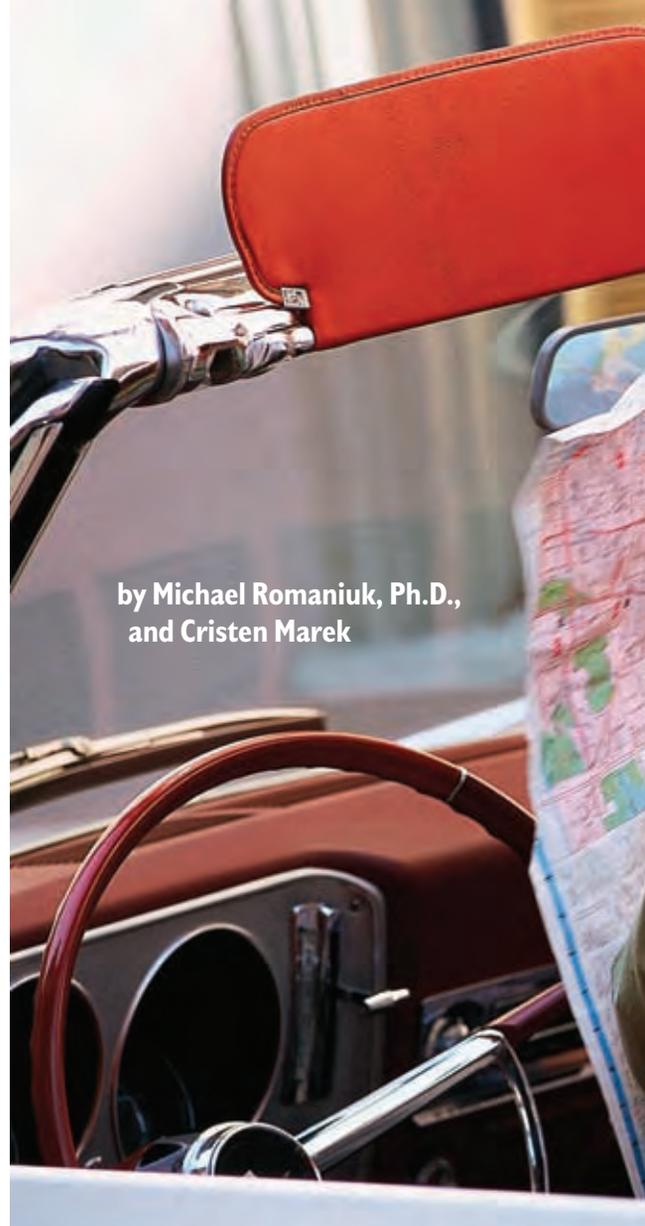


# Managing AD/HD Anger

**H**AVING A QUICK TEMPER OR EXCESSIVE ANGER can be a problem for anyone. Many people have trouble with angry outbursts, which impact their lives in a negative way. This problem can be even worse for adults with AD/HD, as many are emotionally oversensitive and overreactive to stimulation, making them more vulnerable to their surrounding environments. They may become easily irritated, annoyed or frustrated, anxious or worried, sad or depressed, or upset by teasing, criticism, rejection or disappointment. These adults are often easily provoked—just a little disruption can set them off, resulting in an angry response that is disproportionately severe or intense for the situation at hand. When being too quick to anger is a chronic problem, serious consequences for both the sender and receiver often result.

An inability to keep anger in check has many far-reaching effects. It impacts all relationships—personal, professional and social. Uncontrolled anger may also limit success in your career and adversely affect your role as a spouse or parent. It can contribute to interpersonal conflicts, social isolation and feelings of low self-worth.



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The problem is not in the emotion itself (it's okay to feel angry), but in the *expression* of it (huge outbursts are not acceptable). Fortunately, the way you express anger can be improved, and the reasons for doing so are numerous.

## **Negative Effects on Others**

Inappropriate displays of anger can hurt many people. First, your own anger may be displaced. For example, because you can't yell at your boss when he or she does something to make you angry (which might result in your being fired), you might instead take your anger home and dump it on your spouse.

Second, your anger may affect another's health. Being on the receiving end of someone's misplaced anger is very stressful and can trigger a variety of physiological effects such as headaches, ulcers and hypertension. The person could become overwhelmed or unable to think, or shut down emotionally in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the emotions that the



anger creates. They can also become depressed and withdraw from those around them to avoid getting hurt again.

This can result in feelings of insecurity, anxiety and vulnerability. They also may blame themselves for having provoked the anger asking, "What did I do wrong to deserve this?" Overall, those on the receiving end of an inappropriate outpouring of anger may feel hurt and unloved. When people are treated in this manner they often feel that they don't matter.

In addition to these negative feelings, the recipients of your anger could begin to distrust you and others in general. Even worse, they could retaliate with their own anger and perpetuate this vicious cycle.

#### **How Anger Hurts You**

Your own anger can also take a toll on you. Anger is

aversive and can drive people away. Who wants to be around someone who is always losing his or her temper? It can destroy intimacy with others and tarnish your reputation, which could lead to guilty feelings about hurting others and could be embarrassing for you.

