

# Anger Self-Help Guide

## SECTION 1: What is it?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Do you feel quick-tempered, short fused or easily irritated? Anger is an important emotion and is neither good nor bad.



**Anger is an important emotion. Anger is neither good nor bad.**

**It is a physical and emotional response which motivates us to act when under threat, the trick is to manage our response to anger in a positive and controlled way.**

**Anger is not the same as aggression. Anger is an emotion, aggression is an action.**

**Anger can be an energy used to motivate as a force for good. Harnessing this energy can lead to campaigning for change and righting wrongs and being clear about what we need.**

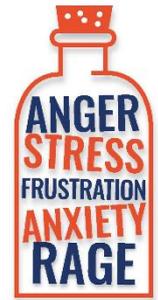
**Anger can happen in the moment, activated by a trigger or thought.**

**Anger can come to the surface years later, as its roots are linked to unresolved events in the past.**

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Anger becomes a problem when we ignore it, bury it, or respond impulsively to it. Problems with understanding and responding to anger are as common as depression and anxiety.

Many people don't get help because they don't recognise that how they respond to their anger is a problem. Often friends or family might notice the change before you do.



Anger can be a problem when:

- You frequently overreact
- You're angry a lot
- It lasts a long time, and you feel upset for a long time afterwards
- You feel that your anger is uncontrollable

## WHY MIGHT VETERANS STRUGGLE WITH ANGER?

There are several reasons why veterans in particular might struggle with anger, here are just a few:

Military training means being very alert to hidden dangers, along with the ability to harness anger and aggression very quickly in order to fight the enemy and survive. This is useful in the military and often necessary when on active duty, but not so helpful in civilian life.

Serving in the military can also lead to more exposure to highly stressful events and traumatic experiences compared to most civilians. This can lead to the 'fight/flight/freeze' system being activated over and over again - perhaps predominantly the fight system. These experiences may reduce our tolerance for different feelings, meaning we are more easily triggered to anger.

Some veterans may struggle with leaving the military and re-joining 'civvy street'. The challenges this can bring and the perceived lack of support and understanding from the MOD and/or civilian services can lead to angry feelings.

Life before the military may have been difficult for some veterans. Certain early life experiences such as childhood neglect or abuse, and bullying through school years may have led to increased angry feelings even before joining the military.

**Before moving on, take a moment to consider your relationship with anger.**



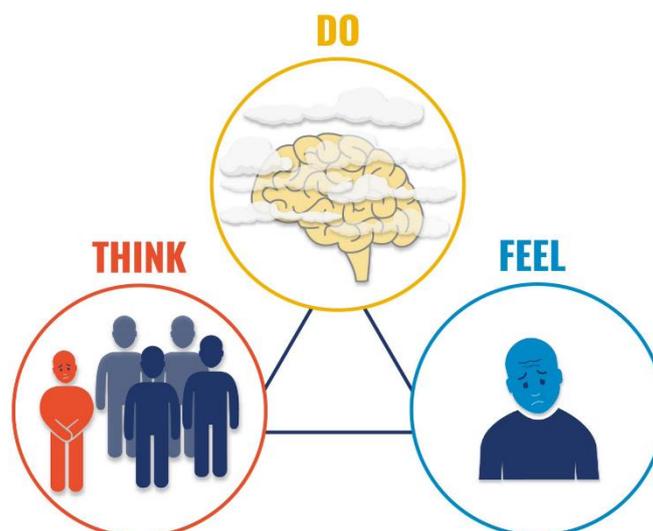
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- Do you accept that anger is different from aggression?
- What experiences in your life have angered you?
- What's behind your anger

## SECTION 2: How does anger affect you?

Anger affects people in a number of ways.

How does **ALCOHOL** affect you?



### Thinking

Being angry can change the way you think. For example:

- You might lose perspective and find it hard to think clearly
- You might think others are being unfair
- You might think more about the events that led you to being angry

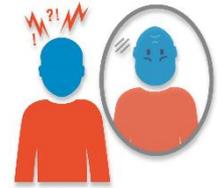


### Doing

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Being angry can lead us to act out of character. You may notice yourself:

- Being more irritable and snappy
- Saying things you don't mean or making barbed or sarcastic comments
- Shouting and arguing more, or 'biting your tongue'
- 'Bottling up' your emotions



## Feeling

Anger can be intense and your body will respond physically. Have you noticed the following?

