Problems with anger self-help guide

1. Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate symptoms of anger. If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

If your anger has caused you to harm other people, or yourself, and you think it's having a destructive effect on your life, you should visit your GP or explore local services to help you cope. This guide can offer coping and management advice, but if your problem is more serious then it's important to seek further help.

Find your nearest GP

Find your nearest mental health and wellbeing services

This guide aims to help you to:

- recognise if you have problems with anger
- understand anger and what keeps it going
- find ways to manage anger and express your emotions in a healthy way

Problems with anger can be caused by a range of different things – this guide aims to help you find where your anger is coming from, and learn ways of solving the problem. It won't stop you getting angry, because anger is a normal emotion, but it will help you to manage anger and express your feelings in a healthy way.

How to use the problems with anger self-help guide

Working through this guide can take around an hour, but you should feel free to work at your own pace.

To type in a graphic or diary, click or tap the part you'd like to fill in and use your keyboard as usual.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

2. Problems with anger

Anger is a normal emotion that everyone experiences. Anger can be helpful in some situations – it alerts you to a problem, and if it's expressed in a constructive way anger can also help you resolve a problem. Anger may be a natural response to being threatened or attacked and help to trigger our survival and self-defence instincts – this will be discussed more later on in the guide. Getting angry can also motivate you to stand up for yourself, and express your opinion. However, if you aren't able to properly express or manage anger, it can become destructive.

When people think about anger, they often think of aggressive behaviours like shouting, hitting, or breaking things. While some people who have problems with anger may lash out and do violent things, having problems with anger can also mean you don't express it at all. Some people 'bottle up' their feelings which can lead to stress and unhappiness. Some people turn their anger on themselves in the form of self-harm because they don't have another way to express it. Either of these responses to anger can cause problems.

Problems with anger can have a negative effect on your relationships, your work or your studies. You might find yourself doing or saying things when you're angry that you regret or feel guilty about later on. These issues can affect your self-esteem and your mood. If you recognise these problems, following the information in this guide could help you to manage anger better.

What it’s like when you have problems with anger

Here are some examples of experiences you might have if you have problems with anger. There are others, and you might have different experiences.

Feelings you might have

- furious
- raging
- tense
- irritable
- stressed
- frustrated
- annoyed
- wanting revenge

How your body might feel

- chest tightness
- tense muscles
- hot
- sweating
- light-headed
- heart beating fast
- shaky legs
- urge to use the toilet
- quick, shallow breathing

Thoughts you might have

- “This is so unfair.”

- “They’ve made a fool of me.”
- “They’ve disrespected me.”
- “I’ll get them back for this.”
- “They’re deliberately winding me up.”
- “I can’t let them get away with treating me like this.”
- “Idiot!”
- “I can’t put up with this.”
- "They always do this.”

Things you might do

- 'snap’ at people
- argue often
- 'bottle up’ emotions
- misuse alcohol and/or drugs
- self-harm
- react aggressively to minor issues
- say hurtful things in arguments
- throw or break objects or property
- shout and swear
- storm out of situations
- be violent towards animals or people

If anger is causing you to act violently, it's important to seek help. You can phone your GP or explore local services to help you cope.

Find your nearest GP

Find your nearest mental health and wellbeing services

3. What causes problems with anger?

There are many possible reasons someone could develop a problem with anger. It is likely that a combination of biological, psychological and social factors are involved.

Biological

- signals in the brain get triggered (set off) in response to a situation or event
- chemicals being released by the brain into the body (natural chemicals, such as hormones, or from substances such as drugs and/or alcohol)
- survival instincts – fight/flight/freeze responses (there's more information on this further along in the guide)
- the effect of trauma, abuse or neglect on the brain and body

Psychological

A number of psychological factors can lead to problems with anger.

Personality traits - the parts of our personality that make us who we are. For example some people are 'laid back', while others are controlling.

Beliefs - how we view ourselves, others and the world. For example, "the world is dangerous and other people can't be trusted, so I need to be on my guard."

Values - what is important to you. For example, some people think loyalty is very important. Others feel it's important to be in control.

Thinking patterns – the way people think in different situations. There's more information on this in section 5.

The emotional effects of trauma, abuse or neglect. Negative experiences can have a long-term impact on your emotions and how you cope with stress.

Learned behaviours from early life experiences. For example, if you watched a parent being aggressive or violent, or if you were told to behave aggressively and ‘stand up for yourself’ as a child.

Memories - if a current experience reminds you of something negative in your past, it might trigger a learned reaction from you to behave in a certain way. For example, a memory of being attacked might lead you to react aggressively.

Social

A number of social factors can lead to problems with anger.

Environment- for example, if the people around you are often aggressive, or if you live or lived in an area where there was a lot of violence.

Family relationships - the way your family handles anger can influence the way you handle anger. If you’ve been taught to ‘bottle up’ angry feelings this can make it hard to express anger in a healthy way. If you’ve been taught to shout or be violent when angry, this can also make it likely you’ll have problems with anger.

Social media - this is a significant influence in many people’s lives. If you have problems with anger, upsetting posts on social media can be very triggering. Social media also makes it very easy to make posts or send messages out of anger, creating more conflict in difficult situations.

Gender identity - the gender you’re assigned at birth can mean that from a young age, you’re told there’s a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ way to express anger. You might have heard phrases like “boys don’t cry” or “nice girls don’t do that”. This can make it hard to express anger in a healthy way, as it means going against how a lot of people expect you behave.

Financial situation - a difficult financial situation can create a lot of stress, which

makes it harder to manage anger.

Group influence – when other people are around, it can affect how you express and manage anger. If you feel you have to behave a certain way in front of other people, it can make conflicts worse. However, in some situations, it can calm things down to have other people around. You might also be affected by how other people behave – for example, if a friend starts a fight, you might feel you have to join in.

