

Anger and PTSD

Anger is a common and natural response to trauma. After experiencing trauma, it is normal to feel angry when someone or something causes us harm or distress. Experiencing a trauma is unfair. You may be angry with other people because they hurt you, abused you, disrupted your life or hurt someone close to you. Or, because they let you down during or after the trauma. You may also be frustrated about the problems and losses that the trauma has caused in your life. You may find yourself dwelling a lot about the unfairness and find it hard to put this behind you.

Feelings of anger may also be triggered by people, places or situations that remind you of the trauma, even if they had nothing to do with it. Many people also find they are experiencing anger towards those they love the most: family, friends, their partners, and their children. Sometimes you may lose your temper with the people who are most dear to you. This may be confusing and upsetting, but it is an understandable response after trauma.

Following a trauma, one theory is that the brain changes to be particularly sensitive to potential threats. In other words, the brain appears to become more likely to misinterpret the actions and intentions of others as potentially threatening. This is part of a natural survival instinct; anger can help us to focus our attention toward survival and get our bodies ready to either stay and deal with a threat or run away to safety. So, following a trauma our response to extreme threat can become "stuck", which may lead to us responding to all stresses in 'survival mode'.

One of the most difficult aspects of anger is how intense and overwhelming it can feel; a lot of energy is generated in the body, and the physical sensations of anger are very powerful. If you are not used to feeling so angry and irritable these feelings may feel foreign to you, and you may not know how to manage them. You may also feel like you have completely changed as a person.

Anger can sometimes be a substitute for other emotions that are hard to tolerate. For example, it's common for people to express anger when they feel ashamed or afraid. Anger can also inhibit grief: Sometimes it is important to finally grieve over what you have lost and cannot have, rather than continue to be angry that you do not have it.

Many people are afraid to express anger but also believe the only way to deal with it is to "get it out." There are many ways to express anger, some healthy and some destructive. For example, healthy expressions include respectfully talking about it with someone, writing, drawing, having a respectful inner dialogue, working toward positive resolution of problems about which you feel angry, dealing with underlying emotions such as shame, or accepting that you cannot change a situation and moving on.

Anger ranges from mild irritation or annoyance, to anger, to rage. The sooner you are able to make these distinctions and can become aware of mild anger, such as irritation, the easier it is to intervene before anger becomes overwhelming.

Helpful Tips for Coping with Anger:

- Learn to be aware of your own physical signs of anger. Anger is typically associated with a tight or tense feeling in your body, clenched jaws or fists, feeling flushed or shaky, breathing heavily, rapid heart rate, a feeling of heat, or a surge of energy throughout your body. Noticing your bodily sensations can be a powerful way to know whether you are angry.
- It is not wrong to feel angry. Anger is a normal and inevitable human emotion; it is important how you express it outwardly or inwardly. Does it help you get what you need without hurting anyone? Is it respectful? Is it within your window of tolerance? Does it lead to positive experiences instead of more negative ones?
- Notice whether the intensity of the anger that you feel is appropriate to the situation. It might help to check how other people would respond to the same situation.
- Try creative and healthy nonverbal ways of expressing your anger like writing, drawing, or painting.
- Physical exercise may help as an outlet for the physical energy generated by the anger.
- Reflect on your anger, try to understand your anger rather than just experience it. You might imagine observing yourself from a distance and being curious about why you are so angry. It is easy to blame circumstances or others for the way you feel, but really, it is your own internal thoughts, perceptions, and predictions that fuel your anger. Noticing them and being able to change them will be enormously helpful, instead of focusing on the external object of your anger.
- Use relaxation techniques; give yourself a time-out, that is, walk away from a situation if you feel you are getting too angry. Count slowly to 10, or even to 100. Practice calming breathing. Distract yourself.
- Use calming statements: Say or read calming statements when you notice you are becoming angry. For example: "I need to slow down and give myself time to think" or "I need to slow down, responding with anger is not going to help me". It may be helpful to write these statements down for you to read in advance.
- Learn the most common triggers of your anger. Once you learn these triggers, you can be more aware when they occur and more able to prevent an automatic reaction of anger.
- Healthy anger can be positive, it can help you be appropriately assertive, set clear boundaries, and confront wrongs. Anger can pave the way to other emotions, leading to improved relationships with others and ourselves.