **wrong person**, in the **wrong place** or at the **wrong time** (we have *displaced* our anger)
- Our anger **hurts other people**
- Our anger is really **aggression**
- Our anger is **turned inwards** and we hurt ourselves

Anger can range from mild irritation to explosive fury. The more skilful we are at dealing with our anger, the less likely we are to bottle it up and eventually 'fly off the handle'.

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When we have problems with anger we might:

- Move very quickly from mild irritation to outright rage
- Take a long time to calm down
- Hold on to resentment for a long time
- Be more likely to act in an aggressive manner when we feel angry
- Frighten ourselves and other people with our anger
- Fear we'll lose control when we feel angry

Anger triggers

Some things seem to be universally irritating; while sometimes the things that make us angry can be as individual as we are. We're more likely to be angry if we're in a bad mood to begin with.

Of course, these things don't actually 'make' us angry; it's not really a 'cause and effect' relationship which compels us to feel angry. We have a choice about how we respond to our triggers.

Take a look at the following list. Are any of these 'triggers' for you?

- Queue jumping
- Being 'nagged'
- Being ignored
- Witnessing bad driving
- Witnessing bullying or cruelty
- Unwanted thoughts or memories
- Lack of sleep
- Being unjustly blamed for something

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Do you have any triggers that aren't on the list above? They might be things that happen to you (external triggers), or maybe they're intrusive or unwanted thoughts or memories (internal triggers). Make a note of them in the box below.

Recognising anger

When we're angry or in a bad mood it can feel like the whole world is against us; every little thing confirms how 'justified' our feelings are. It's like looking through 'blame goggles' – we don't notice the good things, just the things that make us feel even angrier.

Anger changes how we think, how we feel, sensations in the body and the way we behave. It changes the way other people feel about us and behave towards us. It also changes the things we notice in the world around us. Table 1 below shows some of the ways we might experience anger.

Table 1

Thoughts	Emotions	Sensations	Behaviour
'I'll show you'	Anger	Pounding heart	Shouting
'You're making a fool of me'	Irritation	Muscle tension	Pacing
'You've ruined everything'	Frustration	Clenched fists	Hitting out
'You can't do this to me'	Restlessness	Sweating	Throwing

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'I can't trust you'	Wanting to scream	Hot	Shoving
'I'll make you sorry'	Flashes of rage	Pounding head	Hurting self

Take a few moments to think about feeling relaxed. What do you think, feel and do when you're calm, easy, happy and relaxed? Jot down your answers in table 2 below.

Table 2

Thoughts	Emotions	Sensations	Behaviour

Primary and secondary anger

All of us have a basic 'built in' range of emotions from very early in life. They seem to be 'hard wired', part of our biological make-up. People from all over the world experience them – they include happiness, sadness, fear and anger. From a young age, children can be seen to experience anger, perhaps when they feel frustrated or blamed for something they didn't do. These 'wired in' emotions are called **primary emotions**. Anger is one of the primary emotions.

As we grow, we find that some emotions are more 'acceptable' than others. Parents, teachers and friends show us that we can't simply shout and lash out

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when we feel like it, we can't sulk when frustrated or refuse to cooperate with others simply because we don't want to. Different societies and different cultures have different ideas about what's 'appropriate' to feel and express.

Everyone's situation's different; some families want their children to be 'tough' so they discourage crying. Some want their children to be 'sweet' and popular, so they discourage anger and moodiness.

For adults who were brought up to be 'tough', expressions of anger may cover feelings of fear or self-doubt. Sometimes we might look and feel angry, when our primary emotion underneath is one of fear, hurt, or shame.

For people brought up to be 'nice' and 'polite', it may be hard to express anger. Smiling and politeness may cover anger and resentment. Anger may be expressed as **passive aggression** – stubbornness, negativity, moodiness or lateness for example.

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Thoughts, emotions, sensations and behaviour

Our thoughts, emotions, sensations and behaviour can reinforce one another.

