

For families, partners & carers: managing anger

Anger is a normal human response that we all experience but can be difficult to deal with if you're on the receiving end.

Anger is a key characteristic of many mental health disorders and can be challenging for partners, families and carers.

WHAT IS ANGER?

Anger is an emotion we all experience in response to situations that seem unfair or disappointing. People may also become angry when they feel stressed or under pressure, experience mental health issues (such as mood swings), or feel like they're losing control over something. Anger can alert the person that something needs to change. Unfortunately, anger is most likely to be directed at loved ones and people the person feels safest with. Angry reactions to another person's kindness or intimacy may stem from past experiences when the person has felt let down. Anger, when out of control, can also be destructive and does not give the person license to be aggressive, attacking or violent.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The person may find it difficult to tolerate challenges or criticism and be particularly sensitive in close relationships. Make time to talk about neutral topics and acknowledge that there is more to life than problems. When provoked, try to avoid adding to the conflict or situation by being too reactive. Take time out when needed. This can help calm the situation and enable you to respond rather than react.

ROUTINES

Look after yourself by maintaining your own routine, social connections and support. Be aware of times you may feel isolated or drawn into chaos and crisis. Find structure in your daily life that includes taking care of yourself.

BE CONSISTENT

Try to be fair and consistent in the way you respond to anger and behaviours you find difficult or challenging. Be collaborative and invite discussion about what are appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, and what the consequences of these are. Be clear about what is expected of all family members. Be prepared to stand your ground and maintain your respect if you feel unfairly attacked.

LISTEN FOR THE UNDERLYING ISSUE

Anger is usually a reflection of some form of hurt or perceived rejection. It may help to listen to the person's accusations or complaints, and acknowledge to yourself that their anger is an attempt to communicate an underlying unmet need. Although this can be hard to do, it may help you to distance the person's anger from being a direct attack on you. When you feel ready, give the person space to talk about their pain, anger and hurt. Avoid dismissing or challenging their feelings.

WAIT UNTIL THE SITUATION IS CALM AND THEN DISCUSS

Disagreements and conflicts in relationships are normal. If the person is angry and accusatory, admit to whatever is true. Try to avoid becoming defensive about what you believe is not true or valid. Keep your tone as neutral as possible. Do not match the anger and criticism to theirs; this will only fuel the fire. If you note something that needs to be discussed or addressed, wait until the storm has passed. When the time is right, try problem solving the situation with the person. Where possible, express your own point of view on the issue but avoid accusing or blaming the person. Violence is never OK. If the person becomes aggressive or violent, leave the situation.

The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org