How do you know when you're angry?

When people become angry they can experience many different thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions. Some people experience strong feelings of resentment or hostility, raise their voice, curse, or throw things. Other people experience physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and increases in heart rate and blood pressure. For some, angry feelings become so overwhelming they feel ready to explode. Others may not know they are angry about a situation but will feel physically ill, guilty, or will overreact to other situations. Listed below are some direct and indirect expressions of anger. Look through the list and see if you experience any of these thoughts, feelings, or behaviors.

**Direct signs of anger:** raised voice, yelling, cursing, headaches, stomach aches, tightness in the throat, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, clenched fists, threatening others, pushing, shoving, hitting, feeling violated, hostility, resentment, rage.

**Indirect signs of anger:** excessive sleeping, chronic fatigue, anxiety, numbness, depression, sulking, overeating, loss of appetite, crying, constant criticizing, mean or hostile joking, abuse of alcohol or drugs.

Many people experience these general signs of anger. First, identify which feelings you experience using the list above. Then, look at how your anger develops. There are some feelings and thoughts that occur when anger begins and those that occur as anger increases. In order to identify how your anger symptoms develop, it may be helpful to fill out an anger scale. This scale will help you identify your physical symptoms, thoughts and feelings when you first begin to feel angry and help you track how these change as your level of anger increases. In order to use the form, try to think of situations in the past where you have experienced anger and recall what feelings and symptoms you experienced. It will be helpful to think of situations where you experienced different levels of anger in order to better understand how your feelings, thoughts and physical symptoms change.

Handling Anger

Bob is fuming because he is stuck in traffic and he is late for class. Joanne is furious because James is already a half-hour late in calling her. Ted is upset because he received a bill that he did not anticipate from the university accounting office. Marcia is mad because she just discovered she left her wallet at the bookstore when she was cashing a check. Kathy is frustrated because she has trouble registering for class that is required for her major.

You probably have some experiences similar to these students that have left you with feelings of intense anger. Almost everyone experiences anger from time to time. Anger is a powerful, but completely healthy, human emotion that we naturally experience in response to frustration, hurt, disappointment, annoyances, harassment, and threats to our security.

We usually tend to think about anger as a negative emotion, but anger can actually be helpful. It can energize us and motivate us to overcome obstacles, solve problems and achieve goals we never thought we would realize. However, if we fail to deal with our anger constructively and effectively, it can propel us into inappropriate, aggressive, or create additional problems for us. Prolonged anger that is not dealt with and appropriately expressed is extremely stressful and can result in high levels of tension and anxiety,
health problems, increased accidents, and important that you understand anger, how it affects you, how you respond to it, and how you can handle it.

What happens when you get angry?

When you are angry, your body reacts just like it does to stress. Your heart beats faster to pump increased oxygen, adrenaline, and sugar into your bloodstream. Your breathing becomes more rapid, your blood pressure rises, and your muscles tense. Your body is energized for action. In looking for way to release tension you might yell or shout, slam things, pound your fist. Bob, for example, might start leaning on his horn. You might take action to resolve a problem, or you might try to hold your anger in. However, if you do not find a way to release your tension you risk building up your anger to a level that is dangerous and difficult to control. Joanne may say nothing to James when he does call, but may blow up at him over a smaller issue later on.

Cognitively, your thoughts about others may become irrational and you may generate negative self-statements. Ted and Kathy may begin to believe that no one in the university cares or ever thinks about students. Maria may tell herself that she always forgets things and that if she were halfway intelligent this wouldn't happen. These negative thoughts usually serve to increase your anger.

What causes you to get angry?

There are many types of circumstances that can cause a person to become angry. Perhaps the most common source of anger is frustration. Frustration occurs when you are blocked from doing what you want to do or from going where you want to go. It is a feeling of helplessness and loss of control. Bob is frustrated because he can't make the traffic move any faster.

Another primary cause of anger is disappointment. You are disappointed when situations, events, or people, including yourself, do not meet the expectations you have for them. Joanne is disappointed because James has not called.

Threat to our sense of security is also a major cause of anger. Situations that threaten your security like doing poorly on an exam, losing your wallet, or encountering a problem your not prepared to deal with can leave you feeling vulnerable and angry.

The common thread that runs through all of these situations is another emotion, fear. These situations all result in the experience of fear, like bob's fear of the consequences of being late to class or Maria's fear that her wallet and its contents are gone forever. Anger is an emotion of fear. It is a defensive response to the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that fear produces. While fear is a passive emotion with energy directed inward, anger is an aggressive emotion that allows you to direct energy outwards.

