

Anger management

For staff in schools



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Introduction

Much attention is given to the need for school staff to manage student behaviour and anger. This resource will cover this, but also how to deal with your own anger and that of colleagues'. There is also information on what school leaders can do to support staff.



What is anger and why is this important in schools?

Teaching and supporting children whilst working in a very busy, often resource constrained, environment while managing large workloads, staff room dynamics and student behaviour is a big ask of even the most passionate and skilled school workforce. It often requires very high levels of patience and tolerance. It's very normal when these things run out!

Anger is one of many normal human emotions. It acts as a messenger, telling us when we feel attacked, frustrated or that we are being unfairly treated or ignored. It's a standard part of being human and it doesn't have to be a bad thing. Understanding our anger can help us recognise when we don't feel safe or happy, and inspire us to make changes so our overall wellbeing improves.

Teachers are human and will experience the feelings that lead to anger. This is ok. These experiences can help us to grow as people and understand more about who we are. As we grow we better understand what we need to be mentally well, and how to help others experiencing anger.

As schools can be high pressure environments, managing anger in all its forms is something that school staff may find themselves having to do on a regular basis.

When not well managed, or if experienced very frequently, chronic anger can have very negative affect on our physical and mental health. It can also have a negative impact on our career and relationships.

If you explode with anger, you are not getting the chance to properly express the message that sits behind your anger.

This can lead to stress, depression and other mental health problems. It can also increase your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure and insomnia, and cause challenges at work and at home.

Recognising what makes you angry, the signs of anger, and knowing how to manage it, is all part of looking after yourself and being the best possible member of school staff.

Recognising and managing expressions of anger:



Anger management means finding a healthy way to understand and express the feelings that lead to anger. It doesn't mean you must never feel angry or you must suppress your anger - both are impossible!

What are we aiming for?

Being able to recognise the following...

...What makes you angry

...When you're experiencing anger

...How to manage it in the moment

...What emotions have led to the anger

Learning to recognise these things can help you to feel better, more in control and have better quality personal and professional relationship

When is anger a problem?

Anger can cause problems if it leads to the following:

- You regularly express your anger through unhelpful or destructive behaviour, for example verbal abuse or physical violence
- You find it very difficult to compromise and view different opinions as a personal challenge
- Your anger is having a negative effect on your overall mental and physical health
- Your anger is causing a break down in personal or professional relationships
- Anger becomes your only emotion, blocking out your ability to feel other emotions
- You haven't developed ways to effectively communicate the emotions that cause your anger

Spotting the signs

Spotting when you may be getting angry is an important part of effective anger management. These will likely include a physical response so paying attention to your body is important - look out for:

- Knots in your stomach
- Clenching your hands or jaw
- Feeling clammy or flushed
- Breathing faster
- Headaches
- Pacing or needing to walk around
- "Seeing red"
- Having trouble concentrating
- Pounding heart
- Tensing your shoulders



Responding to anger in the moment:

If you're able to spot the signs that your temper is rising you may be able to manage it in the moment. This is often about knowing when anger is rising, and disrupting it to prevent an explosion. There are lots of techniques to help with this. It's important to find which works best for you. Some that are known to be helpful include:

- Take deep breaths: in for 4, out for 6. Breathe from your tummy: let air in.
- Focus on your body: noticing the physical signs of anger will actually help to calm the emotions.
- If possible, change your scene quickly: go for a quick walk round the block, or excuse yourself and take five minutes to move around. Just change location.
- If you're feeling tense in your head or shoulders can you do some stretches or give yourself a gentle massage? Just 15 seconds will likely change how you are feeling.
- Very slowly count to 10: this focuses on the mind and helps bring everything back under control. Then do it again (or count to 100)
- Use your senses: sight, smell, sound, touch and taste can relieve anger if you focus on something that ticks one of those boxes - a cup of tea is a cliché for a reason!
- Visualise a place or time when you have felt calmer, or happier.
- Develop a mantra you can use e.g. 'You're ok. You're safe and incontrol'

Some questions to ask yourself to help manage anger in the moment:

How important is this issue to me? Can I better influence the situation by engaging differently?

Is my response proportionate to the situation?

Will how I express my anger ruin my day? Or other people's? Do I want that?

Is there anything I can control about the situation? If not, will expressions of anger change anything?

Is taking action worth my time? Or can I direct my energy elsewhere?



