

Anger Management for an Angry Time

Anger can be useful—but it's important to channel it strategically rather than let it consume you. Here's how.

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Boxing. Baking. Binge-watching Netflix.

How are your anger-management tools working?

We're living in a time of great fury. The strain is spilling over into our personal lives, fomenting hostility with friends, family and even strangers—and harming our own emotional well-being.

Anger increases when anxiety increases. It's an adaptive response to threat. Anger activates the fight or flight response. It alerts us to pay attention to a potential danger.

It can be quite useful. Anger can make us feel brave and encourage us to take action to right a wrong. But we need to channel it strategically. "Think of tuning a guitar: You need just the right amount of tension on the string," says Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist, research director of the Marcus Institute of Integrative Health at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, and author of "Words Can Change Your Brain."

Most of us are more comfortable being angry than anxious. And so we attempt to alleviate our anxiety over life's uncertainties and our lack of control by getting angry, says Maurice Schweitzer, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, who studies the regulation of emotions. "Anger gives us drive, motivation and purpose," Dr. Schweitzer says. "It gives the clarity we lack day to day."

But internalizing too much anger, for too long, can be destructive. Anger drains our physical and emotional resources and is linked to higher blood pressure and inflammation, infections, heart disease, stroke and cancer, says Srini Pillay, a psychiatrist, brain researcher and CEO of NeuroBusiness Group, a business consultancy.

This is your brain on anger: Activity increases in the dorsal pons, a part of the emotional area of the brain that contributes to physiological response, and in the periaqueductal gray, the area that activates the predator threat response. At the same time, there is decreased activity in the area responsible for attention. "Anger overwhelms the emotional brain," says Dr. Pillay, author of "Tinker Dabble Doodle Try: Unlock the Power of the Unfocused Mind." "And because the emotional brain is connected to the thinking brain, it compromises the efficiency of cognitive processing and decision making."

Research shows that anger can diminish people's ability to understand other people's points of view. Angry people judge others more harshly than they judge themselves in moral dilemmas, a phenomenon psychologists call "moral hypocrisy." They share less with others. And they have less empathy. "Anger narrows our perspective," says Jeremy Yip, assistant professor of management at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, who studies how emotions affect judgment. "This is dangerous because it diminishes our ability to think strategically and broadly."

How can you keep anger from consuming you? Many people turn to exercise, meditation or prayer. Peter Shankman, 47, a marketing consultant in New York, has named his Peloton bike the "anger dispersal unit" and jumps on it every time he has an argument or something doesn't go his way. Danny Murphy, 60, a writer in Jacksonville, Fla., has been writing poems; he recently finished one lamenting the death of Ahmaud Arbery. Paul Fiala has stopped watching the news and started bingeing HGTV shows. "They end up building something which generally turns out pretty nice," says the 64-year-old information technology professional from Lake Dallas, Texas. "It reminds me of the idea of being around people who build you up, not tear you down."

Stedman Stevens, 62, the CEO of an aviation technology company in Wilmington, N.C., sticks Post-it Notes around the house—on his desk, the fridge, the bathroom mirror—with smiley faces or affirmations, such as "you are appreciated," to interrupt his negative thoughts. André Blackman, 38, the CEO of a health care recruiting company in Raleigh, N.C., has channeled his anger into work, trying to help companies build a more diverse workforce. Dana Humphrey, 37, uses a technique she calls the "hand scream." She covers her mouth with both hands, leans forward, and then silently screams, while shaking her hips back and forth. "Moving the energy of anger is really important," says the life coach from Rockaway Park, N.Y. "It allows you to come back with less of a charge and an ability to have a conversation with someone."

Doug deGroot, 55, says he learned about anger management when he had cancer. In just one day a few years ago, he learned that his cancer had progressed, his bladder needed to be removed, his identity had been stolen and his son might also have cancer. Mr. deGroot's reaction? He laughed. "Could my life have been any worse? The answer, sadly, is yes," says the advertising executive from Edina, Minn. "When the going gets tough, take deep breaths and remind yourself of that fact. It always makes me feel better."

Here is some anger-management advice from the experts.

Pinpoint the source of your anger. There are two types, says Georgetown's Dr. Yip. Integral anger is when your anger is directly related to the situation or person you feel angry with. (You're mad at a colleague who dropped the ball on a project.) Incidental anger is when you're provoked by one thing but feel mad or lash out at another. (You kick the dog after your boss yells at you.) Research shows that when people correctly identify the source of their anger, they can think more strategically.

"The moment we start asking questions about our anger rather than going into a knee-jerk reaction, we are engaging our prefrontal cortex, which is the part of our brain responsible for

reasoning and planning,” says Paula Sinisterra, a therapist in Atlanta. “This is essential if we hope to channel anger into productivity.”

Be strategic. Take control of your emotions. First, decide whether you want to harness your anger or discard it. Is your anger useful? If not, put it aside.

If you decide to use your anger, choose something you can control. “Anger is a very energizing emotion—think of it as the opposite of procrastination,” says Evan Polman, an associate professor in the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Remember that anger can give you courage. Use it to ask for a raise, get involved in a cause you care about or get up the nerve to have that difficult conversation you’ve been putting off.

Calm your nervous system. Go for a walk or run. Spend some time in nature. Meditate. Focus on your breath—close your eyes and pay attention to the sensation of air passing in and out of your nostrils. Research shows this “breath-focused attention” lowers the activity in the amygdala, a part of the brain that processes fear and anxiety.

Reduce other irritants. Often, people’s anger increases because they’re physically uncomfortable or in pain. Make sure your environment—your chair, the lighting, your bed—is comfortable. Get rid of clutter or anything else that irritates you.

Reframe the story. Approach someone who has made you mad with compassion. Think about what might be happening in his or her life. Is the person stressed or anxious? (These days, the answer is yes.) Did those feelings cause them to act a certain way? “Once we account for other people’s behavior, once we try to understand them, we are less likely to blame them,” says Dr. Schweitzer. “We can shift our anger to empathy.”