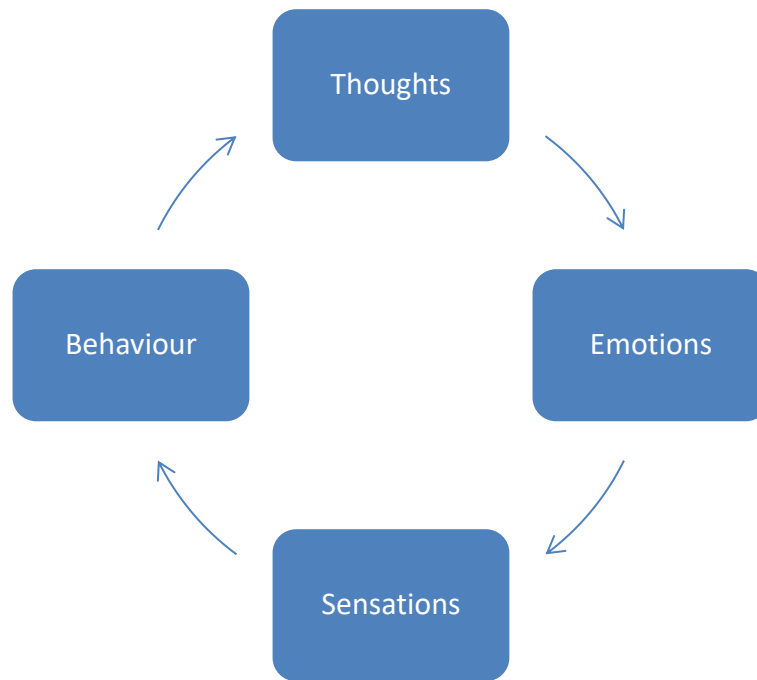


Figure 1

Figure 2 shows how the idea of being 'taken for granted' can result in hurt and angry feelings, leading to physical tension and relationship problems.

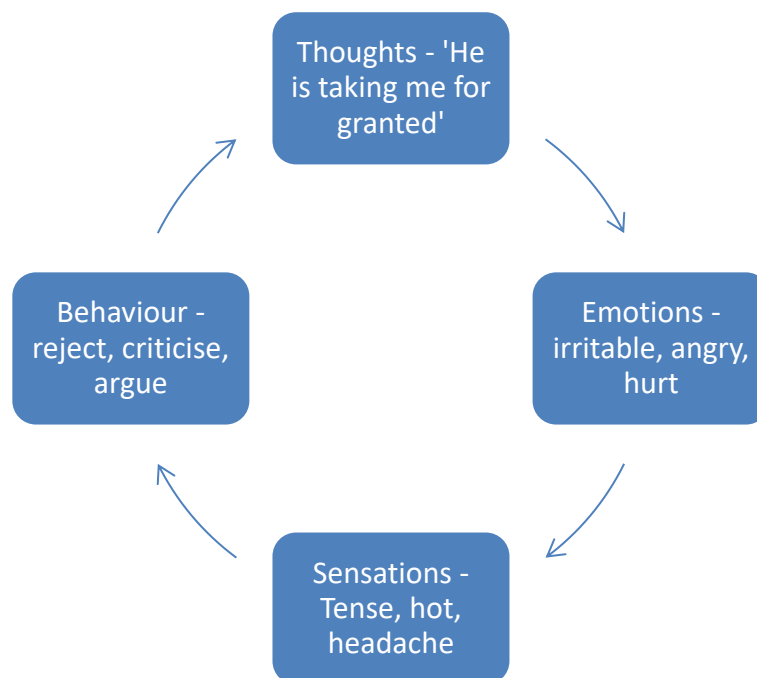


Figure 2

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Because these four areas – thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviour – link together, changing any one of them can begin to ‘break the chain’ of anger and help prevent anger leading to aggression.

How anger helps

It’s not all bad; without anger we’d be pretty vulnerable:

- Anger can help us notice when we’re being treated unfairly
- Anger can motivate us to stand up for our rights
- Anger can help us speak up for the rights of others
- Anger can help us tackle difficult challenges
- Anger can lead to intimacy and insight

What’s sometimes forgotten is that anger, expressed appropriately, can actually reduce the risk of violence. Anger can drive assertive behaviour. It can help resolve conflicts, rather than lead to bottled-up resentments which could explode into violence or aggression at some future time.

