

Facts for Teens: Managing Anger

Overview

We all feel angry at times.

Anger is a completely normal, healthy emotion. It is a common reaction when we have been insulted, wronged, hurt, or treated unfairly. When we know how to control and manage our anger, it can actually play a positive role in our lives, helping us to stand up for ourselves, to fight against injustices, and to recognize when there is a need to make changes in our lives.

Unfortunately, many teens do not know how to control their anger.

Instead, they let their anger control them, and violence often is the result. In one national survey of junior-high and high school students, a third (33%) of the students agreed with the statement, *“When I am really angry, there is no way I can control myself.”*

Of the students who agreed with that statement, more than 3 in 4 reported getting into physical fights. Students who disagreed were much less likely to report fighting.¹

Anger does not have to lead to violence.

Anger is only an emotion — how we act when we feel angry is up to us.

Some people allow their anger to control them and lash out at the source of their anger.

Unfortunately, when people act in anger, they seldom are thinking rationally about what they are doing and what the consequences will be. They rarely stop to get the facts straight. Hence, they often regret the consequences later. When we lose control, people can get hurt, relationships may be ruined, and lives can be destroyed.

Some people suppress their anger by holding it in or denying the feeling.

Unfortunately, bottled-up anger can lead to emotional and physical problems, and the anger often seeps out in other ways, through sarcastic, cynical, or critical remarks, and passive-aggressive behavior. And, when we deny our anger, we may be ignoring an important message — that we need to defend ourselves, make changes in our situation, or take a stand.

A far better alternative is to learn to manage our anger.

We can learn ways to calm down, reducing both the emotional feeling of anger and the corresponding physical reaction.

Once we are feeling calmer, we can step back and take a look at why we are feeling angry. Is there a legitimate reason for our anger? If so, we can express our angry feelings in a calm, assertive way,

Stop youth violence before it starts

being respectful of others and ourselves.

While we often can't do anything about the things or people that make us angry, we can learn to control our reactions.

What You Can Do

Learn to manage your anger:

Learn about ways to manage your anger, and encourage your friends to do the same. Many schools, churches, community organizations, and after-school programs offer training in anger management, often as a component of conflict resolution programs. In the meantime:

Start by learning how anger feels to you.

When you are angry, your body reacts. Your heart rate and blood pressure go up, and you get a burst of adrenaline. You may feel muscle tension, changes in your breathing and heartbeat, a knot in your stomach, goosebumps, or become flushed in the face.

Learn to recognize what people and situations tend to set you off.

If you can figure out what it is that triggers your anger, then you can develop strategies in advance to keep those triggers from pushing you over the edge.

Learn some relaxation techniques so you can calm yourself and keep control.

Simple relaxation tools, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery, can help calm down angry feelings. There are many books, tapes, and classes available to help you master different techniques. It is best to practice relaxation techniques in advance, so that you can call on them when you need them. Here are a few things to try when you need to calm down:

- Practice breathing deeply and slowly, repeating a calming word or phrase to yourself, such as, "calm down," "relax," or "there's no reason to lose control".
- Close your eyes and try to imagine that you are in a place or situation that makes you feel peaceful, calm, and safe.
- Get some exercise. Try running, biking, walking, or dancing to calm your body so that you can think straight.

Change the way you think.

If you can learn to calm down, you can then rationally analyze why you are angry, and you can start to pay attention to the way you think when you feel angry. When people are angry, they often do not think about things in a logical way. Everything seems more extreme — they think in terms of "always" and "never" — "*She never lets me do what I want!*" "*He is always messing with me!*" When you repeatedly mull over thoughts like these, your anger can build and you become more likely to lose control and to do something you will regret.

Instead, calm yourself, pay attention to your negative thoughts, and challenge them. For example, if you believe a friend has spread gossip about you, your thoughts might include: "*I'll show her! Our*

friendship is over! She is always turning on me!" You might challenge these thoughts by considering whether the story is true – are you certain your friend spread the gossip? Have you heard your friend's side of the story? Is it true that your friend *always* turns on you? Has your friend ever stood by you? You can then revise the negative thought, "*If she did spread the gossip, that was a lousy thing to do, but I need to talk to her and get her side of the story.*"

Learn how to express your anger in a way that is not destructive.

There are effective ways to express your anger, to assert your rights to have your needs met, and to get the respect you need, without harming others and destroying relationships. Check out the Conflict Resolution fact sheet to learn more about how to work through conflicts and solve problems without resorting to violence or hurtful behavior.

If you feel angry all of the time, or find yourself acting in ways that seem out of control and frightening, talk to an adult you can trust.

This might be your parent, another relative, friend, neighbor, teacher, coach, member of the clergy, or family doctor. It's OK to ask for help. If one adult doesn't have the answers, find someone who does.

Helpful Links

[A Teenager's Guide to... Fitting in, Getting involved, Finding yourself](http://www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf)

www.ncfy.com/expreng.pdf

Family and Youth Services Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services

When times get tough, it's important to know there are people you can count on. The ideas in this booklet can help you learn to deal with tough times and enjoy the good times by finding the people and places that are right for you. You might find these ideas useful in your everyday life. Or read them to see if they might be helpful to a friend.

[Peace Under Pressure](http://www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/getinvolved/2.htm)

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U.S. Department of Justice

This is a place for youth to learn about more effective ways to peacefully resolve conflicts and includes links to a number of conflict resolution resources.

[Conflict Resolution Virtual Library](http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/conflict/conflictbook.html)

<http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/conflict/conflictbook.html>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, U.S. Department of Education

This site offers a rich collection of documents on conflict resolution, ranging from techniques to avoid fights to descriptions of effective conflict resolution training programs.

[Youth In Action Bulletins](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/youthinactionsum.html)

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U.S. Department of Justice

These Bulletins developed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention provide guidance for teen leaders who are developing their own violence prevention efforts.

References

¹ Greene, J.P., Buka, S.L., Gortmaker, S.L. et al. (1997) Youth Violence: The Harvard-MetLife Survey of Junior and Senior High School Students.

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