4. How do problems with anger keep going?

There are a number of things that keep problems with anger going, and they often affect each other.

Rewards

Angry behaviour can achieve short-term benefits. For example, losing your temper can lead to you getting your own way, or stop someone bothering you. If you tend to ‘bottle up’ angry feelings, this can lead to you avoiding a conflict or being praised for being nice.

When your behaviour’s rewarded in some way, it makes it more likely that you’ll repeat it the next time you’re in a similar situation.

Repeating the cycle

Because your behaviour when you’re angry is being rewarded in some way, it’s natural to repeat it, as mentioned above. This means it can develop into a repeated pattern, or ‘cycle’ of behaviour. You can also get caught in a cycle if you don't have other ways of managing anger.

A lack of coping or problem-solving skills

If you've never learned to manage and express anger in a healthy way, it can be hard to cope with feelings of anger. Healthier ways of managing anger will be discussed in more detail throughout the guide.

A lack of problem-solving skills can also lead to problems with anger – if you struggle to think calmly about problems you're facing, you're likely to feel stressed and less able to cope. Problem-solving will also be discussed in more detail in section 15.

Communication

You might find yourself holding in angry feelings, or having angry outbursts because you can't express what you think or feel. Other people might also be afraid to tell you what they think and feel, because they're worried you'll react angrily. People who have problems with anger often misunderstand what others say, and that can lead to conflict that you might have difficulty dealing with.

Many people struggle to communicate, which can lead to problems with anger. Assertive communication means being able to stand up for yourself and tell people what you want and need. There will be advice and information about assertiveness and communication in sections 12 and 13.

Unhelpful thoughts

Negative automatic thoughts are unhelpful thoughts that pop into your mind, without you making any effort to think of them. They seem believable and are usually upsetting – this can affect your mood and what you do. There's more information about unhelpful thoughts and how to challenge them in the next section.

5. Patterns of unhelpful thoughts

This section will help you recognise when you're having unhelpful thoughts. Once you've identified unhelpful thoughts, you can start to challenge them.

Patterns of unhelpful thinking

Knowing the common patterns that unhelpful thoughts follow can help you recognise and challenge them before they have a negative effect on you.

Catastrophising

This means that you expect the worst to happen, and fear that you won't be able to cope with it. You might think worrying prepares you for when something goes wrong, but in fact the time and energy spent worrying makes you more stressed and then it's harder to cope when things go wrong.

If you're feeling anxious about something, you may end up expressing that emotion as anger.

For example:

- "It will be a disaster and I won't be able to cope."
- "If I tell them how I feel they'll never speak to me again."

Jumping to conclusions

You might find yourself thinking you know why someone did or said something to you, even if you have no evidence to base that idea on. If you react quickly to a 'snap judgement', there's no time to resolve the misunderstanding. This can lead to anger and conflict.

For example:

- “They're not home yet, so they must be having an affair.”
- “My boss wants to speak to me, so I'm going to lose my job.”

Mind reading

People often assume they know what others are thinking, and the assumptions are usually negative.

For example:

You see someone looking at you and assume they’re laughing at you or thinking something negative about you. In fact, they’re not paying any attention to you at all, and just happened to be looking in your direction. They might even have been thinking something positive, such as admiring your outfit.

These mind reading thoughts can often come from your own negative thoughts about yourself – for example, if you think there’s something wrong with your appearance, you assume anyone looking at you must be thinking the same.

Focusing on the negatives

Often people ignore the positive aspects of their relationships, life, or situation. Instead, you might focus on the negative. This style of thinking stops you feeling

good about yourself and others. For example:

When someone is kind to you, you might think, “they’re only being nice because they want something from me."

When someone comes to visit you, you might think, “they’re always late,” and ignore the fact they’ve travelled to spend time with you.

Black and white thinking

People often see things as black or white when they’re angry – there’s no ‘in-between’.

For example:

Everything is either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – so if a friend is late to meet you, you might decide they’re a terrible friend and you can’t rely on them.

Everyone is either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ when they disagree. If you have an argument, you might think you have to ‘win’ by being right, even if the other person also has good points. You don’t see compromise as an option.

Must and should statements

People often have fixed rules for what they and others “must” and “should” do, and judge themselves and others harshly if these expectations aren’t met.

For example:

- “I must stay in control, or I'll lose people's respect.”
- “I should be able to cope on my own.”

Thinking this way can mean you don’t assert yourself at home, school, or work. You might have angry outbursts when people disagree with you or don’t let you have

your own way.

Taking things personally

People who have problems with anger might be sensitive to criticism, and read too much into what others say or do.

For example:

If someone doesn’t reply to a text right away, you might think they’re ignoring you or are angry with you.

If someone criticises your work, you might see it as a criticism of you as a person, and react angrily.

6. Activity 1 – identifying unhelpful thoughts

Over the next week or 2, use the diary below to record the times that you’ve been angry and what’s triggered that anger. Then, try to write the thoughts you had when you were angry. This will help you to identify the type of unhelpful thought you might have been having at the time.

If you want to record for longer, you can use more than one diary sheet and save different versions on your device. The more you practice identifying unhelpful thoughts the easier it will become.

You can download a diary to fill out on the next page.

Situation – where you were, who was there, and what was happening	**Feelings – the emotions you felt**	**Behaviour – what you did**	**Unhelpful thought – what did you think, and what type of unhelpful thought was it?**
For example: I was in the pub with my friend. Someone at the next table was laughing and they looked over at me.	For example: Anxious, paranoid, annoyed, angry.	For example: Stormed out of the pub.	For example: I thought, “they’re laughing at me, they think I’m weird.” It was mind reading, and jumping to conclusions.

Situation – where you were, who was there, and what was happening	Feelings – the emotions you felt	Behaviour – what you did	Unhelpful thought – what did you think, and what type of unhelpful thought was it?

