

Understanding anger

Anger is a normal human emotion, which when managed and expressed properly is not a problem. We often experience anger when we perceive a situation to be threatening or unfair. Anger is mostly directed at other people, organisations, governments or the world at large, or we can feel anger towards ourselves.

What is anger?

Anger, like other emotions, has multiple components.

Physiological

When we perceive threat the flight and fight response is activated so that we can defend ourselves or escape from the situation. If we perceive threat and fight back we are likely to experience anger rather than anxiety. If we perceive threat and escape we are likely to experience anxiety. Both anger and anxiety are fuelled by the flight and fight response and associated physiological sensations are similar: we become more alert.

Emotions

Anger is experienced as a feeling state from mild annoyance, irritation to frustration, anger and fury. Often anger is driven by other negative emotions; underneath, you may be feeling hurt, frightened, disappointed, worried, anxious, threatened, embarrassed or frustrated.

Thoughts

Usually the way we think about an event (rather than the event itself) leads to an angry response. Once we are angry, we also tend to think about things in particular ways that tend to maintain the anger. Typically, those thoughts are about injustice. For example, "That stupid idiot should have been looking where he was going. If he had been, I wouldn't be in the predicament I'm in now". Anger is sustained and escalates through rumination, the reprocessing of negative thoughts over and over again. Angry thoughts cause our anger to intensify, which in turn leads to more angry thoughts and more anger. This can keep us stuck in an angry cycle. On a deeper level, unhelpful beliefs stemming from early life experiences can contribute significantly to our anger response.

Behavioural

People tend to act in particular ways when they are angry. Some people become physically or verbally aggressive, while others might be passive aggressive (e.g., giving someone we are angry with the 'silent' treatment) or behave in a dysfunctional manner (such as drink or drive recklessly). After a traumatic event, individuals may find that they become irritable regularly and will remove themselves from situations if they begin to feel irritable in order not to take out their anger on those around them.

The factors listed above interact and reinforce each other in important ways. How do you think these factors interact for you?