- Clenching your fists and your jaw, or tension in the forearms and shoulders
- Feeling a rising heat like an energy needing to be released
- An urge to shout or lash out
- Feelings of guilt about feeling angry
- Fear of losing control



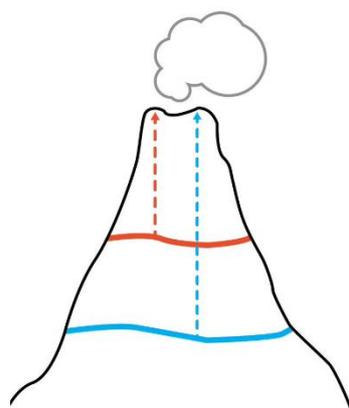
Before moving on, pay attention to your body. What physical sensations or feelings are there that you recognise as depression. Note how you would describe it to someone.

## After acting on anger, you may be very critical of yourself

Difficult experiences and the underlying feelings can add up. The more they add up, the less tolerant we become of more emotional demands, which can result in outbursts of anger.

It might be helpful to think of tolerance like "lava levels" in a volcano - the higher the underlying level of lava, the less room there is to contain any rise in heat, making the volcano more likely to erupt:

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**Red line** – individuals with hyperarousal (what this means is that your threat system is already on high alert due to your prior difficult experiences).

**Blue line** – individuals without hyperarousal (this means your threat system isn't on high alert so you're more able to handle any additional demands without reacting strongly or impulsively).

**Red line-** individuals with hyperarousal (what this means is that your threat system is already on high alert due to your prior difficult experiences)

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With each stressful life event (e.g. early experiences, military trauma, difficult exit from the military, stress at work, problems with relationships) our baseline lava level rises. The result is that then even relatively minor additional stress, can lead to an eruption.

Before moving on, consider the things in your life that have made you angry. Which ones from your early life or military experiences have stuck with you? What other things day to day can trigger an eruption?

#### EXERCISE: CREATE YOUR OWN VOLCANO

You may want to draw out your own volcano. For each of the experience contributing to your angry feelings through your life, mark a line in the volcano to represent how it has raised the baseline lava level. Once you've added all the events, how high is the lava? Does this help you to see why you might have a short fuse?



## SECTION 3: What can you do about Anger

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Three

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You will find below some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- The doing part: Do what matters
- The thinking part: Get your thinking straight
- What your body needs: Listen to your body

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Do what matters' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight.

## DO WHAT MATTERS

Monitor your angry feelings – keep a log of your anger and start to notice patterns. You can use our Anger Diary to help you track this.

### Find a pattern

Once you see patterns to your anger, you can look at what to target:

- Are the same situations coming up?
- Do you notice any changes in how your body feels? e.g. increased heart rate, changes in breathing or getting hot
- Do you find it hard to calm your body down?
- Do you have unhelpful thoughts that make you feel angry?
- Do you find you just 'explode' and become aggressive?



### Managing anger in the moment

Use some 'in the heat of the moment' strategies to calm your body:

- Cool yourself down physically with cold water or a wet flannel
- Distraction - count backwards from 100 in 7s (100, 93, 86 etc.)



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- Walk away from the trigger and change your environment e.g. step outside
- Go for a brisk walk or other form of exercise
- Do some heavy work such as lifting weights, cleaning or gardening

Remember, aggression is just one way you can respond to anger, and it is often not a very helpful response. It can cause long-term consequences for yourself, your family and friends and put yourself and others in danger.

Once you are feeling a little calmer by practicing the above techniques, you can start to choose other ways of responding to your anger.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

## **SECTION 4: The thinking part**

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

Veterans are incredibly positive in the belief that if they stick to their drills and training the 6 Ps, then they'll succeed. Try out the following skills and drills and stick with them until you find one that works for you.

## **GET YOUR THINKING STRAIGHT**

Press pause

- Grounding 5-4-3-2-1 technique (see below)
- Tell yourself "I need to think this through"
- Count to 10
- Think of something other than the thing that's made, or is keeping, you angry.
- Use imagery to calm you, for example think of your safe place

When people feel guilty about getting angry or the thought of what might happen if they were to lose control, the anger is turned on themselves in the form of self-criticism. Remember, you do not choose to be angry, your anger is partly an instinctive and partly a learned automatic

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response. Be kind to yourself, try to be understanding of your anger with an attitude of curiosity e.g.