Situation – where you were, who was there, and what was happening	Feelings – the emotions you felt	Behaviour – what you did	Unhelpful thought – what did you think, and what type of unhelpful thought was it?

7. How to challenge unhelpful thoughts

Once you've identified unhelpful thoughts, the next stage is to challenge them. To do this, you can ask yourself the series of questions below.

After you've done this, you can download another diary to practice challenging your unhelpful thoughts in situations where you become angry.

1. Can you identify any patterns of unhelpful thinking?

Use your thought diary and the patterns of unhelpful thoughts listed earlier in the guide to help you with this. You can use the diary to write them down.

2. What is the evidence for and against this thought?

For example, you might think the way someone looks at you is evidence they're thinking negatively about you.

The evidence against a thought like that is you can never really tell what another person is thinking unless they tell you.

3. Is this thought a fact or an opinion?

For this question, it's important to determine if your thought is based in reality. Here are some tips for working this out:

If something is a fact:

- there's evidence that it's true – for example, it's a fact that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west
- it can't be disproved – for example, you can't disprove that aliens exist in the galaxy, because we haven't explored it all
- it's rational – it comes from the real world, not feelings

For example, it's a fact that humans can't read each other's minds, so you can't know what someone's thinking unless they tell you.

If something is an opinion:

- it's based on personal belief – for example, you might think your favourite sports team is the best one, but others may disagree
- it can be argued against – for example, you can argue that dogs are cuter than cats, but others may disagree
- you can change it – for example, your opinion of a person might change as you get to know them better
- it's often driven by emotion – for example, you might feel so strongly about an opinion that you get upset when someone else disagrees with it

4. What would you say to a friend who had this thought in a similar situation?

People are often kinder to their friends than they are to themselves. Think about the advice you'd give to a friend who was having a thought like this, and try to take that advice yourself.

5. Is there another way of looking at this situation that could be more helpful?

Follow these tips for looking at the situation differently:

1. Try to think about the situation as if you aren't one of the people involved – how would it look to an outside observer? What would they think of the situation?
2. Try to think of the situation from the point of view of the other people involved and consider what they might be thinking and feeling. This is different from

the mind reading thought pattern discussed earlier in the guide – don’t assume you know what they’re thinking, just try to see the situation from their point of view. If you don't know their point of view, ask them.

6. Ask yourself: why am I getting angry? What am I reacting to?

Often there are other issues and emotions affecting how you react in a situation. Think about what those could be, and how you might deal with them to reduce your anger.

7. What would be a better way to deal with this situation?

Think about better, more constructive ways to manage this situation. There’s more information on coping strategies in section 11.

8. Activity 2 - challenging your unhelpful thoughts

For the next week, use the diary below to record your thoughts and feelings – but this time, add your thought challenges as well.

If you want to record for longer, you can use more diary sheets and save different versions on your device. The more you practice challenging unhelpful thoughts the easier it will become.

Situation – where you were, who was there, and what was happening	**Feelings –** **the emotions you felt**	**Behaviour –** **what you did**	**Unhelpful thought – what did you think, and what type of unhelpful thought was it?**	**Thought challenge – record your answers to the thought challenging questions here**
For example: "I was in the pub with my friend. Someone at the next table was laughing and they looked over at me."	For example: "Anxious, paranoid, annoyed, angry."	For example: "Stormed out of the pub."	For example: "I thought, 'they're laughing at me, they think I'm weird.' It was mind reading, and jumping to conclusions."	For example: "I can't tell what someone else is thinking, so there's no evidence they were thinking I'm weird. If a friend was in this situation, I'd tell them to ignore what other people are doing and focus on what their friend is saying, and have fun. I got angry because I felt anxious. The best way to deal with the situation is to relax and enjoy my night out."

Situation – where you were, who was there, and what was happening	Feelings – the emotions you felt	Behaviour – what you did	Unhelpful thought – what did you think, and what type of unhelpful thought was it?	Thought challenge – record your answers to the thought challenging questions here

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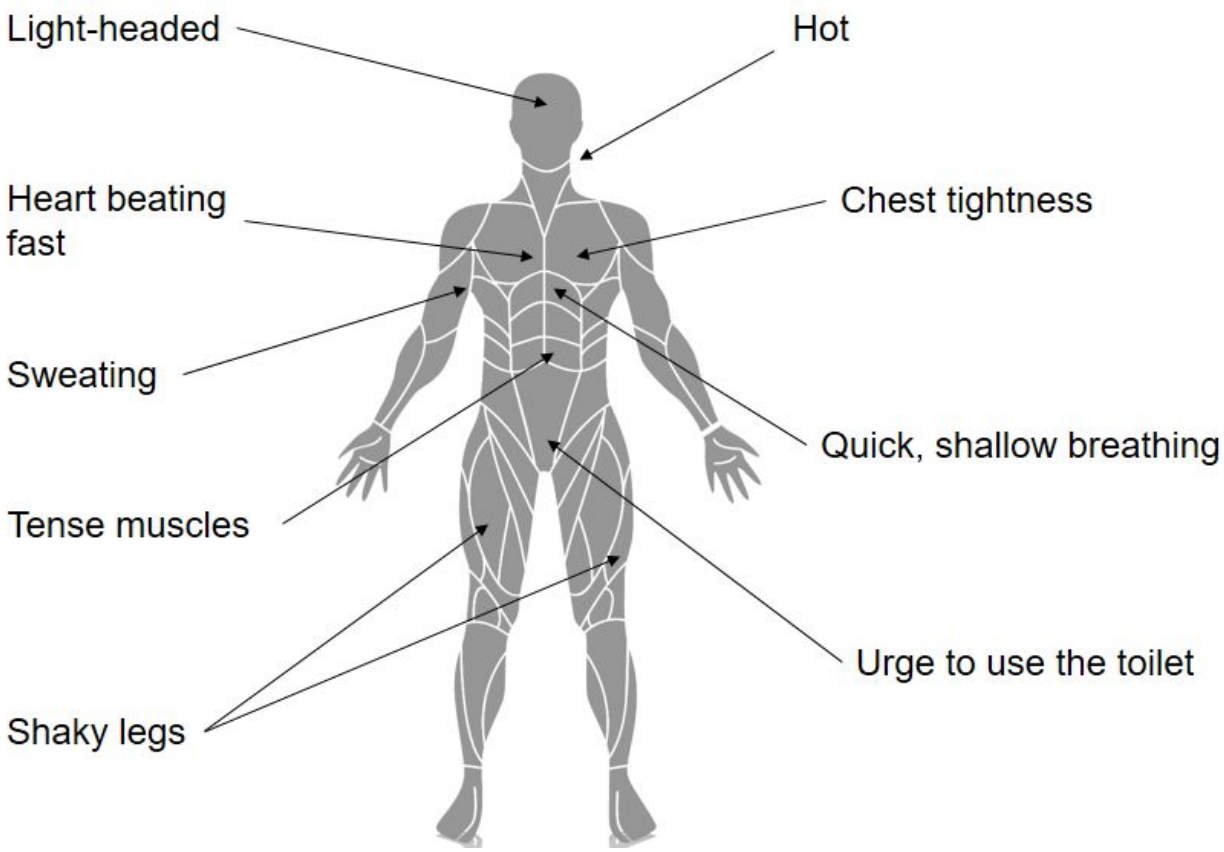
9. Anger and the body