Anger can also hurt your mental functioning, leading to distortion, misperception and misinterpretation of reality. In the heat of anger, good judgment doesn't typically occur. And do you remember those headaches, ulcers and hypertension that your friends may have suffered from? Well, you can be affected by them too.

#### **What Purpose Does Anger Serve?**

You may be wondering, "Why do we even have anger? What is its purpose?" As noted earlier, anger is not

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always a bad thing. In some ways it can be helpful and adaptive. Consider one of anger's main purposes: protecting ourselves from imminent bodily harm. This aspect of anger is an innate, biological reflex that automatically occurs when faced with danger. Think of the "fight or flight" reflex when you encounter a threat. In this case you want to become as intimidating as possible to protect yourself. In instances where your own or another's safety is jeopardized, it is understandable and acceptable to feel and express your anger. Your life depends on it.

However, anger is also inappropriately used for non-life-threatening purposes such as influencing or controlling others. Consider the example of a major league baseball manager. At times you'll see the skipper fly onto the field screaming with his arms flailing and kicking dirt. He'll argue a call with the umpire by throwing a temper tantrum. He could be using anger to influence the umpire into changing his call or to prompt his team into joining him in ranting.

Anger can also be used as a means of conveying a

direct and powerful message to others that you are upset, dislike something or want attention. If you give someone an angry look, you are using nonverbal means to tell the person that you are not happy with what he or she just did or said. Your angry demeanor sends the message.

When we use anger in these ways—to influence or communicate—we have learned to do so from those around us. Our families and society often have unspoken guidelines about which emotions can be shared and how they can be expressed. For instance, boys are often taught not to cry when they're hurt, but told it is okay to display anger in the same situation. For young girls, the opposite is more likely to be true. But as we have seen, the negative impact of displaying inappropriate anger is far too severe to make it worthwhile. Luckily, because how we display anger is *learned*, inappropriate expression can be *unlearned*. More effective techniques to influence, control and communicate can replace anger, achieving the same results and eliminating the drawbacks.

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### How You Can Manage Your Anger

The first step in controlling your anger is to recognize and own your feelings. Don't blame others or deny that you have a problem. You have the power to change your behavior. Try to sensitize yourself to the negative effects of anger on others and on yourself, and work toward minimizing its display. Here are three strategies to help you do just that:

**1. Say vs. Display.** Don't *show* that you're angry, say it. Remember, it's the display of anger (e.g., yelling) that is destructive. Say that you're angry in a neutral tone. This way, others won't be put off by *how* you are saying something, and will be more likely to listen to *what* you're saying. You won't generate the negative effects of displaying your anger, but you can still influence and communicate in a more constructive manner. (And, when you become effective in saying how you feel and getting what you want, the angry feelings actually go away!)

**2. Express your "true" emotion.** Anger may not be the real emotion you are feeling—it could just be the easiest one to access and express. Some may



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have a limited emotional vocabulary because they were not taught or allowed to show a wide range of feelings. Some may have gotten the "don't be a crybaby" line, and others may not have learned to differentiate between emotions such as frustration, disappointment, hurt and anger. In reality, the range of emotions is wide. Think of the anger that may come with a

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divorce or the end of a relationship. A virtual laundry list of emotions could be hiding under that anger: feeling hurt, rejected, alone, hopeless, betrayed, vulnerable, misunderstood, frustrated or disrespected.

If anger is repeatedly felt and displayed without any relief, it may mean that anger is not the “true” emotion you are feeling just the easiest for you to show. Therefore, you need to accurately identify your “true” underlying feeling. When this is done and “processed” or communicated, the anger goes away.

### 3. Develop realistic expectations.

Sometimes anger results when expectations are not met, such as when others’ behavior or our own falls short of what we expect. We may be surprised or disappointed, and view the accompanying anger as justified.

Take the example of road rage. Typically, another driver does something he or she

shouldn’t. In turn, you feel your anger is justified because you expected the driver to drive properly and obey the law. You may feel it is okay to express your anger because the driver’s behavior fell short of your expectations. This makes your angry outburst the other driver’s fault, not yours. However, another way of looking at this situation is that your expectations (“all drivers should obey the law”) are unrealistic and you may be unintentionally setting yourself up for an angry response. Realistically speaking, it is unreasonable to believe bad driving will never occur. If we hold on to this belief, we set ourselves up for anger. But by adjusting lofty or perfectionist standards (“bad driving will happen sooner or later”), we are less likely to be surprised or disappointed, and anger is less likely to emerge.

To summarize, we have highlighted three strategies to help manage anger: saying

versus displaying anger, finding and expressing your “true” emotion, and adjusting your expectations to meet reality. It is important to learn these techniques and to avoid inappropriate displays of anger given their detrimental effects. Not only can excessive or inappropriate anger hurt you and destroy your relationships, it will adversely affect those around you. The negative outcomes of anger far outweigh the positives. Because adults with AD/HD can react quickly, impulsively and inappropriately, learning these skills is even more important to maintaining relationships. ■

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