

Managing your anger is good for your health

By *Teddi Nicolaus*

Your face feels warm. Your chest tightens. Your thoughts start speeding up. That's anger, and it's a normal human emotion built into your body to help you respond when something feels wrong, unfair or threatening. It can push you to act, solve problems or stand up for yourself. But when anger shows up too often or gets too intense, it can start to harm your health and your relationships.

"We're wired for anger as a survival response," said Raymond Novaco, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California-Irvine and an early pioneer in the field of anger management.

Anger is not just a feeling, Novaco says. It affects your body, your thoughts and your actions. Your heart may beat faster. Your breathing may speed up. Your mind may lock onto what feels unfair or upsetting.

Novaco explains that anger is tied to your body's "fight or flight" response — the system that prepares you to act when you sense a threat. In small amounts, that response can help you focus and take action — even save your life. But when anger builds too quickly, lasts too long or becomes too intense, it can work against you in harmful ways.

You may notice this when you snap at loved ones, argue over trivial things or feel irritated throughout the day. Sometimes anger hits so fast that you react before thinking. Other times, it lingers and stays with you, causing you to replay something that might have happened months or even years ago. Novaco describes this as ruminating or dwelling. When anger is intense, it can impair your thinking and override your ability to control your actions, Novaco says. That's when

you may do or say things you later regret.

Anger can damage our relationships. Arguments may become more common. Trust can weaken. Eventually, people may pull away from you. And over time, that kind of anger can affect your health.

Frequent anger can raise your blood pressure and increase stress hormones, putting strain on your heart.



Studies have also linked intense anger to heart attacks and strokes. Anger can interfere with digestion, trigger headaches and disrupt your sleep, making it harder to recharge and focus. Anger can even weaken your immune system and cause you to get sick more often. The list goes on.

The good news is that you can learn to manage your anger. One of the first steps is noticing when it starts to build. Early signs might include a racing heart, tight muscles or a rising sense of frustration.

You don't have to completely get rid of anger. You just need to be aware of some simple tools to help you handle it. Experts recommend that you:

Pause before reacting. Even a few seconds can help you think before you speak or act. Slowly count to three in your head.

Take slow breaths. Deep breathing can

calm your body and lower your stress.

Step away. A short break can stop a small problem from getting bigger.

Watch your thoughts. Remind yourself there may be another way to see the situation.

Stop replaying it. Letting go can keep anger from lasting longer or intensifying.

Know your triggers. Pay attention to what sets you off so you can be ready for it.

It also helps to shift your focus. Novaco suggests building what he calls "antidotes to anger," such as purpose, connection and appreciation.

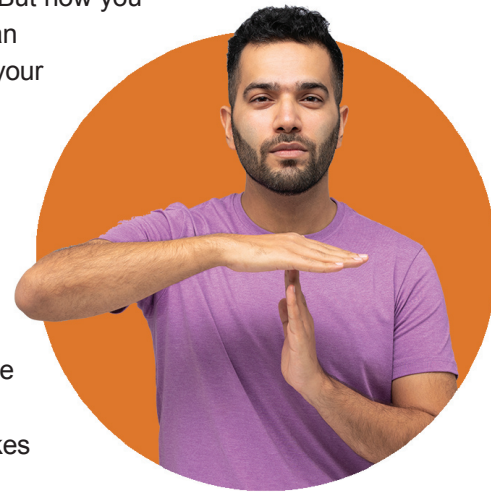
That means noticing what you value in others, staying connected with supportive people and working toward goals that matter to you.

Sometimes anger can feel bigger than you can handle on your own. If your anger is happening a lot, feels very intense or is hurting your relationships, it may be time to seek help. You don't have to deal with it alone.

Talk to your health care provider. They might recommend a mental health professional, such as a therapist or counselor, to help you understand what's behind your anger and teach you ways to manage it. Anger management programs can also give you tools to pause, think and respond in a healthier way.

Getting help is not a sign of weakness — it's a way to take control, Novaco says. Don't be afraid to reach out if you notice that your anger is leading to frequent arguments, problems at work or school, or if you feel like you might hurt yourself or someone else.

At the end of the day, keep in mind that anger is part of being human. You're supposed to feel it. But how you respond to anger can shape your health, your relationships and your daily life. With practice, you can learn to recognize it early, slow things down and stay in control. Remember: Anger itself is not the problem, "it's what happens when it takes over," Novaco says.



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