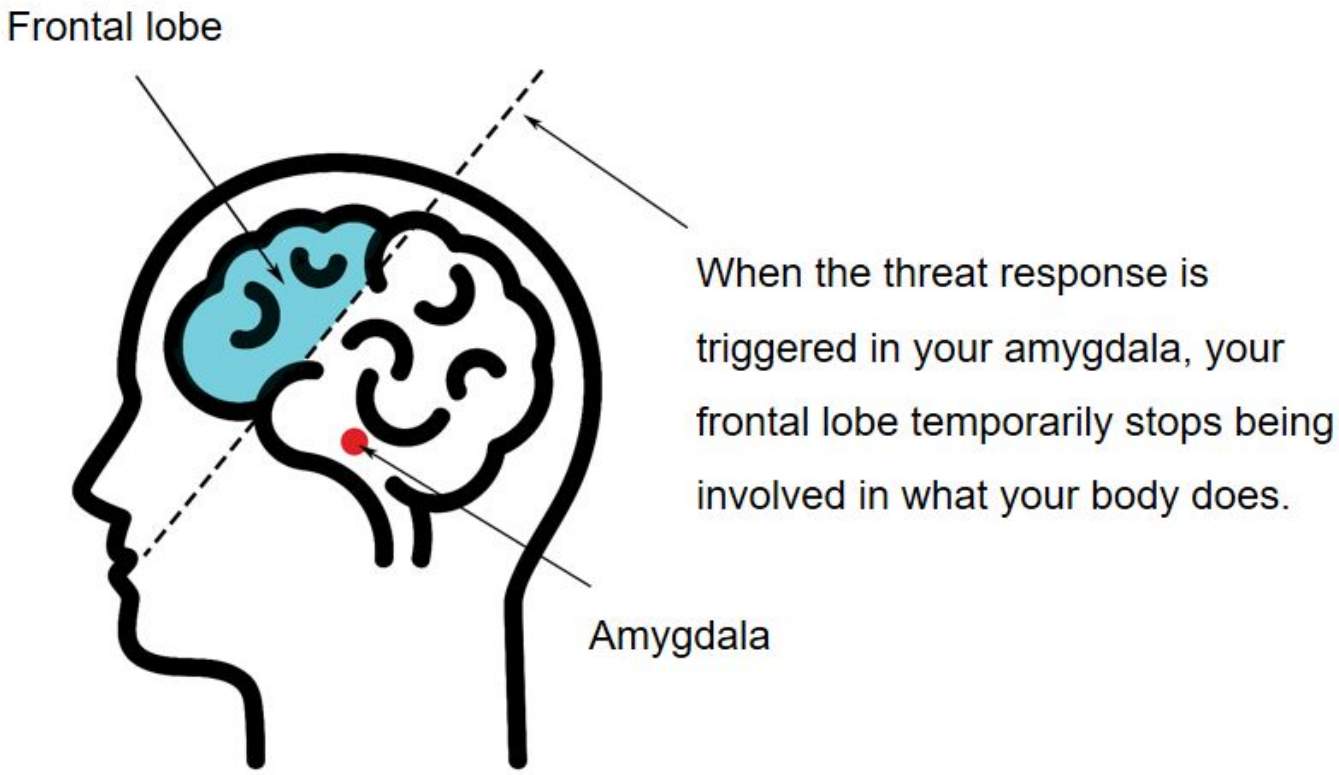
When anger is triggered, or people feel threatened, their bodies react in specific ways. You might experience some of these physical signs strongly, while some others might not affect you.



All of these physical changes happen due to signals being sent by your brain because the ‘threat system’ has been triggered. This triggers the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response where the brain is preparing the body to either defend itself against a threat (fight), run away from danger (flight), or do nothing to reduce the risk of an attack (freeze).

It can be helpful to understand what’s going on in your brain when these reactions are happening in your body. You don’t have to remember all the information below – just notice what’s happening in your body and mind. This gives you an ‘early warning system’ that you’re becoming angry, so you can take steps to feel calmer.