Being ‘**anger literate**’ means we have a wide range of responses when we feel angry – from feeling mildly irritated, through assertive behaviour, into respectful challenge and confrontation. It’s when we seem to jump from irritation to rage with little in between that we can gain a reputation for being unpredictable, bad tempered or even a bit scary.

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Aggression

There are two types of aggression – **impulsive** and **instrumental**.

Impulsive aggression is a spur-of-the-moment reaction to something we see as a threat. It is unplanned and reactive; it's often associated with stress and its goal is to reduce unpleasant sensations and emotions.

Instrumental aggression is purposeful aggression. It's used to pursue more long-term goals and may be associated with callous (so-called 'dark triad') personality traits; those people who may lack remorse, guilt and empathy. The goal of instrumental aggression is usually the control of people or situations.

A little anger can help us be taken seriously, to stand up for our rights and the rights of others. However, this usually only applies to small amounts of anger – anger is a bit like very strong chili powder. A little bit is plenty - too much makes things worse. Figure 3 shows how anger can very quickly make us less effective, because people get frightened and think badly of us when they think we're too angry.

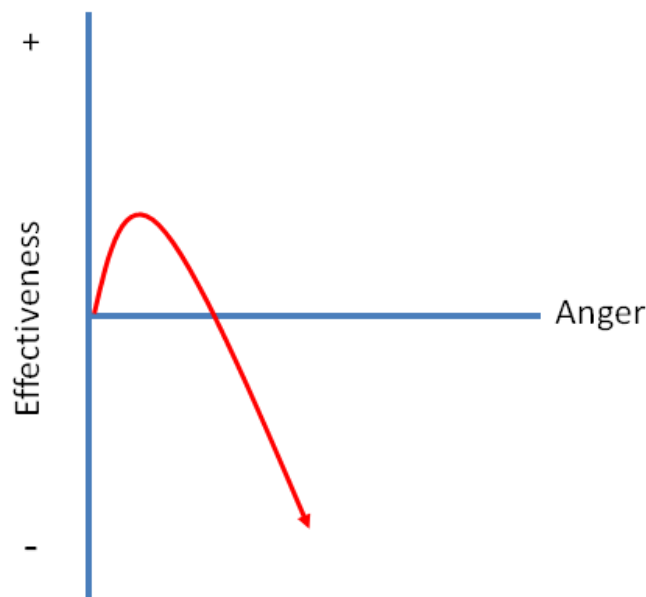


Figure 3

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Angry feelings can lead to destructive and violent behaviour. If we express our anger through aggression or violence it can be very frightening and damaging for other people – especially young people. This can damage our relationships and mean that people stop listening to us. We could be sacked or get into trouble with the law.

The anger bucket



Figure 4

Our emotions work like a bucket slowly filling up with water. Too much and it overflows. We can take hurts and frustrations for a long time, sometimes years, but unless the bucket empties it will probably overflow at some point.

We obviously don't want the bucket to overflow with anger. Mostly we find that anger tends to seep away over time. It takes some people longer than others, but it does eventually subside – thankfully our anger bucket 'leaks'!

Problems can start when we fill up the bucket more quickly than the anger can leak away.

Figure 5 shows how our stress level rises, then falls again in response to something stressful – for example, an argument over breakfast.

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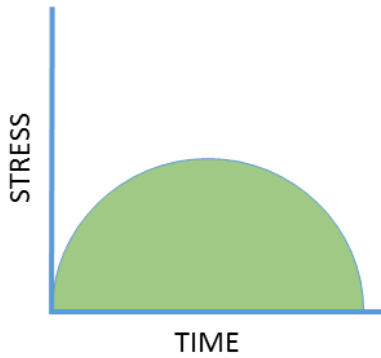


Figure 5

We all differ in the time it takes for us to 'cool down' after an upsetting event. Problems start when one stressor follows another. Figure 6 shows how another stressful event can come along before we've had chance to cool down from the one before it.