Longer term anger management

There are a number of approaches to anger management that can help you to keep a check on your expressions of anger. These include:

Understand your triggers. If you know what makes you feel angry, this may help you to manage unwanted responses. This could be busy times of day, workload stress, receiving negative feedback, or particularly places, people or even times of day. Look at your routine and ask yourself if there are common themes that make your blood boil. Can you find ways to mitigate them or switch up your routine?

Definition of a trigger:

Anger triggers are like any emotional trigger. It's a sensitive area in your emotions that gets stirred up by a certain situation, person, topic etc.

Recognise what comes from ourselves.

Sometimes anger may come from the stories we tell ourselves about events, rather than the events themselves. We may bring past experiences, current frustrations or assumptions to an interaction. We all do this all the time! But if our aim is to manage our expressions of anger, then it can be helpful to make an effort to identify it.

Here are some common habits we can all bring to the table during fraught interactions. We have also included some questions to ask yourself that may help you reframe things.

- Making sweeping generalisations / assumptions - 'she ALWAYS does x', 'he NEVER does y'. These assumptions can often act as a barrier to identifying solutions, because we see the problem as the whole person rather than something they may have done.

- Jumping to conclusions / deciding what people think even if they are saying something different
- Blaming others for everything that goes wrong
- Having a lack of flexibility and nuance in situations of tension - thinking things SHOULD be a certain way and refusing to accept deviation from this

Understand what emotions are causing your anger.

Often anger and conflict mask deeper things such as hurt, upset, shame, anxiety or humiliation. It can also be a reflection of what you experienced in childhood or a symptom of experiencing trauma, depression or chronic stress. If you think that your anger is a problem it may well be helpful to talk to someone, including a professional, about why you are getting angry, how you're expressing it, and to understand the reasons behind it.

Recognise if you need help. It's ok if you come to the conclusion that you need help from a professional — it's not uncommon or something to feel ashamed of. Anger management classes may allow you to meet others facing the same challenges — the comradery may be helpful, and might help you feel less alone. Group or individual therapy may help you to understand yourself, and why you express your anger the way you do, better. It may also provide a safe place to practice new skills for expressing anger.



If you need some support in identifying your triggers and understanding the feelings behind your anger call Education Support's free and confidential helpline: 08000 562 561. Our qualified counsellors are here to help.



Self-care. Long term anger management can be part of a wider self-care and wellbeing approach. We always advocate for teachers and education staff to make time for activities that make you feel like you! You're a human being and your passions can energise you. They can help to stave off burnout, exhaustion and frustration that may lead to big or surprising expressions of anger. You can read more about avoiding burnout [here](#) and you can read about the building blocks of good mental health [here](#).

Questions you can to ask to reframe situations to reduce anger:

- Is my response proportionate to the issue?
- Is there evidence to support my assumptions? (especially regarding other people's intentions)
- What would I say to a friend who was thinking or doing these things?
- Does it have to be the way I see it, or can both perspectives be true?

Finding ways to address issues

Are there issues you'd like to raise with colleagues but worry that you'll get angry? We've got ten tips to consider before you do:

You may also want to have a look at [our guide](#) to boundary setting and saying no in schools.

- 1 Focus on the relationship - maintaining your relationships with colleagues should be the priority, not winning the argument.
- 2 Respect other people's rights to have their own opinions - it's how these are expressed that is key.
- 3 Focus on the current issue and moment - don't be dragged into past resentments or future hypothetical issues.
- 4 Be willing to forgive. Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Remember: no one's perfect.
- 5 Take a break from the conversation if you feel it's getting out of control. Say something like "I'd like to revisit this conversation when things are less heated."
- 6 Know that sometimes you have to let things go. You can't win them all.
- 7 Use humour when appropriate to relieve tension. Try being light hearted when you feel anger coming on to lighten the mood and retain perspective. Don't use sarcasm as that can be misconstrued.
- 8 Choose your words carefully. Preparation is key. Spend some time identifying, your feelings and choose language that your colleague will be more likely to understand. This will help them to understand your perspective.
- 9 Focus on finding a solution to the issue, rather than dwelling on what has made you angry. Articulate the desire for a solution out loud e.g. 'how can we make sure this doesn't happen again?'
- 10 Acknowledge that sometimes, even if you take care and time to ensure you express your frustration in a calm and considered way, you won't always get people to see your perspective. Being able to accept this is a helpful skill for any high pressure workplace.



