

Women and anger

Is anger the emotion of our time? Are we becoming more tolerant of angry behaviour? Is anger a necessary skill to survive in an increasingly competitive environment? Is the pay-off worth the physical and psychological costs of 'living angry'? Is anger always a bad thing; how do women 'do' anger and what can we do to manage it?

What is anger?

Anger is an emotion that can range from mild annoyance to intense rage. It is a mood or feeling that brings about physical changes: increased heart rate, raised blood pressure and elevated levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol. Intense rage can lead to extreme physical responses such as shaking, sweating, a sense of being 'out of control', and behaviours such as yelling, throwing things, criticising, storming out, and sometimes withdrawing. People experiencing intense anger may have a lowered level of awareness about how their behaviour affects those around them.

The upside of anger

Although anger is often seen as a negative emotion, it can be a healthy response to difficult situations. It is part of the primitive 'fight or flight' protective response and can increase motivation to take positive action and change a situation for the better. Whether it is deemed healthy or unhealthy depends on when and how anger is displayed.

Common triggers for anger

A common trigger for anger is an underlying sense of injustice. When a person feels they have been wronged, or that a situation is deeply unfair, they may react in an angry manner. Whether we express anger, or how we express anger, may depend on a number of factors, including how we have grown up.



How women do anger

A sense of 'not being in control' can be a trigger for anger in women. "Men are encouraged to be more overt with their anger. If [boys] have a conflict in the playground, they act it out with their fists. Girls have been encouraged to keep their anger down", says US psychologist Dr Sandra Thomas, a leading researcher in women's anger.

Women say they often feel overwhelmed by the constant pressure to meet the needs of others. They may feel burdened by the need to keep everything going, often at the expense of their own desires. Some feel unappreciated and unsupported and may have a sense of not being in control of their lives. But most importantly, they may feel unable to convey this feeling of unhappiness to those who can help.

"What some women do with anger is swallow it and wait. They typically don't deal with it straight away and may stew over it", says Jean Hailes psychologist and Head of Translation Dr Mandy Deeks. "This is internalising anger, which isn't good for our mental health."

Women who hold in their anger may find that they either turn their anger inwards, which may contribute to the development of conditions such as depression and anxiety, or they may displace their anger, which may resurface in unrelated situations.

“Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way ...is not easy.” – Aristotle

Are women angrier at different life stages?

Some women report increased levels of anger at certain times in their menstrual cycle (premenstrual tension) and during perimenopause and menopause. However these are individual, not universal, experiences. Women who believe their anger is related to their hormones are encouraged to discuss this with their GP.

When does anger become a problem?

Anger becomes a problem when it takes a physical toll on your health, when it is damaging your relationships and when you feel that the ‘anger’ is in control of you and not the other way around.

Dealing with anger in the moment

- When you feel the first surge of anger, pause for a moment and focus on breathing
- Consider how your anger affects you and those around you
- Calm yourself by thinking through the situation
- Walk away if you feel you are unable to calm down quickly
- Find a safe place where you can express your anger, such as a bathroom

Long term management

“Taking the time to work out what is behind your anger is an important step”, suggests Jean Hailes psychologist Gillian Needleman. “Also, increasing your awareness of what triggers your anger and looking at ways to be more assertive about your needs is helpful.”

What makes you angry is unique to your situation and perspective, so it is important to think about what pushes your buttons.

ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

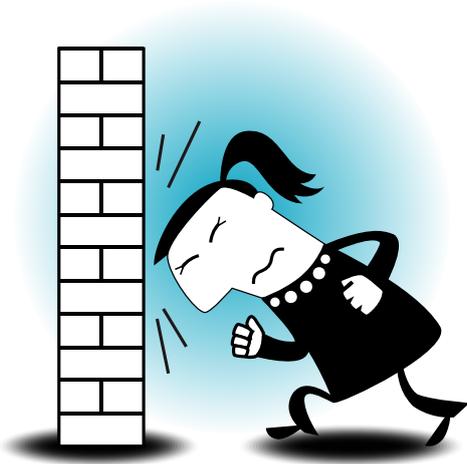
- What triggers my anger?
- What signs tell me that I’m on the brink of uncontrolled anger?
- Have I fallen into any unhelpful patterns of behaviour?
- What have the consequences of my anger been?
- What works to calm me down?
- Are there any triggers in my daily routine or my environment that I could change?



Sandra's story

Sandra was waiting for a parking spot to become vacant when another driver ducked in and took it. She got out and confronted the offending driver, leaving her three children in the car. The driver walked off without offering an apology. Sandra yelled that she had been waiting and "It was a low act to take someone else's park"!

In that moment her sense of always having to put up with the selfishness of others began to weigh on her. She saw the fear in the eyes of her children, became aware that she was losing control and started to talk herself down by saying, "This isn't important, there are other parks". Later, Sandra reflected on this incident and how deeply she felt about being 'taken advantage of', particularly within her relationship. She decided to talk with her partner about making some real changes.



Melanie's story

Melanie listened as the head of her department gave her team some negative feedback. In response, Melanie made the comment that, "It takes a team to get things done". But when pressed she would not say who she was referring to or offer solutions to improve the situation.

Later she handed some work to another team member saying, "I hope you can manage to get this done on time!", and at the end of the day to her partner she quipped, "It would be really nice, just once, to not have to remind you to do your share of the housework".

Melanie noticed that while she seemed to have a great life, she felt angry a lot of the time. She was angry first thing in the morning and often woke up in the middle of the night raging at someone in her head. She felt the exhaustion of always being angry and decided to talk with a psychologist.

Gradually she began to understand that her expectation of how perfect her life should be was making her angry. When people didn't meet her expectations she felt her anger meter rise. She began to accept that the only person she had control over was herself. This was the point from which she began to build a less angry life.

Where to get help

If you feel your anger is out of control, a range of health professionals – including psychologists and anger management self-help groups – can help you learn to understand and manage your anger. Start by talking to your GP about your concerns.

Working out how to control your anger instead of anger controlling you, and being able to assert your needs at an appropriate time and to the right people, is vital for wellbeing.