

Exploring Anger

DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH ANGER?

Do you think you have a problem with anger? Yes / No / Unsure

★ If you circled "Yes," you may want to go directly to the next section. If you are unsure, check (✓) below any that are true for you—these are typical signs of an anger problem.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> You "blow up" at others. | <input type="checkbox"/> You hate yourself. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You often criticize others. | <input type="checkbox"/> You often isolate. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You feel anger but can't express it. | <input type="checkbox"/> You feel bitter. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You have impulses to harm others. | <input type="checkbox"/> You have impulses to harm yourself. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> You "never feel angry." | <input type="checkbox"/> Others have said you have an anger problem. |

TWO TYPES OF ANGER

It is important to know that anger is not bad or wrong. Rather, it is information that can be used either to help or to harm your recovery. It can be used *constructively* to help you heal, to be honest with others, to face your pain. Or it can be used *destructively* to act out against yourself or others, to give up, to become bitter. Anger itself is not a problem—it's all in what you do with it.

Constructive Anger: Anger that Heals

"Constructive anger" means anger that is . . .

- *Moderate or lower* (e.g., up to 5 on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = no anger and 10 = intense anger).
- *Explored* to understand yourself and others better.
- *Conscious* (you are aware of it).
- *Handled well* (e.g., not acted out in dangerous behavior).
- *Respectful of your own and others' needs*.

For example, if you go out on a date and the other person acts selfish, you may rightly feel angry. If you listen to your anger, you can use it as a sign to protect yourself; perhaps you can talk to the person about what bothers you, or you can calmly end the date early. You can feel good about using your anger constructively.

There are great benefits to constructive anger. It can help protect you from danger . . . convey insights about yourself and others . . . give you real power. ★ *Any other benefits you notice?*

Destructive Anger: Anger that Harms

"Destructive anger" means anger that is . . .

- *Acted out in dangerous behavior* (hurting yourself or others).
- *Too intense and/or frequent* (e.g., often above a 5 on a 0–10 scale).
- *"Underground"* (quietly seething or feeling bitter).
- *Unconscious*.

(cont.)

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There are great costs to destructive anger. It can destroy your relationships . . . cause physical harm . . . weaken you . . . become an addiction. ★ *Any other costs you notice?*

Destructive anger can be directed toward yourself and/or directed toward others. Both represent a lack of balance between your own and others' needs. For some people, both are present.

Destructive anger toward self (e.g., self-harm, suicidal feelings): Putting others' needs too much ahead of yours.

Destructive anger toward others (e.g., verbal abuse, assault): Putting your needs too much ahead of others'.

With destructive anger toward yourself, you may not be aware of anger. For example, if you physically hurt yourself you may not notice anger at the time. However, such acting out does indeed represent anger—typically anger toward others that you have difficulty “owning.”

★ *How do you tend to handle anger? Circle one:* Constructively / Destructively / Both

Circle one: Toward self / Toward others / Both

DID YOU KNOW . . . ?

★ *Check (✓) any points below that you understand. Circle any that you have questions about.*

Anger is normal in recovery from PTSD and substance abuse. If you have been through the terrible experiences of trauma and substance abuse, anger is inevitable. You may feel angry at people who hurt you, at the world, at God, at yourself, at life, at treaters, at family, at strangers. Your anger is valid and real. In recovery, the goal is to use your anger as a way to learn about yourself and grow. The task is to face your anger without letting it destroy you or others.

Behind all anger are unmet needs. Anger is a signal that something is wrong. It may mean that you are not taking enough care of yourself, or that you have a lot of sadness to work through, or that you are in a harmful relationship. Listening to your anger and caring for the underlying needs can resolve anger.

Constructive anger can be learned. It is never too late, no matter how long you've had a problem with anger. Mainly, it requires really listening to others' feedback about your anger, “owning” your feelings rather than acting them out, expressing anger in healthy ways, and learning to tolerate the painful feelings behind the anger.

Destructive anger can become an addiction. Can you see similarities between destructive anger and substance abuse? For example, the more you engage in it, the more it increases. Also, with destructive anger you may feel “high” on it in the moment. Have you “hit bottom” with destructive anger—has it caused serious problems in your life?

Venting anger does not work. An old-style view of anger was the idea of venting—that the solution to anger is to “get it out” (e.g., punch a pillow, write an angry letter, throw rocks at a tree). However, these actually tend to increase rather than decrease anger. Currently, it is understood that anger needs to be handled constructively, not simply vented.

Destructive anger never works in the long term. You may get results in the short term. People may do what you want; you may feel powerful in the moment. It is only later that you can see that these are an illusion. Destructive anger spins you out of control and weakens your bonds with others.