

Recognising Anger Signs

Harry Mills, Ph.D. Updated: Jun 25th 2005

Before you learn the techniques to manage your emotions, you first need to learn to recognise your anger. You need answers to questions like:

"How do I know when I am angry?"

"What events/people/places/things make me angry?"

"How do I react when I'm angry?"

"How does my angry reaction affect others?"

Answering these questions takes a while. It is likely you can rattle off several things that make you angry. You might even be able to identify several signs that you exhibit when you are angry (e.g., clenched fists, etc.). These quick answers are only the beginning, however; the low hanging fruit. You will want to continually ask yourself these questions for a period of time before you can be satisfied that you are fully knowledgeable about your personal anger.

Recognising Physiological Signs of Anger

The first step in effective anger management is to learn how to recognise when you are angry. Some angry people see their emotions as a black or white state—they are either raging mad or they are calm. In reality, anger is not black and white, but rather quite gray. Anger occurs on a continuum between rage and calm where most of the time people experience some gradation of anger between these two extremes.

The same people who tend to see anger in terms of extremes sometimes have difficulty recognising when they are experiencing intermediate anger states. Luckily, most people experience a number of physical, emotional and behavioral cues that they can use to let them know when they are becoming upset.

Some physical signs of anger include:

- clenching your jaws or grinding your teeth
- headache
- stomach ache
- increased and rapid heart rate
- sweating, especially your palms
- feeling hot in the neck/face
- shaking or trembling
- dizziness

Emotionally you may feel:

- like you want to get away from the situation
- irritated
- sad or depressed
- guilty
- resentful
- anxious

- like striking out verbally or physically

Also, you may notice that you are:

- rubbing your head
- cupping your fist with your other hand
- pacing
- getting sarcastic
- losing your sense of humor
- acting in an abusive or abrasive manner
- craving a drink, a smoke or other substances that relax you
- raising your voice
- beginning to yell, scream, or cry

Rage Ratings

Another way you can learn about how your anger manifests itself is to get into the habit of measuring your anger. Unlike body temperature which is a physical state that can be measured by a physical instrument (a thermometer), anger is a complex event which has emotional, psychological, and physiological aspects. In order to measure anger, it is necessary to make anger ratings.

Picture a thermometer that measures the amount of anger you are feeling at any given moment. Imagine that when you are slightly irritated or frustrated, the mercury begins to rise out of the bulb of the thermometer. When you begin to feel the anger building but are still able to control it, the mercury rises about halfway up the thermometer. When you get really upset and your anger is boiling, imagine the mercury rising to the top of the thermometer. Rate your anger on that thermometer from 0 to 100 where zero means you are completely calm, and 100 means you are in a complete rage.

Use your anger thermometer to practice making anger ratings. A good way to get started is to think back on recent past situations in which you were angry, and then use the anger thermometer to rate just how angry you were during each situation.

The goal in rating your anger is to recognise that anger operates on a continuum; that it moves smoothly up and down between calmness on the one hand and rage on the other. People with anger problems sometimes don't get the continuum nature of anger because they experience their own anger as an either/or sort of thing; things seem to be either "fine" or "furious". Even though anger appears to be an 'on' or 'off' sort of thing for these people, this is generally because they are only counting the times when they are the most angry as episodes of anger; everything else is lumped into the 'fine' category. With sufficient practice, even these people can learn to distinguish ever finer shades of anger and calmness.

Anger ratings are important because they provide feedback about how likely you are to lose control or explode at any given moment. By training yourself to recognise when you are getting increasingly angry but are not yet out of control, you improve your chances of being able to maintain control by taking steps to reverse the upward trend of your anger.