An argument over breakfast, problems getting the kids to school, a difficult commute, conflict with a colleague – they all add to, and maintain, our level of stress.

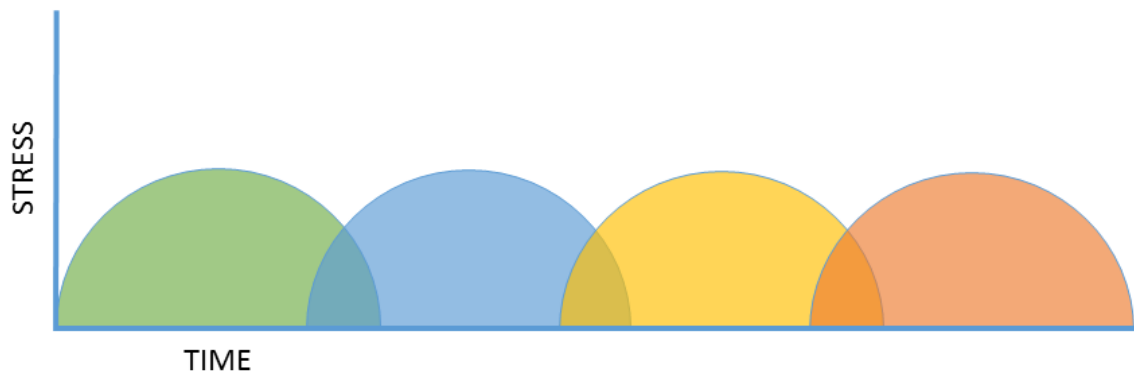


Figure 6

In this way our 'anger bucket' can fill up over time, unless we can do something to help the anger drain away.

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Dealing with anger

When we're angry, we have several choices, including:

- Express the anger
- Suppress the anger
- Manage our anger response

Express the anger

An enraged response might be warranted – perhaps we're being physically attacked or we witness a crime. More often, however, we'll later regret an angry outburst. We might feel we've lost control, and said or done something destructive that we wish we hadn't. Giving vent to our fury can lead us to make the best speech we'll ever regret!

Suppress the anger

You might decide to grit your teeth and ignore a provocation, which we all do from time to time. Occasionally this strategy can go wrong and we can get even angrier than before. This might happen if something has made you angry in the past and you didn't express your anger at the time – maybe you didn't want to, or perhaps you didn't feel it was safe to do so.

This can have negative consequences in the longer term. You may find that when something happens to annoy or upset you in the future, you feel extremely angry and respond with more emotion than is appropriate to the situation.

Trying to suppress your anger can also lead to other types of behaviour, such as responding in a passive aggressive way – for example being sarcastic or

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unhelpful, or refusing to speak to someone. Maybe you find that you are getting angry too quickly or too often, or perhaps over trivial things.

Sometimes people deliberately suppress their anger because they're afraid of losing control. Unfortunately, this can maintain our fear of anger and can make it hard to develop the skills necessary to communicate our feelings effectively.

Manage the anger response

There are a few key skills we can learn to help manage our anger effectively:

- **Pause and count to 20**
 - Slow your breathing, relax that muscle tension - unclench your fists, relax your shoulders. Count in your mind and exhale deeply.
- **Listen carefully**
 - Pay close attention to what people are saying – is this really a personal attack? Check out with them what they mean.
- **Don't respond in anger**
 - If in doubt, say nothing, slow down, walk away, maybe ask for time to think, avoid feeling pushed into something.
- **Look for the truth**
 - Look for the grain of truth in what people are saying, it's always there. Perhaps they feeling angry, afraid, or hurt?
- **Don't make decisions while angry**
 - Decisions made in the 'heat of the moment' are rarely good ones, don't be pushed to make a decision, discuss things later.
- **Act opposite**
 - If you feel like attacking, step back. If your muscles tense up, relax them. If you feel like shouting, speak quietly.

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Unhelpful thoughts

When we're angry or in a bad mood our thoughts can prolong the mood or feed the anger. Sometimes they make us think aggression is justified in some way. Challenge your thinking!

