

Anger and Irritability



What You Should Know

After disasters, people can be irritable and angry for many reasons, including not sleeping well, feeling that they are being treated unfairly, having too much to do and not having enough time or resources, and feeling that no one is listening to them. When you are angry, you may express it outwardly, as in rage, or you may bury it inside yourself, feeling irritable or edgy. Either way, anger can cause problems with your health, emotional well-being, and relationships. To deal with these reactions, you need to identify the stressful situations that cause them and learn how to manage them.

What Can Help

- **Learn about your anger and irritability.** Learn to recognize the situations that trigger your anger and the early warning signs that you are angry. Then use the skills listed below to cope with these feelings.
- **Practice methods to manage reactions.** Use calming strategies to reduce your anger. Try breathing exercises; writing down your feelings and thoughts; talking to a friend; exercising, praying or meditating; listening to quiet soothing music; or spending time outdoors. Make a plan for handling situations that trigger your anger. Identify and remove the triggers or plan how you will manage when you encounter them so that you can feel more in control of your reactions.
- **Take a Time Out.** Anger can increase your heart rate so much that you cannot clearly concentrate on the situation you are facing. Taking a break to calm down before entering the situation may help you keep a clearer head during the situation. If you are in a relationship, agree with your partner beforehand on a signal (such as a hand gesture) for taking a break. A time out can keep disagreements from getting out of control. This doesn't mean ignoring your feelings, but instead finding a way to cool down so that you can resume talking and resolve the problem.
- **Do fun or meaningful activities.** Distract yourself from your reactions by engaging in hobbies; helping others; resuming family routines; and doing fun, meaningful, and satisfying activities.
- **Practice helpful thinking.** Check out your thoughts. Are they negative and unhelpful? If so, they may be causing your anger. Develop a plan to substitute helpful thoughts, such as those on the table below. Then—whenever you have unhelpful thoughts—practice switching to helpful thoughts and concentrating on them.

Unhelpful Thoughts	Makes You Feel	Helpful Thoughts	Makes You Feel
"It's unfair."	Angry Vengeful	"This could have happened to anyone." "Sometimes bad things happen to good people."	Realistic Accepting Understanding Reasonable
"It's their fault this happened."	Angry Frustrated Vengeful Accusing Mistrusting	"Blaming people doesn't change my situation." "Others may be to blame, but I need to focus on myself and my family."	Accepting Hopeful

- **Don't use alcohol or drugs to cope with your anger.** Alcohol and other drugs, while they may seem to help in the short term, always make things worse in the long term. If you need to, join an alcohol or drug treatment program.
- **Use conflict resolution principles to resolve conflicts with others:**
 - **Begin with a positive approach.** Try to establish rapport and mutual trust. Try for a small concession early in negotiations.
 - **Have a concrete strategy.** Know what your needs and concerns are, and anticipate how the other will respond. How strong are your position and situation? How important is the issue? How important will it be to stick to your position?
 - **Consider the other person's situation.** Gather information about the other's interests and goals. What are the real needs versus wants? What is his/her strategy?
 - **Address problems, not personalities.** Avoid the tendency to attack the other person personally. If threatened, defending yourself will make resolving the problem more difficult.
 - **Maintain a goal-oriented frame of mind.** If the other person attacks you personally, don't let him/her trap you into an emotional reaction. Let the other person blow off steam without taking it personally. Try to understand the problem behind the anger.
 - **Emphasize win-win solutions.** Even in what appear to be win-lose situations, there are often win-win solutions. Look for a solution that includes each person's needs. Create additional alternatives, such as "low cost" concessions that might have high value to the other person. Look for alternatives that allow the other person to feel her needs have been met.
 - **Use clear criteria.** Negotiate on principles and results, not emotions or pressure. Try to find clear criteria that both sides can use to evaluate alternatives.
- **Call a counselor for help.** If your reactions continue or increase, contact this program or another program for further assistance.