Anger and your brain



Frontal lobe

Your frontal lobe is the rational part of your brain – the bit that helps you manage your daily life, fit in with others, and do things like work and study. It's responsible for planning, problem solving, and rational thinking. The frontal lobe also handles impulse control and thinking about consequences – it's the reason people can think before they act.

Amygdala

This is part of what's called the limbic system. The limbic system does all the things in your body that you don't think about, like breathing and eating. If your frontal lobe is your 'thinking' brain, your limbic system is your 'instinctive' brain. The amygdala continually takes in and processes information from your senses, so even when you aren't thinking about it, it's scanning for threats and interpreting what you see, hear, feel, touch, taste and smell.

When the threat response is triggered the frontal lobe temporarily ‘goes offline’ which stops you thinking rationally, and the limbic system takes over reactions and decision making. This is often referred to as ‘flipping your lid’. You might have heard this phrase being used to describe when someone loses control of their emotions.

To reduce the threat response system and bring the thinking part of your brain back 'online', you can do things to calm yourself down. This includes using relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing. There is more information on relaxation techniques, including activities to try, later in the guide.

False alarms

The limbic system is hard wired to protect our survival, so it’s over cautious and responds in the same way to an imagined threat as it does to a real threat. It does this to ‘be on the safe side’. This is why many people get scared watching horror films when there’s no real threat to their safety.

When people have experienced traumatic events, their threat response system can become over sensitive and easily triggered. This makes false alarms more likely. This sensitivity can be reduced over time by learning to notice the triggers and alarm bells and developing self-calming techniques and coping skills. These will be discussed in section 11.

Some people will overcome the impact of trauma in time by using their own coping strategies and support network. Some people may need professional support to help them overcome the impact of trauma. If you have experienced trauma in your life and it’s still having a negative impact on you months after the event, it might be helpful to talk to your GP, who can tell you about services that can support you. You can find a local GP using Scotland’s Service Directory.

10. What triggers anger?

Anger can be triggered by a large number of things, and what makes one person angry won't necessarily have the same effect on someone else. However, there are triggers that are common. These include:

- being treated unfairly – for example, being blamed for something you didn't do
- someone doing something that goes against your values or beliefs – for example, insulting your religion
- feeling threatened or attacked – for example, someone shouting at you
- feeling criticised – for example, a partner complaining about something you do at home
- other people not respecting you or your property – for example, someone breaking an item that belongs to you
- feeling 'put down', insulted, laughed at, or embarrassed by others – for example, someone making fun of you in front of other people
- being 'let down' by someone – for example, a friend making a promise to you and then breaking it
- 'losing out' on something you wanted or valued – for example, not getting a job you applied for
- being interrupted when you're trying to achieve a goal – for example, someone distracting you when you're in the middle of a task
- stressful day-to-day problems – for example, dealing with bills, busy days at work, and general inconveniences

When people are stressed or dealing with other problems, they're more sensitive to triggers like these. If you're feeling stressed and tired, and experience a trigger like this, you might overreact and take your feelings out on others.

Anger can also be part of grief – experiencing a loss, like a death or the breakdown of a relationship, can trigger feelings of anger. If you're struggling to cope with issues

like this, you can find local services to help. Use Scotland's Service Directory to search for wellbeing resources in your area.

Think about the times you've felt angry recently – do any of those anger triggers fit into the categories above?

If you find the same triggers come up repeatedly, consider if there's a way you can avoid them, or manage the situation differently. If there's something in your life that is consistently triggering your anger, can you make changes that remove it? For example, if you're having difficulty paying your bills, you could contact Citizen's Advice for information on managing debt.

Read more about coping with money worries

If you find yourself in a situation that triggers your anger and you can't remove yourself, it could be an opportunity to practise the relaxation exercises you'll find in the next section. Dealing with anger triggers is difficult, but practising the skills you learn from this guide will ensure it gets easier over time.

11. Relaxation

Calming down when you start getting angry

Controlled breathing can help you feel calmer and reduce your anger.

Controlled breathing

If you start to notice the signs that you're getting angry, follow these steps:

1. Start breathing slowly and deeply – try counting as you breathe. Breathe in for 3 seconds, hold this breath for 1 second, and then breathe out for 3 seconds. It can be helpful to count as you do this – for example, "in, 1,2,3, out, 1,2,3".
2. Breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth.
3. While you're focusing, try saying a calming statement in your mind. For example:

- “Relax”
- “Stay calm”
- "Keep your cool”

4. Repeat the calming statement while you breathe, until you feel calmer.

The goal of this exercise is to turn off your brain’s alarm system, so you have time to think before you react. Breathing slowly and deeply will send a signal to your brain that everything is okay. This exercise will help whether you tend to lose your temper, or if you tend to hold your anger in. Being calm will help you express your feelings in a healthy way. There’s more information about that in section 12.

Time out

When your anger reaches a certain level, it can be important to leave a situation before it escalates (gets worse). The aim of a time out is getting away from whatever is triggering your anger and giving yourself a chance to calm down. The goal is to do something that calms you down – for example, you could do a relaxation exercise, listen to music, or go for a walk. This lets you turn off your brain’s alarm system and give yourself a chance to start thinking clearly again.

The important thing to remember is that when you take a time out, you’re walking out – not ‘storming out’. The goal is to calm down, come back, and resolve the situation in a constructive way.

Follow these tips to make sure your ‘time out’ is useful:

It can be helpful to explain to friends and family that you’re using the time out method, so they’re better able to understand that you need some time to yourself. It’s not always possible to explain this in the moment, so it can be a good idea to have a conversation with loved ones when everyone’s calm, and let them know that when you get angry you need time out to calm down.