Sometimes there are more subtle cause of your anger. Some people get angry because they fear being powerless or being taken advantage of; some believe that being aggressive is an effective way to get their way; many have not learned to deal with conflict assertively; some use anger to displace their feelings of guilt; and some people get angry because they overreact or misinterpret a situation.

We cognitively interpret most of our life experiences; how we interpret a situation influences how much anger we might experience. For example, if Joanne believes that James has not called because he frequently forgets, she probably will experience annoyance. However, if she interprets his behavior as not caring about her, her fear and anger may be magnified. If Kathy begins to believe that she will not get the class she needs, her anger will become intense.
Everyone experiences anger. The ability to express negative feelings in a constructive and positive manner is essential to positive physical and mental health. Listed below are steps you can take to express and handle your anger effectively.

- **Recognize your anger**
  
  Admit to yourself that you are angry. Know how you when you get angry. What are signs?

- **Calm down**
  
  The old adage of "take a deep breath and count to ten" really works. Tell yourself that you can deal with the situation more effectively if you are calm. Decide not to act on the situation until you have calmed down.

- **Use a sounding board**
  
  If there is a neutral person you can talk to about why you are angry, it may help you to determine if you are interpreting the situation accurately.

- **Identify your fears**
  
  What fears has the source of your anger caused? Reappraise the situation. Give yourself a chance to see if the situation that caused your anger is bad as you first thought.

- **Don't avoid the issue**
  
  Don't allow anger to build up and interfere with later situations or circumstances. After you have reappraised the situation decide to confront it or let it go.

- **Examine your options**
  
  Identify the different ways you might respond to the situation and the potential outcomes that might result.

- **Decide how you will respond**
  
  Determine the response that will result in the most positive outcomes for you and others over the long run.

- **Respond assertively rather than aggressively**
  
  Express yourself firmly without making insulting remarks or trying to put someone on the defensive. Work to resolve the problem rather than to win.

- **Learn to fight fairly**
  
  If someone has done or said something to make you angry, tell them that it has and that you want to discuss it. State specifically what the person has said or done, why it has made you angry and, what you expect to rectify the situation. Ask the person if he or she understands why you are angry and to state his or her understanding of the situation. Ask the person to work with you toward a resolution of the problem.
• **Avoid displacing your anger**

  Because the energy of anger wants to be released, there is a tendency to displace anger onto people who are not the source of your anger. This will only make things worse. If you are angry with a business, agency, office or department, ask to talk with someone in charge to express your anger. Avoid displacing your anger onto an unsuspecting clerk.

• **Use desensitization for recurring anger**

  Sometimes when you become very angry about a situation or with another person, you may experience feelings of anger each time you encounter the person or situation again. Your anger response is automatic and learned and can interfere with your ability to act cooperatively in future circumstances. A counselor can teach you desensitization methods to eliminate your automatic anger response.

• **Use humor, physical exercise or other enjoyable activities to release pent-up anger**

  Sometimes you experience minor irritations or problems that cannot be resolved, or the timing is not right to confront the source of your anger. Finding constructive ways to release your tension can help you to move on or to deal more effectively with the source of your anger when the time is right.

• **Seek help**

  If you have difficulty handling your anger in a constructive and effective manner, talk with a friend or a counselor in the TxState Counseling Center.

**Remember**

Learn to recognize the signs of your anger. Understand the reasons for your anger. Find constructive and healthy ways to express your anger.

How can you deal with your angry thoughts and feelings more effectively?

When you think back to anger-producing situations, it is likely that you recall experiencing intense feelings of anger. You may recall feelings of hostility or rage that may have overwhelmed you and led you to act in ways that did not improve the situation. Maybe you remember trying to control your angry feelings while in the situation and struggling to contain them all day. In order to better understand these feelings and bring them under your control, it is necessary to look at another aspect of the anger-producing situation: your thoughts.

Thoughts or beliefs about a situation influence how you feel about the situation. For example, if another student or co-worker offers you help you with a project, you may think: "This person is trying to be helpful to me." This thought may lead to positive feelings towards the person. On the other hand, the thought: "This person is trying to look good by volunteering” may lead to angry feelings.

