

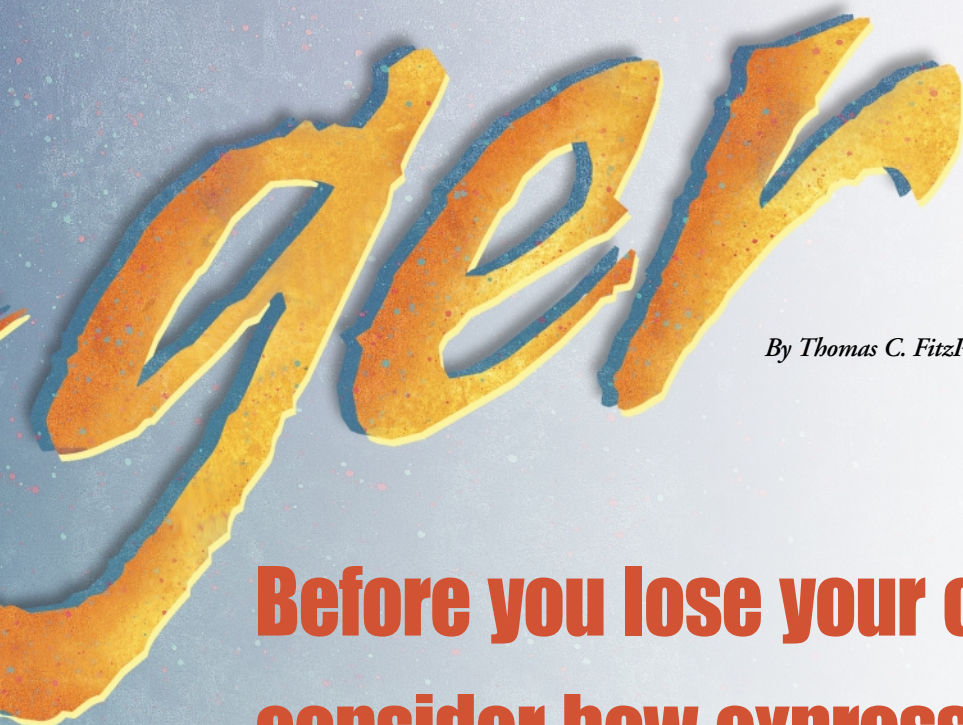
Diffusing



FAST FACTS

- An estimated one-half of Americans show symptoms of road rage.
- Anger is a normal human reaction to many situations.
- The number one cause of firings in the workplace is inappropriately expressed anger.
- Effective anger management can bring about positive changes in one's physical and emotional health, productivity, and relationships.





By Thomas C. FitzPatrick

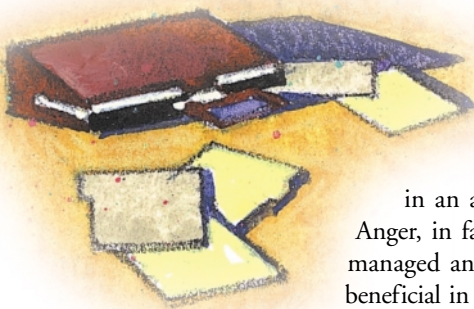
**Before you lose your cool,
consider how expressing anger in a
healthy way can change your life.**

Anger is a feeling; violence is an action. Of the five basic emotions (sadness, joy, anger, guilt, and fear), anger is the pariah. It is regarded by many as an unacceptable emotion, to be suppressed and denied as opposed to managed, expressed, and used for positive change. Yet, its reputation is not unfounded. The personal and societal costs of anger are high. Note the following statistics:

An estimated one-half of Americans show symptoms of road rage. A Washington D.C.-area survey showed that aggressive driving may be a factor in at least 50 percent of auto crashes. Results of a recent Gallup poll indicated drivers worry more about being the victims of road rage than about being hit by a drunk driver. The number one cause of firings in the workplace is inappropriately expressed anger. There are almost two million assaults every year in the workplace, and homicide is the second leading cause of death on the job. In a Massachusetts survey of high school students, 8 percent had been injured by or threatened with a weapon, 38 percent had been in a physical fight, 20 percent had carried some kind of weapon, and 10 percent had carried a gun to school.

