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Dealing with anger

Your heart is thumping, your breathing is getting quicker and your muscles are tense.

You know your face is turning crimson as you dig your nails into your palms and begin to raise your voice.

You are angry. Really angry. And your body is readying itself for action.

Anger is a powerful emotion. It is an instinctive response to feeling threatened and it mobilises the body's resources to defend itself, to attack.

It is an emotion which is neither good nor bad, it is what you do with it that counts, says Norman Warden, a psychotherapist and the director of Galway Counselling Studies. "Anger gives us a sense of power in situations where we feel powerless. It serves as a cue to tell us that there may be something unfair, threatening, or annoying going on."

Productive anger can motivate us to take action to defend ourselves or others, to deal with conflict, manage a task or to change something of major concern.

"The constructive expression of anger is an important way of resolving conflict through naming how we feel. When you know how to express anger in a way that is constructive it can lead to positive and beneficial outcomes, motivating us to solve problems, make complaints and strive for justice."

Evaluate opinions

Unproductive anger, on the other hand, which is inappropriate to the circumstances, can adversely affect our thoughts and actions.

"When angry it is harder to think clearly and evaluate options," he says. "We act more on impulse without considering the consequences of our behaviour."

The psychotherapist states it is a myth that it is beneficial to express anger. "One common myth or theory is that, 'It's good to express your anger, don't bottle it up.'"

But he strongly disagrees with this, warning that it can inflame already heightened feelings and can be used as a "licence to hurt others".

"Research has found that 'letting it rip' with anger actually escalates it and does nothing to help you (or the person you are angry with) to resolve the situation. Shouting and slamming doors can all increase and strengthen feelings of anger. People who are most prone to vent their rage simply get more, rather than less, angry when they do so. Those at the receiving end get more angry too."

Mr Warden says various studies have established a link between severe chronic anger outbursts and high blood pressure. Problems with managing anger can also lead to difficulties in personal and work relationships or can manifest in road rage and violence.

"It is more helpful to find out what it is, in you, that triggers your anger and then develop strategies to keep those triggers from tipping you over the edge. Sometimes when we feel hurt or offended we defend ourselves with anger to protect our pride or self esteem. In some situations it can be helpful to state in 'I' terms that we feel hurt by what was said rather than express anger or aggression."

Aggravates the situation

He outlines that when our anger gets out of control we act before we think, make matters worse and do things that we later regret.

"Our own behaviour aggravates the situation. We overreact with antagonism and that antagonism inflames our anger, perhaps leading to aggression. Aggression is an action that is intended to cause injury, harm or damage while anger is an emotion."

He points out that anger becomes a problem when it is too frequent or intense, lasts too long or leads to aggressive behaviour.

"Sometimes the wrong people bear the brunt of our anger. When things do not go well at work, family members often catch the flak. When this happens, our relationships suffer and that takes its toll on us.

What causes anger? We often experience it in situations where we believe we are under threat.

"For example, there has been an injustice; something or someone has prevented us from doing something we want to do; someone

has attacked or criticised us at a personal level or someone has violated or broken a rule which is perceived as vital to us. Many people find it easier to express anger than expressing sadness, hurt, guilt, or fear. Some events may remind us of earlier (childhood) hurts and threats and prompt us to get angry with someone unrelated to that time."

Self-talk

It is important to note that it is not people or events which make us angry, it is our reaction to them.

"The level of your anger is strongly influenced by how you view the situation. The same situation can mean different things to different people. A frequent determinant of anger is whether we 'take it personally' when someone is upset with us. Our expectations about the way things should be or ought to be can also lead to anger. When our expectations of ourselves and others are set very high, they are likely to lead to disappointment and frustration which can turn to anger. Whether justified or not, if expressing anger will worsen the situation you are better off not expressing it."

One of the many ways our thoughts influence how we feel is through our self-talk.

"The statements that we make to ourselves often precede, accompany, or follow the things we feel. During anger incidents our self-statements play an important part in defining and shaping our emotion. We say: 'That's it, I've had it!', or 'Why doesn't she just get off my back!' These self-statements not only add fuel to the fire, they have a major role in prolonging anger after an incident is over. Anger is often recreated and inflamed by this private dialogue."

Constructive self-statements can be used to regulate and de-escalate our anger. How we view things determines how we feel and influences our type of thinking thus evoking a self reinforcing positive or negative cycle.

