

Anger

What This Emotion May Be Telling You

Anger is a normal human emotion. It often appears when something feels unfair, threatening, disrespectful, frustrating or out

of our control. It can also arise when a need has been ignored, a boundary crossed, or a more vulnerable feeling is difficult to

express.

Anger may be telling you: something matters, something feels wrong, I need protection, I need a boundary, I feel powerless, or there is another feeling underneath that needs attention.

What anger can feel like

- heat in the face or body
- a racing heart or faster breathing
- tight jaw, clenched fists or tense shoulders
- restlessness and an urge to act immediately
- irritability or being easily triggered
- thoughts becoming absolute: 'always', 'never', 'everyone'
- wanting to shout, withdraw, argue, fix or regain control
- hurt, rejection, fear or shame underneath the anger

Anger is information, not permission

Feeling angry does not make someone bad, aggressive or unsafe. Behaviour still matters. Anger can be listened to without

shouting, threatening, humiliating, breaking things or hurting another person. The aim is not to suppress the emotion; it is to

create enough space to choose what happens next.

Pause before action

What happened? _____

What did I interpret it to mean? _____

What is happening in my body? _____

What do I want to do immediately? _____

What response would protect both my needs and my values? _____

What might anger be telling you?

- A boundary has been crossed. Something may feel intrusive, disrespectful or unacceptable.
- I feel powerless. Anger can create energy when we feel trapped or unheard.
- Something is unfair. Anger often responds strongly to injustice.
- I am overwhelmed. Irritability may be an early sign that capacity is running out.
- I am hurt. Sadness, rejection, grief or shame can sit beneath anger.
- I am frightened. The threat system can produce fight as well as flight or freeze.
- I need change. Repeated anger may point to a problem that coping alone cannot solve.

Anger and depression

Depression does not always look like sadness. Some people become irritable, impatient or angry, particularly when exhausted, hopeless, trapped or unable to meet ordinary demands. Anger may also turn inward as harsh self-criticism.

If anger has become more frequent alongside persistent low mood, loss of enjoyment, sleep changes, hopelessness or

difficulty functioning, consider speaking with a GP or mental-health professional.

The anger chain

Trigger - interpretation - body activation - urge - behaviour - consequence. Slowing this chain creates more places where a different response becomes possible.

Map the chain

Trigger: _____

What I told myself: _____

Body signs: _____

My urge: _____

What I did: _____

What happened afterwards: _____

Early warning signs

It is easier to regulate anger at a four out of ten than at a nine. Learn your earliest signs: speaking faster, interrupting, pacing,

jaw tension, feeling hot, becoming sarcastic, wanting to send a message immediately or feeling that nobody is listening.

Create a personal rule for the early stage: pause the conversation, drink water, move away safely, write rather than send, or

ask for ten minutes to think.

Anger and the nervous system

Anger can be part of the fight response. Adrenaline prepares the body for action and narrows attention towards threat. This is

one reason complex conversations are harder at peak activation. Regulation is not the same as admitting you are wrong; it

gives your thinking brain a better chance to decide how you want to respond.

A 10-minute anger reset

- Stop the argument or task if it is safe to do so.
- Create physical space without using withdrawal as punishment.
- Unclench your hands and jaw; lower your shoulders.
- Let breathing become slower, especially the out-breath.
- Move your body safely: walk, stretch or shake out tension.
- Do not send messages or make major decisions at peak activation.
- Name the actual problem in one sentence.
- Return when you can speak without threatening or attacking.

Anger, hurt and rejection

Sometimes anger arrives faster than sadness. 'How dare they?' may protect us from 'That really hurt.' Identifying the more

vulnerable emotion underneath can change what we ask for. Try completing: Underneath my anger, I also feel

_____ because _____.

Anger and boundaries

Anger can reveal that a boundary has been crossed. A boundary describes what you will do or what you can participate in; it

is not a threat designed to control another person. Examples include: 'I will continue this conversation when we are both

speaking respectfully', 'I cannot take on another task today', or 'Please do not speak to me like that.'

Anger and injustice

Anger can mobilise action when something is unfair. Constructive anger can support advocacy, reporting concerns, protecting

others, challenging discrimination or making change. The question is how to use the energy without allowing it to cause

additional harm.

