

‘Too much’ anger

It’s likely that you’ve either experienced or witnessed anger recently. It could be the irritation you’ve felt at your child’s messy bedroom, the frustration at your train being delayed again, or seeing someone getting irate at a shop assistant, never mind watching the news on TV or seeing your football team lose again! As we explored in Chapter 2, anger is an essential threat-system emotion for humans; it tends to arise in situations that involve transgressions, where we or other people have been mistreated, or we have been thwarted in our efforts to achieve something. While it sometimes attracts a bad name, anger can be an activating emotion that may help us to stand up for ourselves, our needs, or the needs and wellbeing of others. It can help to challenge and ‘push back’ with other people, allowing us to assert our needs and prevent others from taking advantage of us. If you imagine for a moment that by reading this, we could remove your anger, so that you could never experience it again, you might start to see how problematic life would be without it. For example, imagine a colleague taking credit for a project that you’d worked hard on; or your partner, friend or child being treated unfairly or cruelly by someone else. Or for that matter, someone taking your phone or bag. Without access to anger, it may be difficult to stick up for ourselves, things that are important for us, and people that we care for.

However, like many things in life, to be useful, anger needs to fit certain parameters. For example, it needs to be appropriate to the situation that we find ourselves in, and turn up with a frequency and intensity level that is useful and productive. Unfortunately, if it starts to move outside of these parameters, it can become a very destructive and painful emotion, both for ourselves, and other people. So, in this chapter, we’re going to explore how to work with anger when it shows up too strongly in your life, and how it can be harnessed instead as something helpful and supportive to you.

The many patterns of anger

One of the tricky things when thinking about whether we experience ‘too much’ anger is that it comes in different shapes and different forms that, although similar, have slightly different features. For example, annoyance is often associated with having an unwanted or disliked experience, whereas frustration links more with feeling disappointed if our (or others’) efforts do not lead to our expected outcome or goal. Anger can be used as an umbrella term then to include experiences of discomfort when our aspirations, plans and goals are blocked, or in response to what we perceive to be ‘wrong’ and unfair. It can also emerge in the face of transgressions – when we or others have been mistreated.

The experience of anger can also vary. For example, it can have different triggers, occur at different intervals (e.g. rarely or frequently), and have different levels of intensity of strength. Anger can build slowly, or turn up very quickly. It can be a fleeting experience, or last a long time, and vary in whether (and how successfully) it’s expressed, or not. There are also types of anger that can be quite toxic, sometimes referred to as vengeful anger, where we can get caught up in wishing, wanting or actually hurting people, and this can be linked to revenge or wanting to ‘get back at them’ in some way. This is not a constructive type of anger as it often leads directly to harm and hurt, and actually goes against the concept of compassion that we’ve outlined in the book. So, it’s important to recognise which type of anger you might be struggling with, whether it’s harmful or destructive to others, or potentially constructive in that you would like to find a way to manage the difficulties that triggered the angry feelings. It’s also important to separate out anger and aggression/violence. For some of my clients, their negative judgement about anger is because, in their heads, it is synonymous with aggression or violence. While it is true that sometimes anger can lead to aggression and violence, we can be aggressive and violent from other emotions (e.g. fear and shame), and the vast majority of

times that people become angry, they don't also become violent. So, it's helpful here to distinguish between feeling angry, and angry behaviours that (sometimes) can include aggression or violence, while remembering that one does not naturally or inevitably lead to the other.

It's also worth considering the different routes through which anger can get triggered. So, for some people, anger occurs as a direct response to the environment, and is not influenced by conscious thought or appraisal. As this is an automatic response, it can be difficult to prevent, other than by having a broad level awareness and adapting the types of situations that we engage in that may be associated with this automatic angry response. Instead, our efforts may go to how best to manage anger once it has been triggered – grounding our self in the body, posture, soothing breathing and compassionate intention to tolerate angry feelings and urges. Another route is through appraisal – essentially how the way we think about a situation may start to trigger anger in a way that is problematic. Here, it's useful to spend more time becoming aware of our patterns of thinking and appraisal, and find more helpful ways of working with situations that could go on to elicit anger (or any other emotion for that matter). We spent some time in Chapter 12 working on this.

