

Managing Anger & Frustration

Anger and frustration are normal emotions that everyone feels from time to time. Some people find it hard to control their behaviour when they are feeling these emotions, and this is when they can become problematic.

Is anger a problem for me?

Consider the following:

- Intensity – On a scale of 1 – 10, how intense is it?
- Frequency – Do I feel angry multiple times a day, daily, weekly?
- Duration – Does my anger and hostile thinking stick around for a long time, or does it disappear quickly?
- Impact – How does my behaviour impact on myself and others?

Anger is likely to be a problem when you experience high levels of intensity of feelings coupled with negative impacts on you or others, based on your behaviour. So it can be a problem even if you get angry infrequently, if the intensity is high enough at that time.

How we express anger is something we learn over time. Problems emerge when we express that anger with aggression or other unhelpful methods. The more we mix the two, the more entrenched the habit becomes.

To break this habit you need to:

1. Develop an awareness of the events, circumstances and behaviours of others that trigger your anger
2. Find strategies to effectively manage it
3. Change your thought patterns

Here are some key points that describe the relationship between anger, frustration and alcohol and drug use:

- Anger brings with it a degree of discomfort or pain
- If it is unresolved we feel frustrated
- People sometimes use alcohol and drugs to deal with their anger (either covering it up or using it to feel less inhibited, which can lead them to discharge pent-up feelings)
- Releasing this tension often makes the person feel better (at least in the short term) but the underlying problems don't go away
- The more we resort to using or drinking to cope with anger and frustration, the less we are able to address what is really going on

This can then lead to a cycle where the person uses alcohol or drugs to manage their anger, repeatedly experiencing negative feelings such as guilt, which in turn prompts alcohol or drugs use ... and so the cycle goes on and on.

Recognising when I am angry

Looking out for your own cues to anger will help prevent things getting out of hand. Paying attention to what's happening in your head and the rest of your body is a very important part of managing one's anger.

Secondary Emotions

Sometimes people connect with the feeling of 'anger' when in reality there is another feeling/emotion that is underneath, for example, fear or anxiety.

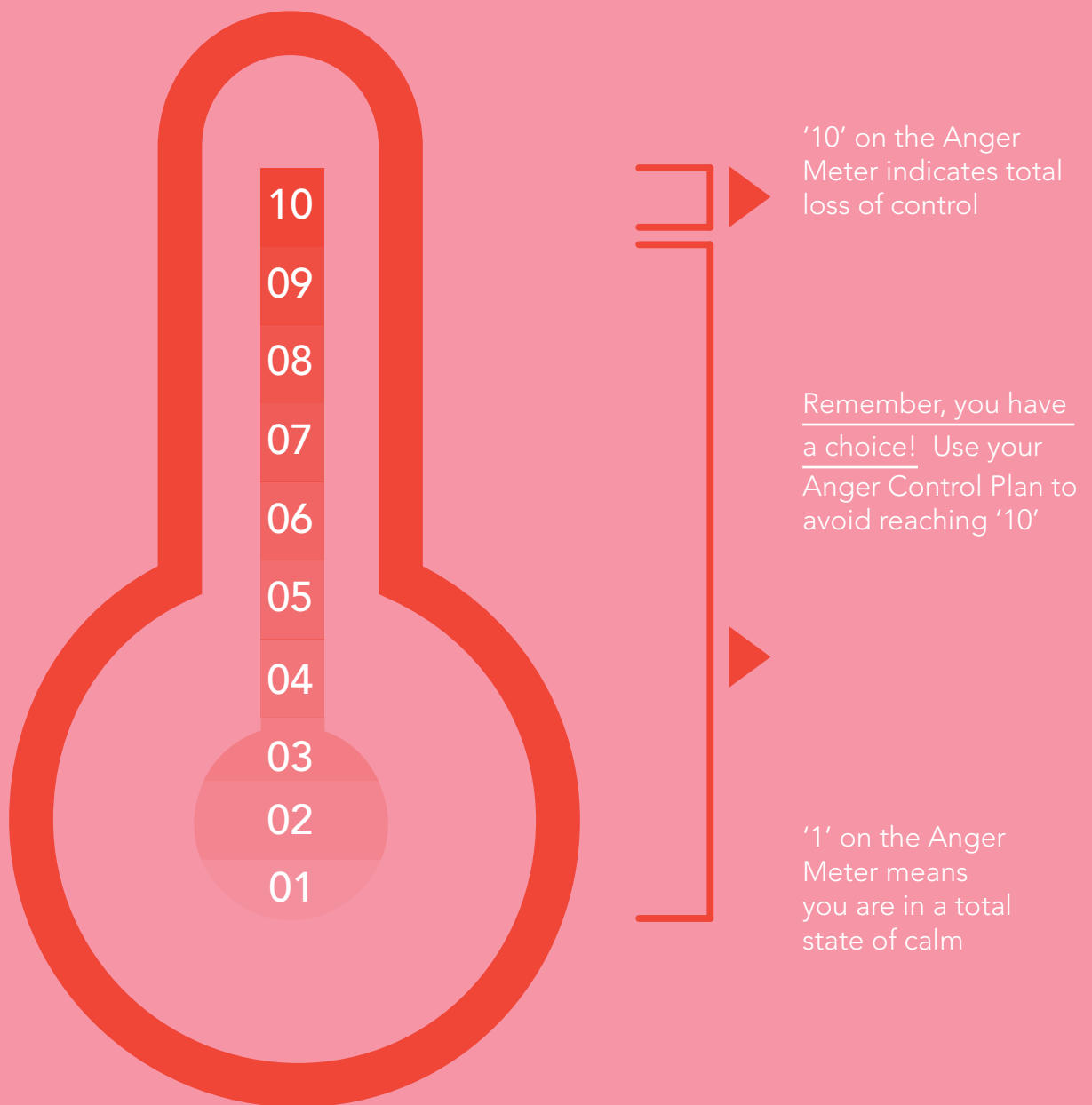
In this situation, Anger is 'secondary' to the real or underlying emotion.