Being prone to anger arousal is more predictive of heart disease than smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, and makes one three times more likely to have a second heart attack. On the other end of the spectrum, the suppression of anger raises one's blood pressure and creates dangerous health risks.¹ Like all the other emotions, experiencing anger is a healthy response to many daily occurrences. It is the harmful expression of anger that is responsible for the conditions cited above. And the solution lies not in suppression, but in the healthy management and expression of anger.

There are three basic ways to deal with anger. One is suppression. If we are ashamed to feel anger, we are likely to deny or suppress it. This can result in hoarding it, as opposed to dispensing with it, which can lead to withdrawal from the person who is the object of our anger, depression, or eventually an explosive outburst. Another response to angry feelings is escalation, which usually leads to an explosive situation. The effects of these first two methods include stress, damage to relationships, depression, loneliness and isolation, physiological symptoms, and lost productivity.



A third way of dealing with anger is to manage it and direct it in an appropriate fashion.

Anger, in fact, when effectively managed and expressed, can be beneficial in several ways. Of the basic emotions, it is the one most likely to promote change. It is energizing. Anger can motivate us to change our behavior and give us the energy to do so. Anger also helps us to define and defend our boundaries, thereby creating the opportunity to be better understood by those close to us. Finally, it is empowering. Anger, when appropriately conveyed, moves us out of the weak position of victim into the stronger role of self-advocate. Stephen Simmer states that "anger is the guardian of the soul and of our values."²

The primary goal of anger management is to replace patterns of suppression and explosion with the use of tempered and assertive expression. The challenge for the person for whom anger has cre-

ated dysfunction is to make the shift from control (hoarding), or out of control (exploding), to the healthy management and direction of anger.

Patterns of Unhealthy Expression of Anger

Individuals caught in repetitive patterns of destructive expression of anger tend to operate within one of five "vicious circles," according to Simmer. In each case, an external event triggers a subjective interpretation of the event, accompanied by a feeling that then drives the person to act out. Others respond negatively, and the angry person reacts by suppressing his anger and becoming passive, until his frustrations over the conditions of his life build again to an intolerable level and the cycle repeats. An example is the "Circle of Shame." An event occurs, which the person interprets as a sign that he is not respected and well-regarded, or that he is inferior or inadequate. To replace this with a feeling of adequacy and self-respect, he makes a violent expression of anger. There is momentary relief, followed by the negative reaction of individuals or society, which causes him to feel chastised and become submissive. As this submissive role generates more shame and frustration, the cycle repeats.

A similar cycle is triggered by perceived abandonment. A person experiences real or imagined rejection and consequently feels panic over anticipated abandonment. To stave off the abandonment, he acts out in an attempt to control the other person and keep their love. When the partner recoils out of fear, the abandonment becomes a reality. This fuels apprehension of future abandonments, which triggers more overreaction and controlling behaviors, causing the cycle to go on.

The "Rage for Order" circle begins with anxiety over chaos or disorder. This results in self-talk such as "Things ought to be more orderly and this disorder reflects on me," which precipitates an angry outburst to restore order, which in turn leads to more chaos.

A fourth pattern is characterized by the attempt to avoid any expression of anger, at all costs, in order to maintain peace. The angry person has "two notes on the scale: cool boredom and rage; and the rage, even if rare, is disturbingly beyond control," according to Simmer. The dominant mood is cool, calm, collected, and controlled. This mood alternates with explosions, which are aggressive and violent and, as such, do not effect positive change. The person feels shamed or chastised and quickly returns to his agenda of peace at all costs.

Finally, there is the "Circle of Restriction." The person feels frustrated with obligations, requirements, and externally imposed restrictions and craves autonomy and freedom of movement. She strikes out in an attempt to achieve these goals and experiences a negative response to her aggression, which often results in reduced freedom and greater restriction.

