



## Don't Let Anger Destroy Your Health

Angry people are exhausting to be around, always carping about some offense and glowering about what someone else did or did not do. For the angry person, life itself is exhausting, zapping his/her energy and, as many studies have shown, triggering health problems from headaches to heart attacks. But it is hard for angry people to get out from under their wrath because they are caught in a self-perpetuating trap, Fortunately, though, with effort and guidance, it is possible to free yourself of the burdens of an angry life so you can enjoy life more, enjoy your loved ones more and be far healthier.

### **ANGER HAS ITS PLACE**

Not all anger is bad, of course. It is an appropriate response to a number of situations, including being lied to or otherwise betrayed, and in those times it would be unhealthful not to feel your anger and give it a voice. Verbalizing the emotion and working it through is how you relieve the physical and mental stress anger creates. It also provides the opportunity to resolve the problem with the other person and move past being angry. Unhealthful anger, conversely, results when people flip out automatically as a reaction, or the extent of the anger is out of proportion to what happened. They hold on to grudges, rage at “stupid” drivers and sputter at heavy traffic — even at silly mistakes of their own. Being angry is what they do because it's the only way they know how to react in a situation, so they do it a lot.

### **BEHIND ANGER**

Being in a regular state of frustration, rage or anger is something angry people have learned... if not at their mother's knee, then at their father's — or perhaps both, In their childhood home, being angry was an accepted way of behaving... the mother who got cold and shut down anytime she was upset about even trivial matters... the father who hollered and slammed doors when something didn't go his way. Seeing so much anger acted out without any attempt to curtail or change the behavior creates the belief in the child that there is nothing wrong with acting this way. (This is, of course, in sharp contrast to the people who grow up in families that do not display anger — even when they feel it — and consequently are reluctant to show anger even when provoked and instead drive it underground.) But there is more to the mix than just learned behavior, Lauren continues.

Angry people want to be in control, be it of their life, their environment or other people. When they can't control something, they get frustrated — and they get mad. They justify their fury by rationalizing that they know the “right” way something should or shouldn't be done. This position,

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then, gives them the “right” to be angry when that something doesn’t go as they wanted it to. Sometimes the angry person is indeed right — other drivers can be stupid, traffic often is a nightmare, war is bad. But anger alone does not resolve problems. For example, getting mad at your hair turning gray will not make it go back to the color of your youth.

## **YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR ANGER**

Angry people are usually stuck being angry because they are so busy focusing on why they are right instead of moving past it. Underneath, deep inside, they often know that they are, in fact, out of control and that people shy away from them, reluctant to be around their explosive nature. While angry people initially cling to the idea, “That’s just the way I am,” it is certainly possible to overcome chronic anger, says Lauren. The first step is to recognize that you are angry and that you hold on to your displays of it much as a toddler does his temper tantrums. A very powerful exercise is to look at the way you’re behaving and notice how childlike the angry behavior is and how foolish you must appear. Then ask yourself what you get from behaving in the same bratty manner as a young child. Like a tantrum, it is probably also an expression of frustration, but when frustration builds in small children, they don’t have a selection of ways to display it. As an adult, you do.

The next step is to investigate how you witnessed anger in your childhood where you learned it. Most people are reluctant to believe they are like their parents, but it’s through parents that we all learn how to conduct ourselves in our lives. Your particular way of showing anger may differ slightly, but in essence the pattern is no doubt the same. Once you’ve recognized that, start to think through what your parents’ anger actually achieved or changed. Did being mad benefit their family or them personally? Or did it, in fact, get in the way? Having evaluated that part of your past prepares you for the next step, which is to observe — and change — your own ways of acting out anger. Here’s how...

- For a week or two, make a list of your anger triggers. Write down everything that makes you sooo mad — no matter how big or small. And, keep in mind, you don’t have to yell to be feeling and displaying anger.
- Review your completed list to evaluate your particular triggers.
- You will discover they are amazingly predictable — variations on the same four or five things again and again.
- Pick out one trigger area and come up with new ways to handle it. This should include ways you can change the situation so that it no longer upsets you and how you can change the way you respond. For example, say heavy traffic on your commute makes you crazy. You can’t change

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traffic, of course, but you can leave earlier or later so that you miss the rush. If that's not possible, change your response by finding something calming and enjoyable, such as listening to books on tape as you drive. It's critical to expect the fact that traffic is going to be bad. By doing this, your expectations of good traffic won't be overestimated so you won't be frustrated. If you change your expectations of a situation, you reduce your risk of frustration and, in turn, anger. Also, look at what you can do to shift a situation. For example, say you complain that your spouse isn't meeting your needs. Can you change that by making more effort to communicate clearly what your needs are?

In addition to these nuts-and-bolts steps, add fuel to change by doing this — picture yourself as a person who is not angry. Visualize how you would behave and actually put words to your description. It might even help to think about someone you know who is not an angry person and how they react in situations. This will help you have a role model for the behavior and may give you a feeling of what it's like when someone reacts without anger. It may be hard at first to visualize a world without anger, but push on, and decide what you would be like and how you would act and the difference that would make in your relationship with those closest to you. Now you are ready to re-channel that ferocious amount of energy you had been putting into being mad into a more peaceful and productive daily experience. You'll realize that instead of getting mad, you've stepped up to the plate to help make a difference in your world.