

Managing my anxiety & anger


Certain levels of anxiety or anger are part of our natural 'fight or flight' stress response mechanisms. The key is to learn how to channel this response constructively, rather than letting it contribute to increasing spirals of unhelpful stress, anxiety or anger.

1. Changing your attitude towards control

Unhelpful anxiety and anger spirals arise mainly from the kinds of depressed thinking which focus on imposing unrealistic control over life – such as control freakery, rule-bound thinking, catastrophising, hyper-vigilance and avoidance. Learning a new attitude towards the idea of 'control' is essential for addressing anxiety and anger problems, as well as depression.

- Make a list of your most important 'shoulds' and 'oughts' about life in general and your own life in particular. To help identify these, ask yourself what kinds of things make you annoyed with yourself or others, or what kinds of things upset you if they don't work out.

(eg. "I mustn't make mistakes," "I must do well," "I shouldn't have to ask for help," "I need to be in control," "I shouldn't ever let anyone else down," etc)



"If something is not in my control then I use simple breathing exercises, or counting exercises, to help bring down stress levels. Once my stress levels are a bit more in control, things seem a little bit easier to cope with." – Leigh

- Now re-write these in the form of preferences instead of demands:

(eg. "It's not a good feeling making mistakes, but it's not the end of the world", "I would very much like to do well, but my worth as a person doesn't depend on how well I do", "It can feel difficult to ask for help, but it is part of being human to give and receive help and support," "I like feeling in control, but when I try too hard to control things it can make things worse – I will take a more realistic attitude to what can be controlled and what can't," "I would like to be dependable for others, but I also need to take care of my own needs," etc)



Make a list of ways you can soothe and help yourself when things don't work out the way you'd like them to: (eg. taking a few deep breaths and practising my relaxation techniques, speaking kindly to myself and acknowledging the disappointment, giving myself a treat like a long soak in the bath with a book, calling up a friend for a chat etc)

See 'Taking care of yourself' in the Self-help First Steps section for self-soothing ideas to add to your list. At the top of your list should be 'Take a few deep breaths' because deep breathing and relaxation techniques intervene directly into the anxiety/anger spiral at a physiological level (see the Practising relaxation page for more).

2. Facing your fears

A very important strategy for reducing chronic anxiety as well as depression is to tackle the avoidance behaviour which contributes so much to it spiralling out of control. By planning this carefully and doing it in small manageable steps you give yourself the opportunity to build up your 'anxiety immunity'.

Make a list of your daily fears and the things you are avoiding. Include small things as well as big ones.

Make sure you are properly supported. Either ask a friend or get professional support especially when facing the more difficult things on your list.



Go back over the list and grade it in order of difficulty, with the least difficult as number 1.

Write down the fear/avoidance labelled at number 1 on your list (ie the least challenging one) here, then use the following steps to address it:

(eg. "I'm avoiding checking my bank account because I think I might have gone over my overdraft.")

What is the worst thing that could happen? How likely is this?

(eg. I find I have gone into overdraft and have had lots of extra charges - it's quite likely I've gone into overdraft, but probably not got too many charges yet.)

What practical things can you do to deal with this? Use the Problem-solving Framework to generate and evaluate practical solutions.

(eg. I can use the problem-solving framework to think of solutions and stop myself from building up more charges.)

Notice what depressed thinking habits are getting in your way and use the Thought Challenging form to challenge them

(eg. I'm scared the charges will have mounted up and I'll never be able to get back on track – catastrophising, all-or-nothing thinking)

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What can and can't you control in the situation?

(eg. I can't control whether or not my housemates do the washing up. I can control how I respond when they don't do the washing up and how I communicate my feelings about it.)

Use the Thought Diary to notice if there are any depressed thinking habits fuelling your anger, especially any related to 'control freakery' or the sense that you need to be able to control things unrealistically. List them here:

(eg. They are doing it because they don't respect me – over-personalisation. Everyone must do their equal share in the house – rule-bound thinking. They've just finished supper, so I'm going to check whether they're doing the washing up or not – hyper-vigilance)

Use the Thought Challenging form to replace these thoughts with more balanced, constructive evaluations.

(eg. "They probably don't realise how much it annoys me because they are less bothered about tidiness than I am. I'd really like everyone to put as much effort into keeping things tidy as I do, but I can't force anyone to do so. Constantly checking up on whether they've done it or not is just winding me up even more, so it would be better if I tried to ignore it for a while.)

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What practical steps can you take to address the situation? Use the Problem-solving Framework to help you identify a range of ideas and strategies.

(eg. I can plan out how to let my housemates know how I'm feeling and ask them if we could set up a rota for keeping the kitchen tidy. Or I could offer to tidy up the kitchen if they take on some of the other tasks that stress me out like paying the bills or dealing with the landlord.)

See 'Assertive communication' in the Living Well section for a useful skill in dealing with anger

If the situation is completely out of my control and there is nothing else I can do practically, then what can I do to help myself with my anger?

(eg. If my housemates still don't bother and won't work with me on a mutual solution then I can: – decide that I will do the washing up myself anyway, because it's more stressful to live than the mess than with the resentment for doing all the tidying, - acknowledge my anger and give myself sympathy for it, - go out for a vigorous run when I feel myself building up a head of steam etc.)

Remember to get support, especially when you are working on the more difficult issues. It can be really helpful to 'sound out' your ideas with someone else to get a different perspective on the things that make you angry. Your uni or college counselling service may have workshops on Anger Management as well as Assertiveness to help you build on these skills.



Repeat these steps with the other anger points on your list.

Use some of the specific ideas you come up with to make yourself a general Anger Plan which you can remind yourself of when new anger issues come up.

4. Making an anger plan

Example:

1. As soon as I notice my anger building, I will ___ step away from the situation for a moment, if possible, or take a few deep breaths, if not ___.
2. To help me deal with my anger in that moment, I will ___ remind myself to take a few deep breaths and think before I act ___.
3. I will take time to ___ think through exactly what I am feeling angry about and whether there is anything I have control over in the situation ___.
4. If there is something constructive I can do in the situation, I will ___ plan in my head what I want to say and remind myself to speak calmly and assertively ___.
5. If there is nothing I can immediately do to improve the situation, I will ___ acknowledge my frustration and recognise its legitimacy; promise myself I will take time later to help myself with these feelings ___.
6. If I still feel angry later, I will ___ go for a run or do some other vigorous activity to 'let off steam' ___.
7. In order to help myself with similar situations in the future, I will ___ use the step-by-step plan above to help me work out what to do ___.

My Anger Plan:

1. As soon as I notice my anger building, I will _____

2. To help me deal with my anger in that moment, I will _____

3. I will take time to _____

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4. If there is something constructive I can do in the situation, I will _____

5. If there is nothing I can immediately do to improve the situation, I will



“My counsellor helped me to see how to use all my bottled up anger in constructive ways. I control it now by going out for a run or to the gym. Even, God forbid, doing some work! I cleaned our flat from top to bottom the other week, and my flatmate asked what the * I was doing!” – Darren***

6. If I still feel angry later, I will _____

7. In order to help myself with similar situations in the future, I will _____