**The first step in managing your angry feelings is to examine the thoughts you have just before becoming angry.**

Try to remember one or two situations when you became angry and trace each situation step by step. Can you remember what you were thinking right before you became angry? The next time you get angry at someone, stop yourself and make a note of your thoughts about the person and the situation. Start writing down each situation and your thoughts until you have several examples.
The next step in effectively managing anger is to evaluate your anger-producing thoughts.

Sometimes the thoughts we have are accurate and sometimes they aren't. It is important to carefully examine your anger-producing thoughts to see if they are accurate or somewhat distorted. Distorted thoughts are inaccurate or less adaptive ways of thinking about a situation. For example, if a person says something critical about you and you think, "This person is a jerk," you will likely feel angry and respond to this person in an angry fashion. You may learn, however, that this person just found out a loved one is very ill. Labeling a person based on one interaction is an example of a type of distorted thinking called overgeneralization. Listed below are some other types of distorted thinking and examples.

1. **Labeling**: You put a fixed, negative label on others without considering that the evidence might more reasonably lead to a different conclusion.

   *Example*: "He's an idiot." "She's two-faced."

2. **Magnification**: When you evaluate another person, you unreasonably magnify the negative and minimize the positive.

   *Example*: "My teacher gave me one low grademark (and several high ones), she's so unfair!"

3. **Personalization**: You believe others are behaving negatively as a reaction to you, without considering more plausible explanations for their behavior.

   *Example*: "That guy is being cold to me because he thinks he's better than I am." (You are unaware that he just received some upsetting news from home.)

4. **"Should" or "must" statements**: You have a precise, fixed idea of how others should behave and you overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met.

   *Example*: "She should have called me by now. She must not care about our friendship."

5. **Tunnel vision**: You only see the negative aspects of a situation.

   *Example*: "My professor can't do anything right. He's critical, insensitive, and? a lousy lecturer."

6. **All or nothing thinking**: You view a situation in only two categories instead of on a continuum. Things are either good or bad; you are either perfect or a failure.

   *Example*: "My friend doesn't agree with me on this issue, so he's completely non-supportive." "I just know I'm going to get an "F" on that exam!" (when a "B" is most likely).

7. **Fallacy of fairness**: You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair, but other people won't agree with you.

   *Example*: "Why can't my professor see that I deserve an "A"?"

8. **Blaming**: You hold other people responsible for your feelings.

   *Example*: "It's my roommate's fault I'm so angry."

9. **Fallacy of Change**: You expect others will change to suit you if you pressure them enough.
**Example:** "If you just hear me out one more time, I'm sure you'll agree with me."

10. **Being Right:** You are continually trying to prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness.

**Example:** "I was totally justified in yelling at my friend for what he did!"

When you are angry, it's likely that many of your thoughts will fall under one of these categories. In order to overcome some of these thoughts, it may be helpful to develop an Angry Thought Record. In the first column, write down the anger producing thought. In the next column, write down the type of distortion it represents. In the third column, write down a different, more accurate, adaptive way to think about the situation.

**The next step is find more accurate, adaptive ways of thinking about the situation.**

For each distorted thought you have written down, try a different way of thinking about the situation— one that is more accurate and does not make you feel as angry. This may involve exploring the positive aspects of a person or a situation, identifying other possible reasons for the person's behavior, or looking at "the big picture" rather than focusing on one relatively small incident.

**The last step is to practice identifying anger-producing thoughts, finding the distortions, and developing more accurate ways of thinking every day!**

This final technique to reduce anger must be practiced every day in order to be effective. It is necessary to write down angry thoughts regularly and to practice refuting them. As this becomes easier, you can better identify your thoughts when you are in a situation and begin to feel angry. By identifying distorted thoughts and replacing them with more adaptive ways of thinking, you can keep yourself from becoming overwhelmed by anger in difficult situations.

**When is anger a problem??**

Sometimes, angry feelings can become overwhelming and can be difficult to handle. Below are some questions to ask yourself in order to determine if you are having difficulty managing your anger.

1. When you become angry, do you ever feel out of control?
2. When you become angry, have you ever said or done anything you regretted later?
3. While angry, have you ever physically attacked someone (i.e., grabbed, shoved, slapped, or punched)?
4. Has an angry reaction to a situation ever cost you a relationship or a job?
5. Do feelings of anger often make it difficult to concentrate on work or school?
6. Do you drink alcohol or use other drugs to calm down and to reduce your angry feelings?
7. Have you ever been arrested or faced legal difficulties as a result of your anger?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, then you may have difficulty managing anger. If you answered yes to most or all of these questions, then you may have a serious anger management problem.