Let's look at an example of someone who was struggling with 'too much' anger. Clive came to therapy because a number of people – including his manager at work and his partner – had told him he needed 'anger management' as he would often fly into angry rants and rages. Ironically (or not), Clive told me he felt angry with people for suggesting this! In therapy, Clive referred to an experience when he was cycling to work one day and was knocked off his bike by a woman driving a car, who had two young children in the back. He described 'losing it' at this moment, running up to the car, and starting to bang on and punch the window, shouting and swearing at the top of his voice, calling the woman 'all the names under the sun'. As the lights changed and the terrified woman drove away, Clive tried to chase after her on his bike.

For the rest of the day, he remained in an irritable state, playing over the incident in his mind, ruminating on how selfish and unapologetic the woman was. It was only that evening, when he got home and went up to say goodnight to his six-year-old son, that Clive had a moment of insight about his behaviour, and how scared the children in the car must have been at his enraged response. It was with this experience that he felt it would be useful to seek help.

Let's take a think about how we can turn towards your experience of anger.

How do I know if I'm experiencing too much anger?

This is a difficult question to answer in isolation, as it all depends on many things, such as what is happening in our life, cultural or societal perspectives on anger, and how much we feel we can guide and influence anger when it arises. However, some of the following, simple prompts are useful when reflecting on this.

Overall, I feel:

- I am too easily triggered to anger
- I get angry very frequently
- I seem to get angry by many different situations, and more than others seem to be
- When I get angry, it tends to last for a long time
- When I become angry, it tends to be at an intense level
- When I get angry, I don't feel that I'm in control of my feelings or actions
- What I get angry, this tends to have negative consequences on my life, or on others
- When I get angry, it tends to take a long time to settle down again
- After settling from anger, I often feel that my feelings or reactions may have been misplaced, or disproportionate to the situation
- Other people tell me I'm an angry person

It's worth taking some time to reflect on this yourself; make a few notes if that's helpful, as holding this in mind will help you as you work through this chapter.

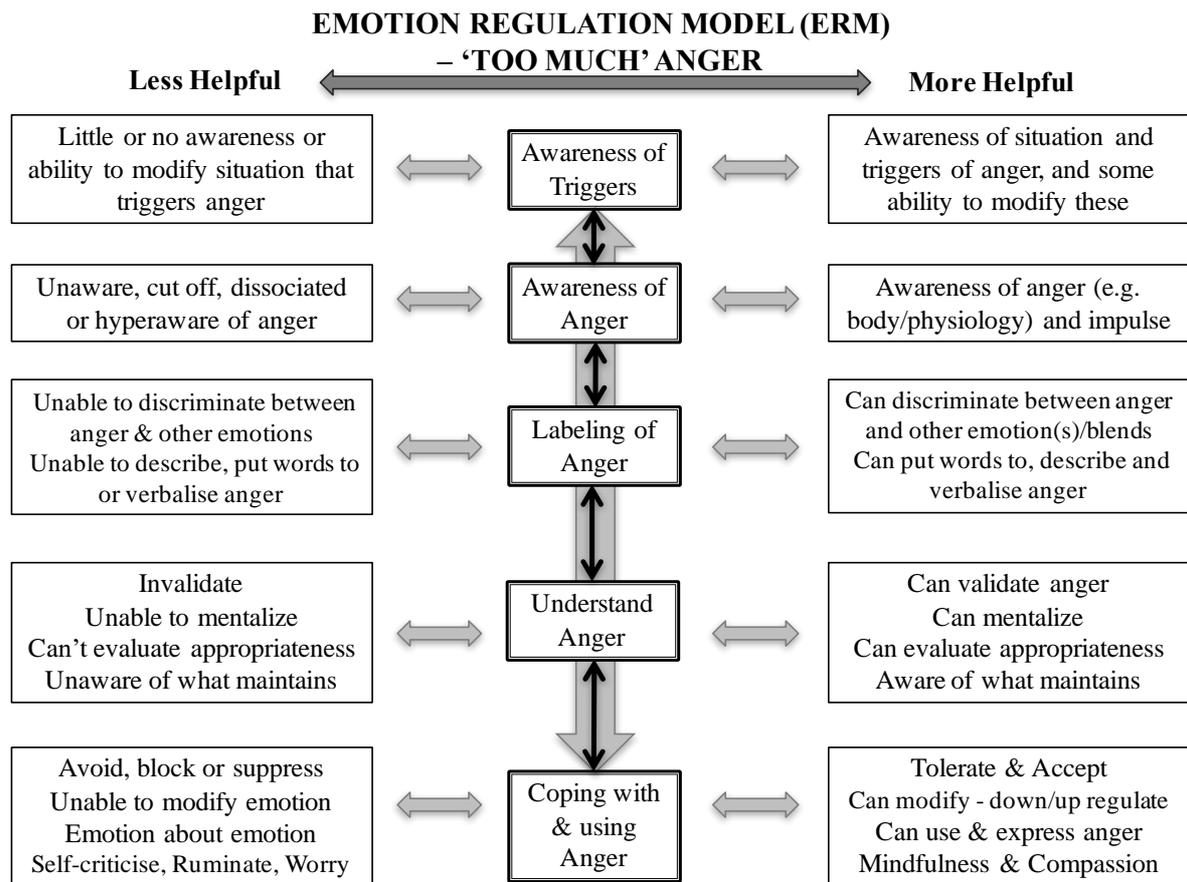
When we looked at these with Clive, he recognised that anger was intruding in life in an unhelpful way. He particularly resonated with a sense that anger was being triggered too often, at too high a level, and in situations that didn't require such a response. He was also aware that this was causing problems for himself and his partner, and that rather than help him 'sort out' situations, it generated more distress and often made interactions more difficult for him.