Changing the Pattern

The prescription for changing these unhealthy patterns is not to control the anger but to learn to manage it. Effective anger management is a two-stage process. The first stage involves cognitive

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restructuring to abate the ascending rage and prevent a destructive reaction. If the angry feelings still persist, the person can then engage in a structured process of communicating his anger and asserting his needs.

In each of the "circles" described above, the pattern begins with an external event that creates a feeling of discomfort. For instance, your spouse or close friend arrives 45 minutes late for a lunch date. Next comes an inflammatory thought (you tell yourself, "He has no respect for me" or "This relationship is not important to him"). This thought begets a decision to lash out at the other or, more commonly, to stuff the anger, thereby creating a resentment against him and contaminating (and perhaps eventually destroying) the relationship. Additionally, stuffed anger sometimes turns into depression, a malady which attorneys are 3.6 times more likely to suffer than the average person.³

The opportunity for change is at the point of the inflammatory thought. The technique, according to Simmer, is to challenge that thought and reframe one's interpretation of the event by applying an "extinguishing thought." The person must become willing to question the story he is telling himself and accept alternative explanations or interpretations of the event. In the example above, one might engage thoughts such as "There has been an emergency," "He is stuck in traffic," or "He thinks we are meeting elsewhere." If successful, this reframing process can defuse the potential explosion and restore one's equilibrium.

If the angry feelings endure, then the person may choose to direct her anger in a structured process designed to clear the air and maintain, and ideally improve, the relationship. This clearing process has five steps. First, the angry person asks the companion if he is willing to have a clearing discussion, stating that her purpose is to maintain a good, resentment-free connection. Secondly, she asks him to merely listen and reflect back what she says, after which he will have an opportunity to do the same. Then she states the facts ("you were late"), her feelings ("I'm angry"), and her interpretation of the event which has created the feelings ("I have been interpreting your lateness as disrespect for me or as a sign that our relationship is not a priority for you.") Note that since this dialogue is an effort at strengthening the connection as opposed to a debate, neither party should subject the other's interpretation to a reasonableness test. The goal is to be understood and accepted, not to be deemed rational and right. Finally, the angry person asks for what she wants ("I want you to be on time or call me if you will be late").

If the partner accurately mirrors what was said and is able to say, "I understand why you would feel this way," then—and only then—should the partner take the floor to express himself and be similarly mirrored, understood, and accepted. Again, the goal is for each party to feel understood and accepted, not to have a right and a wrong party, a winner and a loser.

The example given above occurs in an intimate relationship. In our daily lives, we tend to save our best behavior for our professional and casual encounters. On the other hand, it is usually those closest to us who receive the brunt of our anger, and it is those intimate relationships that are most damaged by the mismanagement of angry feelings.

The essence of intimacy is the feeling of being emotionally safe with another person. Emotional safety flows from the feeling of being understood and accepted. The goal of the anger management process is a close, uncontaminated connection, not victory. The use of clearing and reflective listening can have a significant impact on a marriage or other intimate relationship. Anger is a feeling and can be used for positive change. Resentment, the result of suppressed anger, is an attitude and it destroys many relationships. The healthy expression of anger prevents it from turning into resentment.

Anger is a normal human reaction to many situations. It can be stuffed, escalated, or managed and positively directed. Suppression and escalation lead to unhealthy and destructive outcomes. Effective anger management can bring about positive changes in one's physical and emotional health, productivity, and relationships. Help in planning and implementing effective anger management is available through educational programs, personal coaching, and relationship coaching. For information about available resources contact Bill Livingston at the Lawyers' and Judges' Assistance Program of the State Bar of Michigan. ♦

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Footnotes

1. "Men and Anger: An Integrative Approach to Anger Work, A Workshop by Steven Simmer," Reach Educational Seminars, Springfield, MA.
2. Id.
3. "What Ails Thee," by Naseem Stecker, *Michigan Bar Journal*, March 2002.