Managing and responding to colleagues' anger at school



Anger from colleagues at work can be hard to handle. Especially when you're already dealing with a busy day, the needs of pupils, and a huge to-do list. When a colleague is angry towards you it can be difficult to know how to respond. It can be easy to find ourselves responding in kind. Then situations can escalate.

Try to recognise the difference between someone letting off steam and a pattern of difficult and unpleasant behaviour directly specifically towards you (bullying).

Here are some suggestions for managing and responding to colleagues' anger at school

During conflict:

- Wherever possible, acknowledge the anger and emotions your colleague is experiencing. This is much easier if the anger isn't being directed towards you, but in both circumstances helping a person feel validated will assist in reaching resolution.

- Avoid non-verbal behaviours that could be misconstrued by someone who is angry - e.g. standing up to leave, mid conversation or inadvertently blocking an exit.
- Do your best to stay calm - even if you have your own difficult feelings, if you can stay calm it may stop an escalation. Try to focus on something external — such as evening out your breaths or watching a ticking clock — to focus on something other than the anger in the room.
- Listen as much as possible - without judgement, if possible. Giving people permission to be angry can provide validation and help calm things down.
- Offer them space - if you think continuing the conversation may be making things worse, offer your colleague time and space. It may help you too.
- Be empathetic - if a colleague is taking out their frustration on you, try to find the root of the anger by asking simple and direct questions, be patient, and take responsibility for any mistakes you've made.
- Call out inappropriate behaviour immediately (or as soon as you feel comfortable and safe doing so). Whilst listening, engaging and being empathetic is important, you should never feel like you have to put up with inappropriate behaviour when a colleague is angry.



Dealing with a persistently angry colleague:

Find a safe space to address any inappropriate behaviour and give honest feedback to your colleague. You may wish to involve HR or managers in this process although an informal, relaxed conversation may be all that is needed, once the episode has passed, to resolve the issues.

- Where appropriate (e.g. if you are their line manager or they've asked you for peer support), help your colleague identify their triggers or what is going on for them. This is something you can try when you're both feeling calm, away from any heated situation. Identifying someone's triggers for anger can help you both think about ways you can avoid triggering situations, and plan how to handle them and how to communicate when they do arise. Try not to be judgemental, or accusatory. While it can be useful to give specific examples of when you remember them getting angry, be aware that this is probably upsetting for them to think about.

Some questions you might want to ask, include:

- What happens to make them angry? This may identify if it's one consistent trigger or a range of triggers.
 - What do they feel in their body? Physical sensations can often appear, giving them an indication that they may be getting angry.
 - What emotions are they feeling aside from anger? While anger can be a primary emotion, often it serves as a secondary emotion covering over feelings of hurt, anger, anxiety, stress, or loneliness.
 - How do they interpret what has happened?
 - What do they need to help them manage their anger going forward?
 - Do they have a support network?
- Support colleagues to seek professional help. For example, you could help them arrange to see their GP, or help research anger management courses.



- Ask for all staff to be given training on anger management and conflict resolution, so that everyone working in a school has a better understanding of these important skills.

Overall principles:

- Find a balance between self-reflection and not blaming yourself too much. It's important to be able to see what or how behaviours of yours may have led to anger from another person, but not to take all the responsibility for what followed or their anger.
- Set and maintain your boundaries, both in terms of behaviours you think are unacceptable, and what support you are able to offer. You don't have to put up with any behaviour that makes you feel unsafe or seriously affects your own wellbeing.
- Look after yourself. Spend time relaxing and doing things that energise you and bring you joy. It will help you to build patience, perspective and resilience in the long run.
- Be honest if someone in your team has unpredictable anger issues and you don't feel safe or comfortable at work. Bottling it up won't solve the issue. Talk to the other people in your team or your manager.
- Stand up for yourself - don't be afraid to call out the bad behaviour when it happens and remember that no one should be treated badly at work.



Remember:

- That most people act aggressively at work because they feel hurt, ashamed or threatened
- To ask yourself whether the issue really is about you or whether you are misinterpreting the situation
- Not to take all the blame but do engage in regular self-reflection
- Try not to escalate the situation until you've tried to solve it informally and with the help of other peers if helpful and appropriate
- Don't suffer unnecessarily - if a colleague's anger is having a negative impact on you, address it through appropriate channels



Everyone has the right to feel safe and secure at work, however busy an environment you're working in.