Managing 'too much' anger – what might help?

So how would we approach working with high levels of anger? There are of course many ways to do this, but in this chapter, we'll look at a number of steps that you can engage in that can be helpful.

Step 1: Emotion regulation model

It can be useful to start by looking back at the emotion regulation model we explored in Section IV of the book, Chapters 12 to 16. Have a look again at the model below, and take some time to reflect on which of the five steps of emotion regulation you might be struggling with in relation to anger.



When Clive did this, he quickly identified which steps he was OK with, and which were far more difficult. In terms of struggles, he realised that he had a hard time with Step 1, as he found it challenging to recognise situations that typically triggered his anger. For example, he found it difficult to notice that cycling on the busy streets in London, working in environments where people were loud and thoughtless, and taking on a role that was junior to people he felt were less talented than him, were all potential triggers for him. He also realised that he struggled at Step 2, identifying the various signs of anger (e.g. tense body, increased heart rate, desire to lash out and shout) and that it was difficult for him to regulate his anger downwards, once he was in an angry state (Step 5).

Take some time to return to the emotion regulation model (Section IV of the book). When it comes to your anger – in particular, in experiencing ‘too much’ anger – which of the five stages of the emotion regulation model are you leaning more towards on the left-hand side

(i.e. engaging in strategies that can be signs of less helpful emotion regulation strategies)? For which of the steps are you more on the right-hand side (i.e. engaging in more helpful ways of managing emotion)? Depending on which step, or steps, were most difficult for you, take some time to work through the chapter in Section IV that corresponds to developing emotion regulation skills for that step. Take your time with this, allowing yourself the space to develop your skills, before continuing this chapter. Once you've done this, it can be useful to work through the following steps.

Step 2: Motivation to face anger

Anger is not a simple emotion to experience and work with, and not necessarily an easy one to want to reduce or bring under control. Anger can feel very energising, strong and empowering, and for some, it is associated with beliefs that it commands respect and makes other people listen. And, unlike anxiety or sadness (in the short term at least) its energy can make it rewarding and appealing, especially if it's compensating for other feelings, such as vulnerability or shame. So, it's useful to begin by connecting with our motivation for facing anger. To help with this, take some time to work through the below exercise.

Exercise: Compassionate motivation to engage in changing anger

Sit in a comfortable and upright position. Take a few moments to engage with your soothing rhythm breathing, helping your body to slow down a little. Bring to mind the qualities of your compassionate self – wisdom, strength and commitment. Spend a short time feeling your way into this version of you.

From this part of you, take some time to think through each of the following questions, making notes on a separate piece of paper if that helps:

- What problems can you envisage in changing your relationship with anger? What will be difficult in reacting with less anger to some of the situations that trigger you?
- If you weren't struggling with such high levels of anger, what would you be able to do instead? What's your anger holding you back from, or stopping you from doing in life?
- What might get in the way of being able to tolerate high levels of anger?
- What can you do to support yourself with these difficulties?
- If you had your compassionate self by your side, how might that help you to tolerate angry impulses?