Prepare yourself a ‘calm kit’ in advance because when you’re feeling very angry it

might be hard to think clearly, but you can just pick up the kit. This can include:

- relaxing music, either a playlist or a CD
- a relaxing book or magazine
- a link to a funny video, or a funny DVD
- a relaxation app on your phone, or a link to relaxation techniques – you could use these exercises as a starting point
- a bag with your gym clothes, if exercise helps you feel calmer
- comfortable clothes
- a note to yourself with self-calming statements
- a printed copy of this self help guide

Once you're feeling calmer, take some time to think about how you're going to resolve the situation. Think about what triggered your anger to begin with and how you're going to deal with the current situation. You can also consider what you want to say to the other person involved, and how you'd manage the situation differently in the future.

Over time, if you keep using the methods in this guide, you'll find that you need time outs less because you'll be able to deal with situations before they get to this point. Consider time outs a short-term solution while you learn better techniques for managing anger.

Taking time to relax

If you're more relaxed in general, it'll be easier for you to notice the signs that you're becoming angry. Feeling less stressed also means you'll be less sensitive to anger triggers.

Try to find a small amount of time in your day for breathing and relaxation, and do the exercises somewhere you won't be interrupted. When you first start practicing these exercises, try to do them when you're feeling fairly calm so you are able to focus on and learn the techniques – if you're already angry or upset, try using the

controlled breathing exercise first.

It can take time and practice to feel the benefit of doing these exercises, so it’s important to do them regularly. The differences can feel very small at first, but as time goes on you’ll notice an improvement in your mood and ability to stay calm in stressful situations.

If you feel any discomfort or pain when doing these exercises then stop.

Progressive muscle relaxation

If you’ve been having problems with anger, you might find there’s a lot of tension in your body. This is part of the fight, flight, or freeze response. This muscle relaxation exercise will help your body to relax.

Doing this exercise will also make you more aware of when your muscles are becoming tense, which is an early warning sign for anger.

Lie on your back and get comfortable. If you have lower back issues, it can help to put a pillow under your knees.

This exercise uses your whole body, but if there’s a body part that's painful you can miss it out.

Take turns tensing and relaxing the muscles in each area on the list according to the instructions below.

1. Tense the muscles in each area of your body in turn. Breathe in as you do this, and hold the tension for a few seconds.
2. As you breathe out, release the tension in the body part and allow the muscles to relax.
3. Repeat the process of tensing on the in-breath and relaxing on the out-breath for the muscles in the different parts of the body.

4. When you've gone through the list, focus on each body part in turn. If you notice any remaining tension allow it to release as you breathe out.

Go through this list of body parts in order:

1. Right hand and arm
2. Left hand and arm
3. Right leg and foot
4. Left leg and foot
5. Stomach
6. Chest
7. Back muscles
8. Shoulders
9. Neck and throat
10. Face

Breathing and relaxation exercises

We have more breathing and relaxation exercises on NHS inform that are helpful for dealing with anger and stress.

View other breathing and relaxation exercises on NHS inform

12. Communication

Clear communication allows you to express yourself and get your message across to others. It helps you and the people around you to understand each other better, and can improve relationships overall.

Often, people find themselves getting angry because they can’t express their feelings, wants, and needs, or because they misunderstand when someone else is communicating with them. Learning to communicate well is an important part of dealing with an anger problem, because it can reduce a lot of the stress and possible conflicts in your life.

Communication styles

There's a range of different communication styles, and most people use them all in different situations. There are 4 main types:

Passive

If your communication style is passive, you might:

- prioritise other people's needs over your own – putting them first
- go along with what other people want to do, even if it's not what you want to do
- avoid expressing your own needs or opinions because you're worried about how other people will react
- find it difficult to say "no" to people, again because you're worried about their reactions
- think of yourself as shy – you might tend to be quiet and withdrawn, and avoid drawing attention to yourself, especially in a group or a crowd

If you have this communication style, you likely feel as if other people don't listen to you. You might feel 'walked over', and tend to agree to do tasks that you don't want to do.

Most people with a passive communication style are worried about how people will react if they express their actual thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs. You might be afraid that other people will react aggressively or get upset with you, or reject you. This is an example of the mind-reading type of unhelpful thought. It also suggests you think of other people as unreasonable, and likely to overreact, which is an example of jumping to conclusions and focusing on the negative.

Aggressive

If your communication style is aggressive, you might:

- prioritise your own needs above other people's – putting yourself first
- always think that you're right, and other people are wrong, and force your point on others
- always want things to be done your way
- ignore what other people have to say
- talk loudly or shout to be heard
- talk over or interrupt people

This can be a confrontational style of communication. You might confuse this style of communication with being assertive, especially if it seems to get results when you want something. However, people might feel they don't enjoy being around you, because you don't take their opinions into account. People might also be afraid of you, or see you as a bully. This can lead to problems in your relationships, and in day-to-day life.

Passive aggressive

If your communication style is passive aggressive, you might:

- avoid directly expressing your feelings
- be sarcastic or make jokes to show you're unhappy about something
- make rude comments, and pass them off as jokes if people react badly
- try to make other people feel guilty for asking you to do something you don't want to do, even if you've agreed to do it
- give 'backhanded compliments' - for example: "you look nice today, I'm surprised"
- refuse to express directly that you're unhappy about something, or say what it is that you're unhappy about

- sulk or give people the ‘silent treatment’ to show your unhappiness

If you have a passive aggressive communication style, you might want other people to know how you feel, but instead of telling them directly you expect them to know, or pick it up from your behaviour. You might be afraid to tell people how you feel directly, in case they react badly or think badly of you.

