

Anger and Health

An Anger Alternative White Paper based upon the Medol Model® principles of managing anger and anger-related behaviors.



We all know what it feels like to get angry. Often our heart races, our hands shake and we start to breathe faster or break into a sweat. That is what happens when our bodies are gearing up for a fight.

Anger triggers our flight-or-fight response, an evolutionary adaptation that prepares us to react quickly to a perceived threat.

The Physical and Biological Development of Anger

When we become angry, the amygdala (the emotional center of the brain) reacts by releasing neurotransmitters and stress hormones to the body and brain. These chemicals arouse our nervous system and create a burst of energy, which can be perceived as an elevated heart rate,

hyperventilation, trembling, and more. We don't know it, but we're prepared to fight to the death or run for our lives.

The amygdala reacts so quickly to threats that we often react to anger feelings before the prefrontal cortex (judgment and decision-making area of the brain) can catch up. In other words, our bodies respond to the flood of adrenalin and other stress hormones before our thinking brain has a chance to decide what to do.

This nervous system arousal can last for hours or even days. It takes a long time to relax once we become angry. And while we are cooling down, our stress hormones are still above normal, which means that we are more likely to be irritated or to become angry again.

You can learn to control your brain's reactions to anger by learning new behaviors. You can train your brain to ignore the initial fight-or-flight response to anger and learn how to use your judgment when you are angry.

Physical Health

Mis-managed anger can have a long-term, negative effect on health. In terms of physical health, it doesn't matter if you tend to lash out in rage or repress your anger. If you constantly struggle with your anger, your stress hormones will be far above normal, which can result in illness, injury, and even death.

Chronic anger problems compromise the immune system, making us more susceptible to colds and sickness. Researchers have found connections between anger and physical illnesses, such as strokes, coronary heart disease, gastric and respiratory

conditions, and some researchers have theorized that high stress levels are a risk factor in developing diabetes and even cancer.

Anger is also a mortality risk, especially for women. In one long-term study, women who often suppressed their anger had three times the mortality rate than women who did not. A 2000 study published in *Circulation Magazine* found that among men and women with normal blood pressure, people who were chronically angry were two times as likely to develop coronary heart disease and three times as likely to have a heart attack, compared to the least-angry subjects.

Anger -- as well as anxiety, depression and other negative emotions -- are a part of life...But if people find that they have them chronically and at high levels and can't seem to get away from it, I view it like pain. It's a signal that something needs to change. This is not how it's supposed to be. *Laura Kubzansky, PhD, MPH, as quoted in WebMD*

Mental Health

Anger and stress also have an effect on our mental well-being. Although everyone reacts to stress differently, for some people a move, a lost job, or the death of a loved one can lead to clinical depression.

For people who don't know how to express their emotions, depression can manifest as anger. One way of understanding depression is that it is anger directed inward. If you don't know how to manage or express your emotions, they don't go away, they fester inside. There can be a vicious cycle of anger and depression; the pain of depression feeds anger, and anger feeds depression.

Maurizio Fava, MD, and Jerrold F. Rosenbaum, MD - *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1998, have studied anger in people with depression or anxiety disorders. They have found that anger attacks are intense episodes of anger that resemble panic attacks. In their studies, they have found that 30 to 40 percent of depressed people experience anger attacks. Participants who did not have depression or anxiety disorders did not have anger attacks.

In another study, 30 percent of subjects who had panic or anxiety disorders experienced anger attacks. Additionally, people who had an anxiety disorder and anger attacks were also more likely to be depressed than participants who did not have anger attacks.

Anger attacks can be mistaken for panic attacks, which are often associated with panic or anxiety disorders. Panic attacks can be triggered by certain situations. Panic disorders can often be successfully treated with medication and therapy, especially Cognitive Behavior Therapy. If you experience panic attacks, you should talk to your health care provider about treatment options.

If you don't know how to manage your anger, there can be severe repercussions on your physical and mental health. By learning how to identify the sources of your anger and respond to them, you will not only improve your physical and mental well-being, you will learn how to channel your anger.