A personal reflection

"I used to think the goal was to stop being angry. That made me ashamed whenever it appeared. I eventually learned that

anger was often the first sign that I was overloaded or had agreed to something I did not really have capacity for. Now I try to

notice it earlier and ask what boundary or need I have missed." - illustrative personal reflection

Anger and neurodivergence

Autistic and ADHD people may experience anger or irritability around sensory overload, repeated interruption, sudden

changes, communication misunderstandings, executive-functioning strain, rejection, injustice or accumulated masking. What

looks like disproportionate anger may sometimes be the final visible part of a much longer build-up.

Helpful adjustments can include reducing sensory load, using written communication, providing processing time, increasing

predictability, making expectations explicit and allowing recovery after demanding situations.

Meltdown, shutdown and overload

A meltdown is not the same as deliberate aggression or a tantrum. It can occur when regulation capacity is exceeded. Safety

and reduced demand come first. During acute overload, fewer words, less sensory input and more processing space may be

more useful than reasoning or insisting on an immediate discussion.

Anger in relationships

Healthy conflict allows both people to have feelings and boundaries without fear. Try moving from accusation to specific

observation and request: 'When X happens, I feel angry because Y matters to me. I need/request Z.'

Anger is never a justification for coercive control, intimidation, threats or violence. If another person's anger makes you

frightened or controls what you do, consider specialist relationship or domestic-abuse support.

Anger at work

Unclear expectations, workload, lack of recognition, repeated interruptions, bullying, inaccessible systems or being excluded

from decisions can create anger. Individual regulation helps, but it should not be used to disguise a structural problem.

Document patterns, clarify priorities and seek appropriate workplace support where needed.

When anger turns inward

Some people rarely show anger externally but direct it at themselves: 'I should have known', 'I am useless', 'Why can't I

cope?' Self-directed anger can deepen shame and depression. Ask whether you are holding yourself to a standard you would

never impose on someone else.

From self-attack to information

What am I angry with myself about? _____

What expectation am I applying? _____

Is it realistic and fair? _____

What can I learn without attacking myself? _____

Problem-solving after regulation

Once activation has reduced, decide what type of problem you have. Is it something to accept, something to communicate,

something to change, something to leave, or something that needs outside support? Anger becomes more useful when its

energy is connected to a clear, values-based action.

Supporting someone who is angry

- Keep your own voice calm and clear.
- Do not crowd, corner or touch someone without consent.
- Acknowledge the emotion without agreeing with harmful behaviour.
- Offer time and space where safe.
- Set boundaries around threats, abuse or aggression.
- Return to the underlying issue once both people are regulated.
- Seek emergency help if there is immediate danger.

When extra support may help

Seek professional support if anger is frequent, intense, difficult to control, damaging relationships or work, linked with

depression or trauma, or leading to aggression, risky behaviour or fear in other people. A GP or psychological therapy service

can help explore underlying causes and appropriate treatment.

If you believe you may hurt yourself or somebody else, or there is immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS

111 can direct you to urgent mental-health support. Samaritans can be contacted free on 116 123.

A seven-day anger awareness exercise

- Day 1 - Notice your earliest physical sign of anger.
- Day 2 - Identify one common trigger.
- Day 3 - Separate what happened from what you interpreted it to mean.
- Day 4 - Look for the feeling underneath the anger.
- Day 5 - Practise one clear, respectful boundary.
- Day 6 - Use movement or a pause before responding.
- Day 7 - Review what your anger was trying to protect or change.

Books and further exploration

- The Dance of Anger - Harriet Lerner: anger, relationships and patterns of communication.
- Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith: practical emotional-regulation tools.
- Nonviolent Communication - Marshall B. Rosenberg: identifying feelings, needs and requests.
- Self-Compassion - Kristin Neff: reducing harsh self-judgement and responding to distress with care.

Clinical and source notes

This resource is informed by established psychological understanding of anger as a normal emotion involving cognitive,

physiological and behavioural components, alongside NHS mental-health guidance on stress, low mood and urgent support.

Anger can be influenced by stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, neurodivergence, relationships, environment, sleep, physical

health and learned patterns.

This guide is educational and does not diagnose a mental-health condition. Persistent, escalating or dangerous anger

deserves individual assessment. Physical symptoms, sudden behavioural change or medication-related concerns should also

be discussed with an appropriate healthcare professional.

What this emotion may be telling you

Anger can be a messenger for boundaries, hurt, injustice, overload, fear, powerlessness and unmet needs. The goal is not to

silence it or let it take control. It is to understand the message, regulate enough to think, and choose a response that protects

what matters without causing unnecessary harm.

Your feelings matter. Pause, reflect, choose, then move forward in a way that still feels like you.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Understanding emotions without judging them.