However, by not communicating clearly, you’re expecting other people to read your mind – which doesn’t work. This leads you to feel more frustrated, and have more anger that you feel unable to express. This communication style has a negative impact on your relationships and day-to-day life – people might struggle to know why you’re behaving the way you are. You’re also likely to experience frequent misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Assertive

If your communication style is assertive, you will:

- balance your own needs against the need of others
- take time to listen to other people's points of view
- say what you want, but accept you can’t always have things your way, and that other people have the right to say no
- be willing to compromise and negotiate with others
- behave in ways that show respect for yourself and respect for other people
- forgive yourself and other people for making mistakes
- express your opinions and feelings in a clear and respectful way

Being assertive means expressing your own needs and wants in a way that’s calm, clear, and considerate. Communicating assertively allows you to express how you’re feeling and what you want in positive way that’s more likely to be understood and respected by others. A lot of problems with anger are triggered by poor

communication, so being assertive makes it less likely that you'll struggle to deal with anger in your day-to-day life.

The next section has tips on how to be assertive, and allows you to practice positive ways of expressing your feelings.

13. Assertiveness

Follow these tips to help you become more assertive and constructive about communicating:

Say what you mean clearly – don't expect people to guess what you mean or know what you're thinking.

Instead of:

Saying something sarcastic when you're unhappy, for example – if a friend cancels plans with you, saying "that's just great."

Try:

Expressing how you really feel – for example, saying something like "I'm disappointed that you've cancelled last minute. In future I'd like you to give me more notice if possible."

Keep the volume of your voice steady and your tone calm – try not to shout or raise your voice.

Instead of:

"SHUT UP!"

Try:

“Would you please keep the noise down?”

Say what you think or feel using ‘I’ statements to avoid blaming or attacking the other person.

Instead of:

“You’re annoying me.”

Try:

“I’m getting annoyed.”

Listen to the other person and check you’ve understood their meaning by asking questions, or saying what you’ve heard in your own words. This lets the other person clarify if you’ve gotten something wrong, or misunderstood.

Instead of:

Assuming or pretending you understood their meaning.

Try:

“Are you saying... [say what you understood]?”

or

“I’m hearing… [say what you understood], is that right?”

Ask for what you want or need.

Instead of:

Hinting or saying nothing – for example, if you're struggling to complete a task on your own, just hoping the other person will offer to help.

Try:

"Would you help me please?"

This also applies to emotional needs and wants – for example, if your partner has a habit you don't like, directly asking them to stop is more constructive and assertive than hinting. It's also more likely to succeed.

Respect the other person.

- avoid using insults or personal comments
- accept it if the other person says "no" or disagrees with you
- avoid getting aggressive or threatening

Be firm if someone's trying to pressure you into something you don't want to do.

If you're having a conversation where someone keeps asking you the same thing, repeat yourself in a firm but calm tone. This is sometimes called the 'broken record' technique – if you keep saying the same thing, the other person will eventually give up.

Remember that you don't need to apologise or make excuses for saying 'no'.

Be open to criticism.

- remember constructive feedback can be helpful

- ask yourself if the criticism is true or not before responding
- try not to get defensive or take it personally
- if you don’t agree with the criticism, remember you don’t need to pretend you do

Choose the right time and place for a conversation that might be difficult.

- choose a private place where you won’t be interrupted
- pick a time when neither of you will be distracted or busy
- try to talk to the person one-on-one

If you’re going to have a difficult conversation, plan what you want to say beforehand. You could try:

- writing a script
- practising the conversation

You’ll have a chance to practice doing this in the next section.

14. Practising assertiveness – Activity 3

This activity is a chance to prepare for a constructive, assertive conversation.

If you want to write more conversation scripts, you can use more than one activity sheet and save different versions on your device.

You can find the activity sheet below.

1. Think of a current situation in your life where you'd like to be assertive with another person. For example, where your needs aren't being met in a relationship, or you're unhappy about something.

2. Use the tips from the previous section to write out a script with what you want to say - use the prompts below to help you.

3. Think about how you want to say the words in the script.

4. Practice your script, either by yourself or with someone else.
5. Make any changes to your script that you think would help.

6. Have the conversation.

7. Review how it went – think about what went well, and what you'd do differently next time.

Prompts for writing your script

1. Explain the problem situation to the person clearly and directly.
2. Tell the person how you feel, using ‘I’ statements.
3. Ask for what you need or want to happen, and explain the benefits of doing it.

Using a script is useful when you have time to prepare for a conversation. Keep doing this for challenging conversations until you feel confident asserting yourself without a script, even when a conversation might be difficult.

You won’t always have time to prepare for challenging conversations, but the more you practice these skills, the easier it will become to be assertive in the moment.

15. Problem solving

If you’re dealing with problems in your life, you’re likely to feel more stressed overall. This means you’re more sensitive to anger triggers. Using a problem-solving approach can help you to cope better with the problems you’re having, and reduce your levels of stress and anger.

Follow the steps below when you have a problem, in order to work through it in a constructive way.

Identify the problem

What’s bothering you?

Prioritise

If there’s more than one problem, make a list and choose the most urgent to work on first.

Identify your options for solving the problem

- don’t move straight from identifying the problem to trying to solve it – think through all of your options first
- be creative – think of as many options as you can, and don’t rule anything out at this stage
- if you’re struggling to think of options, ask someone for advice

For each option, think of the pros and cons

Think of the good and bad parts of each option – think through what would happen after choosing each one.

Choose a solution

Pick the option with the most pros and the fewest cons.

Make a plan to put your chosen solution into action

Think through each step of your solution. It can help to make a to-do list.

Put your solution into action

Work through the steps of your solution.

Review your solution

Did it work? What would you do differently next time?

If your chosen solution didn't work, go back to your options and choose another one. This might be a good time to look at the pros and cons again, now you have more information.

If you have more than one problem on your list, go through these steps for each one. The process will get easier each time you do it.

It's important to accept that there are some problems that can't be solved – either they're out of your control, or there's no way to change the situation. If that applies to any of your problems, it's important to work on your coping skills using the tips in this guide – they will help you to deal with these issues.