"Wow, I am starting to feel really angry and with it an urge to act out"

"It's OK for me to feel angry, my angry feelings are trying to tell me something important and I want to understand."

"Is my anger a little big for the situation? Is some of this anger about stuff from before?"

"I can choose how I respond to this angry feeling, I don't want to ignore it, or bury it, nor do I want to act impulsively on it... I need some space to cool off and then think about what I need to do."

## GROUNDING: THE 5-4-3-2-1 TECHNIQUE

	<p><b>What are 5 things you can see?</b></p> <p>Tune into your surroundings and try to notice the small details such as patterns, shapes, texture and colours.</p>
	<p><b>What are 3 things you can hear?</b></p> <p>Focus on the subtle sounds we often don't notice, such as the clock ticking, the wind outside or distant traffic.</p>
	<p><b>What are 2 things you can smell?</b></p> <p>Pay attention to any smells in the air or look around for something with a smell, like a flower, food or perfume. Consider carrying a strong smell with you on a tissue or your sleeve.</p>
	<p><b>What is 1 thing you can taste?</b></p> <p>It can be handy to carry some gum, strong mints or sweets with you for this one.</p>

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## SECTION 4: Listen to your body - What your body needs

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Five

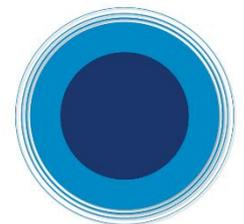
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### Listen to your body

#### Focus on the differences between 'then' and 'now'

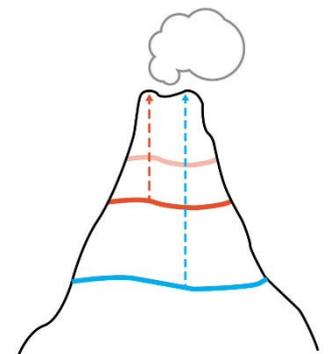
Calm your body down to reduce the 'lava levels':

- Slow your breathing
- Relax the body by focussing on jaw and shoulders
- Wear a calming smell i.e. your partner's aftershave/ perfume, lavender, lemon
- Have a warm bath or shower
- Do a plank or wall sit
- Rock in a rocking chair



Light red line - individuals with hyperarousal (what this means is that your threat system is already on high alert due to your prior difficult experiences)

Dark red line - individuals with hyperarousal who are regularly practising coping strategies (outside of anger/crisis phases) and therefore have a lower lava level and thus a greater tolerance to anger triggers.



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Blue line - individuals without hyperarousal (this means your threat system isn't on high alert so you're more able to handle any additional demands without reacting strongly or impulsively).

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

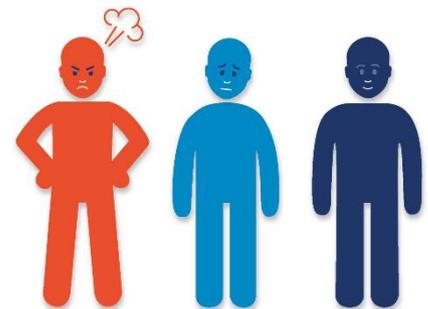
## SECTION 4: Protect your mental health

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Six

Be kind to yourself

In the longer term, looking after yourself can make you less prone to angry responses. It can help to:

- Keep physically active
- Eat healthily
- Talk to friends and loved ones
- Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Take time to relax
- Expect that things will happen in a day that will irritate
- Care for others



## WHAT TO DO NEXT?

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

## SOME QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE

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## What to do if I'm still struggling with anger?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

## How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to any further recommended resources at the bottom of this page. For a complete list of other Self-help guides in this series, [click here](#).

## Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

- If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.
- The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.
- Call [0800 138 1619](tel:08001381619)

## Are there any other resources that may help me?

- NHS Northumberland, Tyne and Wear online self-help materials: [www.cntw.nhs.uk/home/accessible-information/easy-read/self-help-guides/](http://www.cntw.nhs.uk/home/accessible-information/easy-read/self-help-guides/)
- Moodjuice - [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/)

Some veterans have, in the past, found the books 'Why is Dad so Mad?' and 'Why is Mom so Mad?' by Seth Kastle helpful for explaining PTSD-related anger difficulties to children.

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## **You've completed the anger self-help guide. Well done!**

We hope you've found this resource to be helpful and can begin to notice some changes. Make sure you take a break before beginning your next resource. We recommend waiting two weeks before moving on.

**This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.**

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