Things should be just exactly how I want them to be

Sometimes we feel entitled to have things our own way. When we were young maybe there was some truth in that. Our parents will have made life easier for us in many ways. Sometimes this idea hangs over into adulthood, along with the notion that life should always be 'fair' or 'just'. Of course, there are no rules that say life should be fair, reasonable or just. There's plenty of evidence that life can be very hurtful and unfair at times. When things don't go your way, remember that sometimes you're ahead, sometime you're behind. Just like everyone else.

People don't take any notice unless you're angry - it's the only way of making your point

This thought seems based on the idea that other people are somehow a bit self-centered and careless, neither noticing nor bothering unless you make them sit up and take notice. Maybe that was true at some point during your early life, but healthy adult relationships aren't built on fear or abuse of power. People generally don't like to be around angry people. Don't confuse attention gained through fear for respect or admiration. Sometimes anger provokes anger in others, so others may feel threatened and even pick fights with you if you come across as unreasonably angry.

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I can't control my anger

It's true that people are born with the tendency to be more or less emotional. Some people react more quickly than others, some people take longer to calm than others. However, the way we behave in response to our emotions is largely learned. We might not have much influence over how we feel, but we have far more control over how we behave when we're angry. Attending an anger management course can help us with the skills necessary to tolerate feeling angry or upset without adding to our problems by doing something we'll regret.

I'll explode if I don't let my anger out

Think about times when you have let your anger out. Has it been positive? Have things improved as a result? In the short-term? How about in the longer-term? If not, how might things have been different had you not been so angry?

Sometimes we're afraid of our anger – it feels as though there's a monster inside that'll be dangerously out of control if unleashed. This leads us to further suppress our emotions; the trouble is we then miss the opportunity to develop the skills to communicate our anger in a healthy and appropriate way. Suppressing anger through fear of the consequences keeps us 'stuck', afraid of what will happen should we let our guard down, or if we 'let the monster out'. If this sounds like you, anger management classes can show you ways to understand and gradually express your anger without fear, and without adding to an already difficult situation.

Feeling angry helps me feel powerful and less afraid

Sometimes people who have been frightened when they were young become scary themselves. This way they think they'll be safe, that no-one will take

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advantage of them and they won't have to feel afraid any more. Of course, this really just leads to more problems. The only way to overcome fear is by facing up to it, not by covering our fear by layer upon layer of anger or hostility. We might seem angry, but we'll still know we're frightened deep inside.

If someone makes you frightened

- Does someone you know frighten you?
- Do you feel you're 'walking on eggshells' in case they 'kick off'?
- Are you frightened to be yourself?
- Do you feel constantly criticised?
- Have you had to make allowances for someone's temper?
- Does someone have you under surveillance or other form of control?
- Does someone shame, humiliate, bully or yell at you?
- Do you feel that you can't do anything right for someone?
- Does someone blame you for their own behaviour?
- Does someone force you to have sex or take drugs?
- Does someone threaten to commit suicide if you leave?
- Does someone hurt you, or threaten to hurt or kill you or your children?

Both men and women can be frightened of their partners, their children, even their friends. If this is the case and you live in Wales, call the UK CALL helpline (**0800 132 737**) straight away, or text 'help' to 81066. They will be able to put you in touch with organisations and people who can help. If you are under 18, you can contact [Childline](#) on **0800 1111**.

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If you are reading this because you are frightened of someone right now, or if you have been hit, **act now**. Call the Police.

The police can ensure your safety and can make sure appropriate help is provided.

Nothing warrants or excuses physical violence; it rarely happens just once or ends by itself.

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Self-help resources

There are many good books and websites that can help. Your GP, practice nurse or primary care mental health practitioner will be able to recommend from a range of helpful material.

Act now!

The sooner you deal with this, the sooner you'll feel better! If you've been affected by anything you've read here, or if you've tried all the advice here but still have trouble with anger, contact your GP or a health professional for extra information or to get on the road to recovery today.

Disclaimer

This material is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. We have used all reasonable care in compiling the information but make no warranty as to its accuracy. We recommend you consult a doctor or other health care professional for the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions, or if you are at all concerned about your health.

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