Problem solving guide

If you'd like to work through the problem-solving approach in more detail, we have a problem solving guide on NHS inform you may find useful.

Use the problem solving guide

16. Coping strategies

People who have problems with anger often have a number of coping strategies – things they do either to feel better and less angry, or to try and let the negative feelings out. Many of these strategies feel helpful at the time, but can actually be unhelpful in the long run.

There are three main types of coping strategy: avoidant, emotional, and practical.

Avoidant

If you have an avoidant coping strategy, it means you try to avoid the problem, or avoid how it makes you feel. For example:

- drinking alcohol or using drugs to ‘block things out’ and avoid thinking about the problem
- ‘storming out’ of difficult situations instead of talking through the problem
- ignoring problems, for example by not opening bills that arrive in the post or not answering your phone

Avoidant coping strategies are short term, and they don’t actually resolve the issue.

Emotional

If you have an emotional coping strategy, it means you try to manage the way the problem makes you feel, without addressing the problem itself. For example:

- taking drugs you know will change your mood
- crying
- exercising or another physical activity, to ‘work off’ stress and anger

While these strategies might make you feel better in the short term, they don’t address the actual problem.

Practical

If you have a practical coping strategy, it means you try to deal with the problem that’s causing the negative emotions. For example:

- talking through an issue you’re having with someone
- using problem-solving techniques
- seeking support or advice when you need it

A practical coping strategy allows you to work on solving problems and react to

them in a constructive way. It might be more difficult in the short term, but it has significant long-term benefits.

Avoidant and emotional coping strategies can be helpful in the short term – if you don't feel able to deal with a problem right away, it makes sense to put it out of your mind or do something to feel better. However, it's important to follow these short-term strategies by doing something practical, or problems will continue to grow and create more stress.

17. Looking after yourself

Improving your overall quality of life as much as possible can be helpful in managing anger. Developing mentally and physically healthy habits can lower your overall stress levels and improve your mood.

Here are some tips that could be helpful:

Exercise

Keeping fit and active can improve your physical health, mood and ability to cope with problems. Try to get at least some gentle exercise each week. You could try going for a walk or a run, playing sport or joining an exercise class.

Find free and low-cost options for exercise in your area

Activities

Finding an activity or hobby you enjoy will make you feel better overall.

Here are some suggestions:

- spend time with a friend or family member
- read a book

- watch your favourite TV show
- go to the cinema
- do something creative, like drawing or painting
- have a bath

You could do a web search for events happening in your area and see if there's anything you'd be interested in. Just remember you don't have to do everything at once. You'll know what works best for you.

Healthy eating

A healthy, balanced diet can improve your general wellbeing and mood.

Visit our pages on healthy eating and nutrition for information and help with meal planning and weight management.

Sleep

The ideal amount of sleep, on average, is around 7 to 9 hours a night for adults. Being tired can make you more sensitive to anger triggers, and leave you feeling unwell and overall less able to cope. Try to develop a bedtime routine and stick to it – this will help you get into a positive sleep pattern, which will benefit your mood overall.

Get advice and help with sleep problems from the Sleep Charity

Visit the Sleep problems self-help guide

Relationships and social support

Good relationships and support from friends and family can help you cope better. It can be helpful to talk through difficulties with other people. You could discuss your

problems and ways of coping – some people might have been through something similar and could offer you support and advice.

Socialising and doing activities with other people can also be fun and improve your mood.

Alcohol and drugs

Alcohol can impact your ability to cope and control negative behaviours, which can be unhelpful if you're trying to manage problems with anger. It can also make you more likely to behave aggressively, or act without thinking.

Drinking a lot and often can also damage your health. We recommend that you drink no more than 14 units of alcohol a week.

Many drugs can have an impact on your mood and behaviour. Using illegal or non-prescribed medication can be damaging to your health and negatively affect your life – your relationships, work, and finances can all be impacted.

If you're worried that your alcohol or drug use, or someone else's, is becoming a problem, you can find help from these organisations:

We Are With You (formerly Addaction) offers free, confidential support with alcohol, drugs, and mental health issues

The Scottish Recovery Consortium (SRC) is an organisation dedicated to helping people recover from problems with alcohol and substance misuse

Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs (SFAD) offers support to anyone concerned about someone else's alcohol or drug use in Scotland

If you're using alcohol or drugs to cope with issues in your life, it's important to be aware that there's help available. Your GP can advise on services in your area, and

you can also find a range of services and sources of support on Scotland's Service Directory.

Self-care

It's important to take time out for 'self-care'. This means focusing on yourself and your own happiness for a little while, and doing things that make you feel good. Self-care could mean treating yourself to an activity or food you like, or just setting aside time to relax. For example, you could go for a walk, take a hot bath, or just settle in and watch your favourite film.

Self-care isn't the same as being self-indulgent or selfish. It isn't lazy to need a break. It's healthy to look after your own mental and physical needs.

18. Next steps

Keep using the techniques you found helpful from this guide – they should continue to benefit you, and your skills will develop more with practice.

If there are some things that you didn't find helpful to begin with, stick with them for a few weeks – CBT can take a little time to work.

Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

If you feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area.

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phoneline is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday)

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, Living Life offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. This service is appointment-based and specifically for low mood, or mild/moderate depression or anxiety. Living Life are open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655 for an assessment appointment.

Learn more

For more resources on managing problems with anger, visit some other parts of NHS inform:

Learn more about anger

Learn more about managing anger

If you're experiencing anxiety, you might benefit from the anxiety self-help guide

There's information on dealing with low mood and depression, or you can use the depression self-help guide

If you're experiencing panic, you might benefit from the panic self-help guide

Learn more problem-solving techniques

Try some breathing and relaxation exercises for stress

If you're having problems with sleep, you might benefit from the sleep problems and insomnia self-help guide