

Managing anger

One of the commonest difficulties that people present in therapy is trying to manage feelings of anger. Part of the difficulty is that in Irish society anger is seen as a “not okay” response – particularly for women - something to be sat on and suppressed. But even when we can do that, the anger is still there: so, what can we do about it?

Causes of anger

Angry responses can be triggered by many different causes, but among the most common are our expectations of others or of ourselves, some kind of threat (imagined or real), stress, fear of or actual failure, or even something as simple as tiredness. Alcohol and some medications can predispose us to be angry by affecting our mood.

Approaches to managing it

To begin with, one of the most useful things we can do is check out our attitude to anger – our beliefs about anger as an emotion: Is it always wrong? Am I a bad person for feeling angry? Is it ever okay to be angry? Then, we can try to find the most usual trigger(s) of our anger. With this information, we are well on our way to finding a way to manage anger when it happens.

Anger as such is neutral, neither good nor bad. In fact, at times it gives people energy to make things happen, to bring about important changes in society or their own lives even when these are resisted by other people.

There is a problem, though, if we react with anger when it is not appropriate and/or use inappropriate ways to express anger. Inappropriate anger reactions develop out of our experiences and are related to, for example, self-image and our expectations of other people. These people could be partners, work colleagues, or even people we have just met for the first time. Anger can become our standard response to any situation where we are thwarted or fail in some way. When counting to ten or taking deep breaths doesn't work and an angry response becomes habitual, it needs time and patience to work out where it is coming from and how it could be changed.

You are unique

Because each person is unique with a unique personal history, part of the work in therapy is to explore the triggers of anger for that person and look for each one's own best way to manage anger. It is collaborative work and may take time but the freedom and peace of mind it gives in the end are worth the effort.