If it helps, write out a few notes on your answers to the above questions. Sometimes people find it helpful to keep these as a reminder – especially when it is challenging to manage anger – to why it is important for them to continue developing skills and to hold onto the motivation to engage in this process.

Step 3: What sits behind anger?

There's a beautiful, pithy saying: 'Anger is sad's bodyguard'. What this points to is that, for some people, anger can turn up in life to protect them from other emotions or feelings that may be scary, such as sadness, vulnerability or shame. With this in mind, it can be useful to think about what might sit behind or underneath your anger. To help with this, take a few moments to consider the following questions:

- What does your anger protect you from? What positives might it bring, by stopping something else from happening in your life?
- If you didn't get angry when you tend to in life, what other emotions or feelings might show themselves?
- What would your fear be if anger began to settle and you didn't experience it so intensely?
- If you couldn't ever get angry again in life, what would your fear be?
- What pain or hurt sits behind your anger, or your angry part?

If it helps, bring to mind a situation when you recently got quite angry toward someone, or about something. Think back to what was happening just before you got angry. If you can, play the scene forward slowly in your mind, and see if you can notice if there was another feeling that might have showed up in you, if you hadn't experienced the flash of anger. What was that feeling? Let's have a look at another way of exploring this.

Exercise: What sits behind anger?

Take a few moments to connect to your compassionate self – allowing your breathing to slow down, sitting upright with your friendly facial expression and voice tone. Find your way into the part of you that is wise, strong and committed. When you feel ready, bring to mind a recent time when you got caught up in anger in an unhelpful way. Now, imagine that you could see that angry version of you, that you could see it in front of you. Try to imagine what it would

like – it's posture, facial expression and voice tone. As your compassionate self, see if you can 'see behind' the image of your angry self. What might be sitting behind it – may be a concern, pain or hurt – that caused your angry self to react as it did? Given your compassionate intention and motivation, see if you can focus on your desire for this concern or hurt that sits behind the image of your angry part – to experience reassurance, care and compassion. Hold your wish that the distress of this part would come to an end. What would that be like, if that could be the case? What would happen to your anger if it didn't have this fear or concern heating it up?

If you cannot identify anything that sits underneath your anger from doing this, that's fine – there might not always be another feeling. It might also be helpful to try the multiple self exercise (Chapter 16d), as this helps to move us through different emotions about the same experience, and can help to clarify when we have mixed feelings about something.

But if you did notice another feeling sitting behind anger, it might be helpful to think about how you can bring compassion to that feeling. So, holding to your compassionate motivation, see if you can direct a desire for that difficult emotion that sits underneath anger to ease, to experience care, support and reassurance. How would that leave the angry part of you feeling? How might we bring wisdom and understanding to why this emotion is difficult for you, and why anger tends to turn up in its place? How would your compassionate self help you to deal with the vulnerability or fears that might be left if you could let go of anger a bit? It may be that it's helpful to turn to one of the chapters in Section IV to explore working with this emotion more specifically.

Step 4: Taking responsibility

Throughout the main book, we've been focusing on the idea of 'not your fault', and this certainly holds up for the case of struggling with too much anger in life. The compassionate

wisdom and knowledge we've been building can help us appreciate some important reality checks about our emotions, including anger. For

- Anger is a threat emotion, and therefore evolved to help/protect us (and our relatives/group) in threatening situations
- Anger is activating – it helps to energise us to take action, and can signal threat out to others so that they back down, or leave us alone
- Anger – when used in an assertive, helpful and guided way – can be useful in getting our own and others' needs met, for standing up for ourselves, and for preventing unfair, and unethical treatment

However, while there is an important function and purpose to anger, too much of it, too often and in inappropriate situations, can cause us, and other people, a lot of distress. It's sometimes helpful here to recall a time, recently, that your angry self took over. With this situation in mind, see if you can picture what your body posture, facial expression and voice tone were like. Given this, what impact did your anger have on other people? If you could now step into their shoes, seeing what your anger looked like, how would it have made them feel? Now, tapping into your empathy and compassionate mind – is this how you'd like this person to feel? If it isn't, how would you want them to feel around you? What could you do to take responsibility, to try and ensure that you start 'being' the version of you that would leave other people feeling at ease, safe and cared for by you? If it helps, make a few notes on these questions; take your time, feeling into the questions and what your compassionate intention would be to this person.