"How angry we get in a given situation is strongly influenced by the meaning we place on it. That may include our view on the person's intentions, which we can't know, but will assume. Some keep the anger alive or at high levels through treating their thoughts (assumptions and beliefs) about others' intentions as facts. Thoughts are not facts."

Possible reasons

Norman Warden advises people to consider all the possible reasons for the other person's actions. Recall when you did something similar. Question whether getting angry is going to be helpful for anyone. Remind yourself of the negative consequences of losing your temper, the physical and emotional effect on you, and the negative impact on the relationship/situation.

"Make a distinction between the times when it is appropriate to be angry and when getting angry isn't such a good idea. That way you won't feel uncomfortable about being angry when anger serves a useful purpose. Respond instead of react."

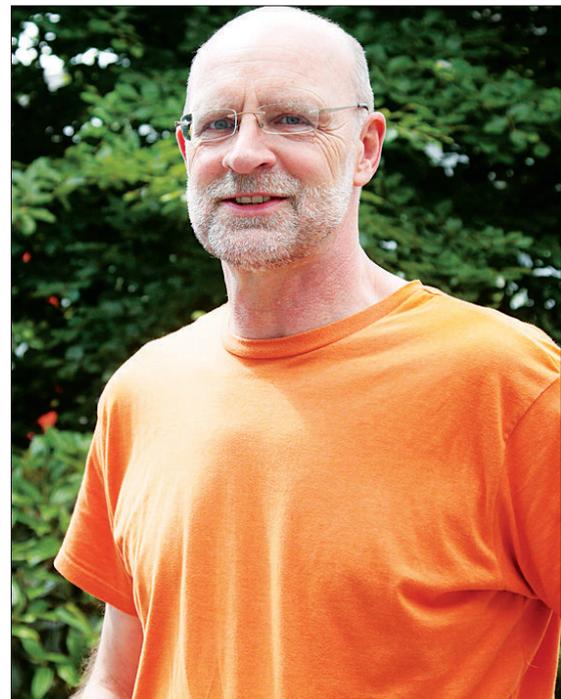
Signs that you may have a problem with anger?

- You feel angry, irritated, or tense a lot of the time?
- You seem to get angry more easily or more often than others around you?
- You sometimes become so angry that you break things or become violent?
- Your anger is out of proportion to the situation?
- Your anger leads to problems in relationships?
- Those close to you sometimes feel intimidated or frightened of you?
- It takes you a long time to 'cool off' after becoming angry or irritated?

How to calm down when angry

Norman Warden recommends practising some of following self-statements to help you "cool" you down in angry situations.

- Slow down, breath easily.



"Productive anger can motivate us to take action to defend ourselves or others," says psychotherapist Norman Warden.

- Keep your sense of humour.
- Do not make more out of this than you have to.
- Do not assume the worst or jump to conclusions.
- Tell yourself that the difficult person you are encountering must be "awfully unhappy to be that irritable".
- Remember there is no point in losing it, you will just feel worse.
- Remind yourself that when you do not take things too seriously, you fare better.
- Keep your voice low.
- Is it really that important?
- There is no need to take this personally.
- How important will this look in a week?
- Agree to disagree.
- Is my need to get angry more important than the person with whom I am getting angry?
- Does the situation warrant this level of anger?
- Am I catastrophising - treating something out of all proportion to the circumstances.
- How would I like to be treated if I were in their shoes?
- Am I dumping on the other person just so I feel better.
- Am I practising emotional reasoning, taking my emotion as evidence for the truth. (ie "I feel angry. That proves that I'm being treated badly" - does it?)

Recognise the early warning signals

Anger is like fire, the earlier you catch it the more effective you will be at putting it out. Becoming aware of your body's alarm bells helps you to spot anger early on, which gives you a better chance of putting other coping strategies into practice. Treat early signs of anger as signals or cues to act, to step back or walk away. Notice what happens in your body when you start to feel angry.

Norman Warden will provide the following courses in Galway in September - Foundation Certificate in Counselling and Psychotherapy, Introduction to Counselling and Psychotherapy, Managing Stress through Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Training for Helping Professions.

For further information email normanwarden@gmail.com or log onto www.galwaycounselling.com or telephone (086) 3954939.