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Herbert G. Lingren

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Get Rid of Anger For A Healthy Life

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Everyone gets angry at times – it is a normal human emotion. But let it happen too often, and it can turn into self-destructive behavior. If left unchecked, anger can damage your relationships, your reputation and your health. Anger produces the well-known *fight-or-flight* response – the physiological changes that help us marshal our resources to escape immediate danger. Today, however, this response is counterproductive. Physical force is an appropriate or useful response in very few situations – yet our bodies continue to react as though it were frequently necessary.

Anger and the Body. Anger stimulates the release of the hormones *adrenaline* and *cortisol* into the bloodstream. These two hormones have a number of effects that mobilize the body over the short-term but that can be destructive if anger is chronic.

- ***The hormones cause heart rate and blood pressure to rise.*** This can damage the delicate inner lining of the arteries and accelerate the development of arteriosclerosis – a buildup of plaque that can lead to a heart attack.
- ***They cause platelets circulating in the blood to become sticky.*** That enables them to cling to damaged areas on the artery lining, where they clump and release chemicals thought to further stimulate the growth of arteriosclerotic plaque.
- ***They stimulate fat cells to empty into the bloodstream*** to provide a quick energy source. When that fat isn't burned, it's converted into cholesterol – making more cholesterol available to be incorporated into plaque.
- They appear to suppress the immune system, making us more susceptible to illness.

Psychological Triggers. Anger also has a number of harmful psychological effects that may take their toll on your physical health. Various studies have suggested that hostility may be associated with poor marital satisfaction, difficult relationships with other family members and greater problems at work.

A hostile attitude also drives others away and may contribute to social isolation, which is itself a predictor of poor health and reduced longevity. Perhaps because they are under greater stress from

frequent arousal, people who measure high in hostility are also more likely than others to engage in habits that are dangerous to their health – particularly smoking, excessive alcohol use and overeating.

Damage Control Strategies. Some ideas to control anger before it blows:

- ***Reason with yourself.*** Though at first anger may not feel like an emotion that responds well to logic, you can use your reasoning powers to keep from reacting *automatically*...and from flying into a rage. When you feel yourself getting annoyed, stop and ask yourself three questions before you react:
 - **Is the issue at hand important to me?**
 - **Is my anger justified?**
 - **Is there anything that anger can do to fix the situation?**

If you answer "yes" to all three questions...your anger is probably worth acting on. ***Strategy:*** Instead of losing your temper, be assertive. Describe the specific behavior that's bothering you, and tell yourself what you want. Be specific about the behavior you want changed and make the request calmly. If necessary, take a few deep breaths before speaking.

If you answer "no" to at least one of the three questions: Instead of trying to change the situation that made you angry, it may be more appropriate to change your *internal response*. The key is to talk yourself out of it. Recognize that your anger will not change the person or situation that has irritated you. Remember the damage that anger is doing to your body. Remind yourself that if you remain angry, it's your own health and well-being that will suffer most.

Talking Yourself Out of Anger. Most angry people are highly cynical, so it will take time before they accept the power of anti-anger messages. But with practice, these anti-anger messages will start to make more sense.

- ***Empathize.*** When people do something annoying, try to find a reasonable explanation for their behavior. Seeing a situation through another person's eyes often can short-circuit impatience or irritation before it erupts into rage.
- ***Use the thought-stopping technique.*** This strategy may sound so simple that it couldn't possibly work, but it has been used for years by cognitive therapists with great success. If you've determined that a particular angry thought is unjustified or ineffective, the moment you become aware of it, say the word *Stop!* to yourself. In a sense, thought-stopping is an extension of reasoning with yourself, but with an emotional punch that can make the difference when logic isn't convincing.
- ***Distract yourself.*** Your mind can't focus on two things at once. When you feel angry, scan your environment for something else to occupy your mind. For example: If you're annoyed by a slow supermarket checkout line, pick up a magazine and bury yourself in an interesting article. If your environment fails to offer a suitable distraction, make up one. Vividly imagine yourself in a favorite setting...plan the menu for an upcoming dinner party...or daydream.
- ***Meditate.*** This takes commitment and practice, but once you've mastered it, you can calm yourself on the spot. When practiced regularly, meditation soothes the nervous system, helping to counteract the damage created by the fight-or-flight response. Set aside 15 minutes a day to sit quietly. Relax the muscles of your body, and focus on your breathing. Each time you exhale, repeat a calming word or phrase such as *peace*. When random thoughts intrude upon your

concentration, gently return your mind to this phrase.

Other anger-reducing strategies might include:

- ***Reduce artificial stimulants.*** Cut back on or eliminate nicotine, caffeine, sweets and other substances that stimulate the nervous and cardiovascular systems. Regular, mild exercise also can help to reduce anger.
- ***Work on your relationships.*** Angry people tend to be on the lookout for mistreatment by others – and their distrust is sometimes enough to create that very behavior. Look for ways to develop a spirit of greater trust and cooperation. *Suggestions:*
 - ***Become a better listener:*** Instead of interrupting while someone else is speaking, look that person straight in the eye and reflect on what you're hearing. Avoid being judgmental – or jumping in with advice.
 - ***Find ways to care for others.*** Adopt a pet or regularly perform community service.
 - ***Confide in a friend or family member.***
 - ***Laugh at yourself.*** When you feel angry, take your annoyances to a ridiculous extreme until you laugh at their absurdity. Laughter not only banishes negative emotions, it's relaxing.

Anger can be a friend or foe. It depends on how we use it when it arises.

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