What school leaders can do:

School leaders should support staff to look after themselves and the relationships they have with colleagues. Both can support anger and conflict resolution in the workplace. This can be done in the following ways:


- Encourage and support wellbeing activities and initiatives for staff. Recognise the role of personal wellbeing in helping staff manage difficult or stressful emotions and experiences.
- Acknowledge that anger is a normal part of being a teacher, working in a school, and life in general. Talk about anger, and personal experiences of it if you feel comfortable doing so. This will help staff understand that anger is normal.
- Provide opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice, anger management and conflict resolution training or personal development sessions.
- Ensuring staff are listened to in different ways across the school and their experiences taken into account when planning, timetabling, organising workloads and making school wide decisions.


Not feeling validated or listened to is a key trigger for anger, especially when people are under stress too.

- Make sure school staff have tasks and expectations that are appropriate for their role and experience. Recognise if you feel you are asking too much of people.
- Some school leaders recommend a whole school approach to anger and anger management strategies.




More information and support for individuals and schools


 **Anger management tips for teachers**
(with a focus on students too)

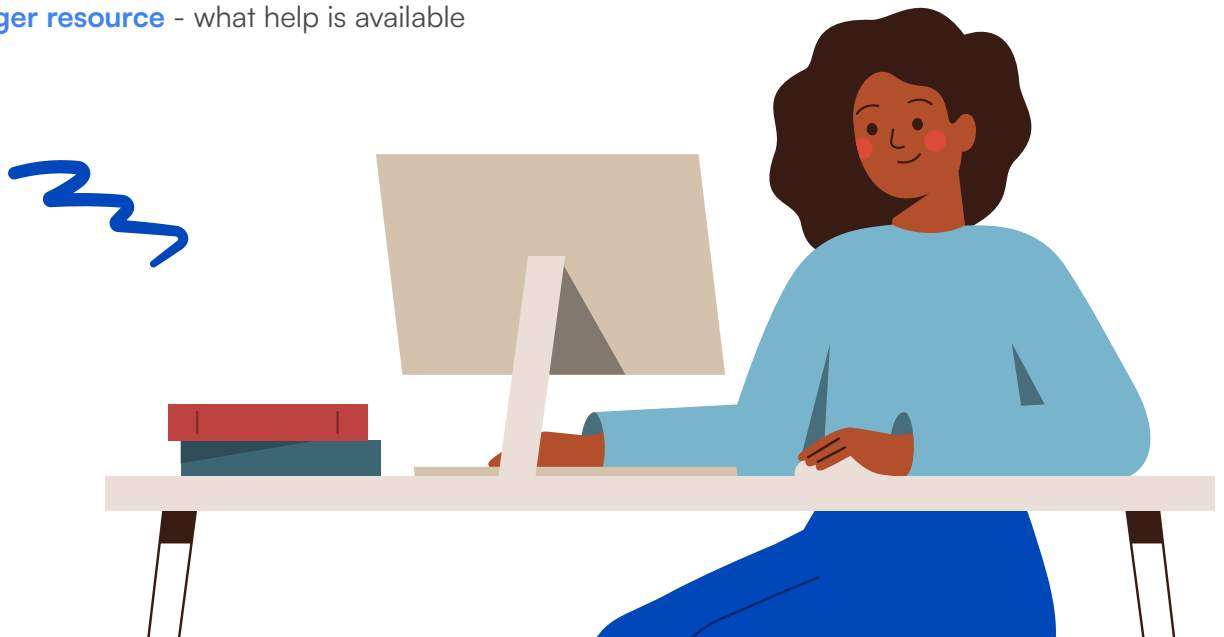
 **British Association for Anger Management**
- offers support to range of audiences including the education sector on anger and conflict management and resolution

 **Mind anger resource** - what help is available

 **NHS anger management**

 **Supportline** - confidential emotional support including for anger / anger management

 **Whole school strategies to anger and anger management**



Sources:

1. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/anger-management-strategies-for-teachers.html>
2. <https://www.education.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Anger-3.22.06.pdf>
3. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anger/about-anger/>
4. <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/anger-management.htm#>
5. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/melodywilding/2016/06/01/5-ways-to-stay-cool-when-work-is-making-you-angry/?sh=5bb6e6e57865>
6. <https://www.managers.org.uk/knowledge-and-insights/listicle/dealing-with-anger-problems-at-work-count-to-10/>
7. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/how-to-deal-with-a-mean-colleague>