Can you think of a time when you felt angry?

Try applying the ABC-DE model to it.

Use the Anger Meter to rate the intensity of your anger. This tool will help you keep track of your anger and stop you from acting out with aggression.

The earlier on you notice how angry you're feeling, the more choices you have.



Some strategies for managing frustration and anger

The Stop-Breathe-Leave technique

STOP - Say the word "stop" in your mind or out loud, and visualise a stop sign or flashing lights at the same time

BREATHE - Take a few deep breaths to lower arousal and distract yourself

LEAVE - Physically remove yourself from the situation. This will keep you and others out of harm's way

The aim of Stop-Breathe-Leave is to stop the flow of aggression-provoking thoughts which occur when we're in the escalation and build-up phase. It's also about moving away from whatever or whomever it is that is bothering us.

A really effective way of managing the physical signs of anger is to do a breathing exercise. It'll help you refocus your attention away from what is bothering you, and let go of the tension you are feeling:

Breathing Exercise

Get comfortable in your chair. If you wish, close your eyes or just gaze at a particular spot on the floor.

Take a few moments to settle yourself. Now focus on your body.

Beginning with your feet, slowly scan upwards, checking for tension as you move along. Notice any tightness in your legs, stomach, hands and arms, shoulders, neck and face. Try to let go of the tension you are feeling.

Now focus on your breathing. Pay attention as it enters and leaves your body. Take a deep breath and hold it for a second. Notice how your lungs and chest have expanded. Now slowly exhale through your nose. Take another deep breath. As you fill your lungs notice how much air you can take in. Hold it for second, and gently release.

Now try this on your own – continue breathing in this way for a couple of minutes. As you notice yourself breathing in and out, feel your body becoming more and more relaxed.

Use your breath to wash away the tension in your body. If you notice your mind wandering, gently bring it back to the breath.

When you are ready, open your eyes.

How was that? Did you notice anything that surprised you? How do you feel now?

An angry outburst is preceded by the build-up phase. This is characterised by what we call 'thought stacking'. After the initial trigger the person becomes increasingly angry as they dwell on one hostile thought after another. These thoughts come in quick succession, forming a chain of negative assumptions. Sometimes people will drink or use drugs as it helps them to thought stack.

If the person's anger continues to escalate uninterrupted they will explode. If not managed well they can act out with unhelpful or negatively impacting behaviours (verbal and/or physical).

This is followed by the post-expression phase. After the initial outburst people are generally quiet, at least for a time. In some cases they regret what they did and feel guilty, which in turn can lead to further alcohol /drug use. In this context the person may use substances to numb the emotional pain.

One of the tell-tale signs of the build-up phase is '**thought stacking**'. This is where the person works themselves up by dwelling on hostile thoughts:

- People should always do the right thing (or what I believe is the right thing)
- The world should be fair, and people should always behave ethically and decently
- I should always be treated fairly
- I shouldn't be inconvenienced or put out as a result of other people's actions
- If people do the wrong thing they are horrible and deserve to suffer for their wrong doings

If the person's anger continues to escalate uninterrupted they will express their anger, possibly exploding

Anger and unmet expectations

We get angry because our expectations are not met.

These expectations can lead us to act out with aggression, believing we're in the right while the other person is wrong.

Ask yourself:

"Are my expectations reasonable?"

People who have trouble managing their anger tend to engage in ideas, preoccupations and thinking practices that are:

- **Self-righteous** – believe your own actions, opinions are right and others are wrong
- **Blaming**- putting the responsibility for problems on other people
- **Vengeful** – wanting to harm someone for a perceived harm they have done to you.
- **Disrespectful** (especially of people who are different)

Talking yourself down

Talking yourself down not up is a technique which involves using calming statements to counteract thought stacking. The more you reflect on these calming statements, the less agitated you will become.

Calming statements you can use include:

"I'm not going to let this get to me"

"Cool it ... I can handle this"

"My emotions do not control me"

Developing an Anger control Plan

Developing an Anger Control Plan can help you to try a range of different strategies: immediate strategies for use in the heat of the moment when anger is rapidly escalating, and preventative strategies to assist in avoiding escalation of anger before it begins.

These strategies can range from taking time outs and relaxation (e.g. deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation) to exercising and talking to a friend (someone you trust).

Sample of an Anger Control Plan

- Taking time out (formal or informal)
- Talking to a trusted friend
- Regular exercise (going to the gym and going for a walk)
- Thought stopping and talking myself down to manage my self-talk

Time Out

Time Out is a practical strategy you can use to gain control over your anger or protect yourself from another person's aggression.

It's important to remember that:

- Time Outs are not an escape!
- They are not a way to avoid difficult or sensitive subjects
- Time Out can be called by either party
- Don't 'thought stack'

Time Out Procedure

Step 1: Recognise (what's going on?)

- Notice your body signs (jaw, stomach, heart ...)
- Notice your actions (voice, words, stance ...)

Say to yourself: *"I'm getting too angry. I need a Time Out. I want to talk about this but first I need to calm down"*

Step 2: Be responsible (time to think)

- Move away and try to calm down. Before leaving tell the other person where you are going and when you'll be back
- Change how you think about the situation

Ask yourself: *"Do I really need to win this argument?"*

Step 3: Retry (let's try this again)

- When you have regained self-control go back and try again

Say to yourself: *"Can we start again or shall we leave it for another time?"*