The point here really is that without guidance, anger can turn up 'too hot', or in the form of aggression (just as it can in other animals), and this can lead to a variety of problems. This is where a compassionate insight can be useful: While it's not our fault that we experience

this emotion, it is our responsibility to learn how best to manage this so that we don't cause ourselves, and others, distress, harm or suffering. Let's look at a couple of ways to do this in the final two steps.

Step 5: Slow down, step out

Anger is often an emotion that speeds us up or keeps us locked into ruminating about a difficulty (e.g. being treated unfairly). A phrase that some people have found helpful in relation to their anger is 'slow down, step out'. This can become a bit of a prompt to remind ourselves to do something different from what anger is telling us. Firstly, it's useful to remind ourselves to slow down, grounding in the moment and using soothing breathing rhythm and a sense of body groundedness. This allows the body to calm, and the mind to access its reflective capacity, which can generate choice and more helpful options than what anger is propelling us to do.

It will take some practice to remember this, which is why mindfulness is so useful and important – to remember to notice when anger speeds us up, and then slowing down and grounding ourselves and not allowing it to 'run the show'. Interestingly, while being told to 'slow down' or 'calm down' by someone else when you're angry will add more fuel to the fire, learning how to do this for yourself can be quite satisfying and confidence building. Similarly, if we are aware that anger has locked our mind into a pattern of rumination and planning for revenge, we learn to notice and step out of these automatic patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, and allow some space to ground ourselves. Angry rumination locks us into an angry state of mind, perpetuating our feelings and most likely, lowering our mood, disconnecting us from our work and relationships. Learning to notice this pattern and stepping out of it and into the present moment can allow space for freedom and new options for managing the situation.

Step 6: What would my compassionate self do?

As we've explored already, anger is a vitally important emotion. But if we only act from our angry self, it's likely that we're going to encounter many problems in life. Once we've become more skilled at noticing anger-provoking situations and feelings, it's useful to learn how to slow down in their presence, and to work with these from the compassionate self. To do this, it's useful first to have this as a question or prompt in your mind: 'What would my compassionate self do here?' In fact, I often use this myself (and encourage my clients to), and try and have ways to remind myself of this shift in perspective. For example, I have this question written down in various places (my computer, my phone), and have objects that I associate with this motivation which help to remind me to pause and wonder. From this question, we can then get more specific:

- Given this situation, what does the compassionate self understand about why anger has been triggered?
- Given its wisdom, strength and commitment, what would the compassionate self do at this moment?

How would the compassionate self help the angry self to slow down, while holding on to the potential need to be assertive and communicate angry feelings in a way that can be heard?

Like many things discussed in the book, all of this takes time and practice. Don't be surprised if the angry self sometimes turns around and says: 'I don't give a toss what you (compassionate self) would do!' This is understandable because it can be hard to switch away from an experience that, at the moment, feels strong and about to 'sort it all out!' But over time, and with dedicated practice, we can recognise that we can be in our compassionate selves and still be strong, assertive and effective. This is when our angry self can start to calm down a little, giving way to a more helpful way of managing triggering situations. It's important to see that this isn't about letting go of being strong; for example, how much strength does it take to

punch someone who's insulted you, in comparison to tolerating this urge while dealing with the situation differently (e.g. walking away or talking to them in an assertive but grounded way)? Sometimes it's useful to hold in mind the concept of 'opposite action' (Linehan, 1993) – that is, to notice and learn what anger (or any emotion for that matter) is urging or wanting you to do, and then do something in opposition to this. So, if you feel that your angry part is wanting you to shout, it might be that instead, you sit quietly and not respond. If your angry part urges you to aggression and to approach and threaten someone, it might be useful instead to walk away from the situation.

Key reflections

- Anger is an important emotion that evolved to energise us to respond in situations in which we are challenged or treated unfairly
- Anger – and the way we react when we experience it – can sometimes be damaging for ourselves and others
- Anger sometimes sits on top of other feelings, such as sadness and anxiety, that might be more difficult to experience or express
- Compassion for anger involves learning to recognise that while angry feelings can be important to harness, we can take responsibility that our anger is used in a wise, regulated, helpful way