

Seven Steps for Anger

Anger as energy that arises when our expectations conflict with reality. It is energy to deal with this discrepancy. And our most important decision is *what to do with* this energy. Breaking anger into steps can enable us to recognize control, and give us more choices regarding both intervention and prevention

1. Free will

The first step in dealing with anger is to recognize choice. We may not control anger, but we have full control over what we do with anger. We can be angry and passive, angry and aggressive, angry and passive-aggressive, or angry and assertive. It's our choice. Anger can quicken our reactions and make it *seem* like no choice is involved. Still, we need to empower ourselves by regarding these options as choices.

2. Acting in the direction of our values

Ask two questions:

- 1) What do I want in the long run?
- 2) What constructive steps can I take in that direction?

The fact of the matter is that people do ignore your wishes and intrude. What constructively can you do when that happens? You can continue to respect privacy, be truthful, fair, and principled in your interactions with others. In short, you can be part of the solution, not the problem.

3. What Hurts?

The second step is to examine what really hurts or scares us when our rules are broken. Some rules are more central to our self-esteem; others are more distant. For example, when we get enraged, we can ask ourselves, "What really hurts here?" This can reflect a general belief about others or ourselves. "People are rude and insensitive," "I'll be made the victim," or "I'm powerless to do anything about this." What may hurt the most is our inability to change people's behaviour. At this point, we can really examine the idea: "There is really no evidence that I should be able to change people. They are responsible for their own beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, and assumptions. Perhaps his suggestion to me is better seen as an effort to help me, and not as an intrusion. Perhaps I can see myself not as a victim, but as a person receiving assistance."

3. Hot Thoughts

The third step is to respond to the hot, anger driven, reactive thoughts with cooler, more level-headed, reflective thoughts.

Reactive: “How dare he!”

Reflective: “He thinks he’s trying to help me.”

Reactive: “How stupid can she be?”

Reflective: “She’s human.”

4. Anger

The fourth step is to respond to the anger arousal itself. We can work with this by practicing forms of relaxation (progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, music.) Or we can redefine the anger itself: anger is energy to problem solve. It is energy to do the right thing in the service of our deeper values, morals and principles. Anger is a problem primarily if we use it in violation of these principles. It is a problem when we use it to treat people in ways we would find abhorrent. It is a problem when it fuels hypocrisy and aggression. Just as Martin Luther King was angry at racism and Mother Theresa was angry at poverty, we can turn anger into positive and principled action.

5. Moral Disengagement

The fifth step is to examine the beliefs that turn anger into aggression. These are rationalizations and excuses that justify destructive acts. “He deserved it.” “I just want them to hurt the way that I’ve been hurt.” “This is the only way I can get my point across.” “Screw it – I’m out of control.” “I don’t care.” We need to recognize these ideas as con artistry. They con us into throwing aside our morals and engaging in threats, sarcasm, demands, and blame. We can remind ourselves of the costs of such strategies, and the benefits of striving for patience, understanding, empathy, and grace.

6. Aggression

The sixth step is to examine the specific dysfunctional behaviours that arise: We give ourselves permission to act aggressively and ignore the rights of other people. We can intervene by empathizing with those who trigger our anger: We put ourselves in their shoes, imagine what they are thinking and feeling, and really work to understand that perspective. This can help to

- decrease our anger
- decrease the other person’s anger
- increase the likelihood that we will be heard
- increase the likelihood of us engaging in a rational and reasonable conversation.