

**ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT:  
A KEY TO A LONGER LIFE**  
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In a landmark research study, it was found that individuals between the ages of 50 and 94 who had positive views about themselves and positive attitudes toward aging lived 7.5 years longer than those without such positive, optimistic attitudes. This correlation was still true after the research investigators controlled for age, sex, income, loneliness, and physical capability to engage in household and social activities. This powerful effect exceeded the 1 to 4 years of added life associated with other protective factors, such as low blood pressure, low cholesterol, and no history of obesity or cigarette smoking (Levy et al., Kasl, 2002).

A bad attitude can kill. Sustained hostility with angry outbursts contributes more strongly to death from heart disease than other well-known risk factors, including smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol (Finney et al., Engebretson, 2002; Suarez et al., 2002; Williams et al., 1980). Scientific investigators have found that the ability of the heart to pump blood efficiently though the body dropped significantly during anger but not during stress or exercise (Ironson et al., 1992). Anger also affects people without heart disease. Medical students who were often angry were seven times more likely to die by the age of 50 than students in the same class who had lower levels of hostility (Williams et al., 1980).

In learning how to handle anger, it is important to understand the differences among the terms anger, hostility, and aggression. Although there is some overlap among these terms, there are also some significant differences. *Anger* is a normal emotion which, despite its adaptive benefits, is considered a negative emotion because most people would generally prefer not to feel angry. *Hostility* is the pervasive attitude that anticipates aggression in others and justifies aggression toward others. Hostility is a

characteristic of chronically angry people, who tend to ignore their own contributions to frustrating situations, which they view as intolerable, unjustified, and intentionally caused. *Aggression* is any behavior that is intended to cause harm (Del Vecchio & O’Leary, 2004). Although anger can be an energizing, empowering, and adaptive emotion, the inappropriate expression of anger can be a destructive force in one’s physical health, emotional wellbeing, and in relationships. Although the adaptive expression of anger may protect us and ensure that we are treated fairly by others, maladaptive expression of anger can have a variety of detrimental effects on relationships. In general, people who are chronically angry have fewer and less satisfying intimate, social, and career relationships (Lench, 2004). In contrast, learning to manage anger can be a positive step toward improving one’s mental and physical health. Psychologists have identified the basic components of good anger management which, if practiced on a regular basis, can improve one’s quality of life.

### **Consider Changing How You Think**

Emotions such as anger are often determined by how we think about things, and our thinking often creates problems for us that the same kind of thinking cannot solve. Because our emotional reaction to a situation is usually determined by our interpretation of the situation (conscious or otherwise), examining our thoughts can help us determine whether our interpretation of events is realistic. Psychologists have identified several cognitive strategies that can be helpful in improving our emotional functioning. Using effective cognitive coping strategies can help alleviate negative emotions by altering our perception of ourselves and others (Lench, 2004). The

following suggestions may be useful in improving how you think about things.

*Examine unrealistic expectations.* Unrealistic expectations can serve as premeditated resentments. If you don't get what you want in a situation, it may be because your expectations are not realistic. Unrealistic expectations can set the stage for disappointment, resentment, and frustration. Good anger management requires self-examination and the development of realistic expectations in dealing with specific situations.

*Consider attribution errors in thinking.* Angry people often magnify the focus on what happened to them, while minimizing or failing to consider their own contributions to a situation involving another person. Angry people also tend to attribute their anger to the personal characteristics of the other person while neglecting to consider situational variables that may have contributed to the other person's behavior. *Attribution errors* involve perceiving the actions of others as indicative of the "kind" of person they are, rather than the kind of situations that may motivate their behavior. To reduce attribution errors, a good place to start is with a simple question, "What's my part in it?"

*Consider an attitude adjustment.* There are several cognitive distortions and errors in thinking that can lead to anger and other negative emotions (Burns, 1999). *Absolutistic thinking* occurs when a thought is equated with reality. The underlying belief is, "If I think so, then it's so." This type of thinking leads to rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of emotional and behavioral freedom. A little attitude adjustment can go a long way toward better emotional management.

*Be aware of your feelings.* People who display anger or temper outbursts are often unaware of their underlying emotions until they reach the boiling point. Good anger management requires

increased self-awareness into the subtle nuances of emotions, including the ability to detect low levels of anger such as irritability. Accurate identification and appropriate expression of low-level frustrations can go a long way toward preventing the buildup of anger.

*Avoid emotional reasoning.* While errors in thinking can lead to negative emotions such as anger, negative emotions can also lead to errors in thinking. *Emotional reasoning* occurs when a feeling is equated with reality. For example, emotional reasoning occurs when a person assumes that a situation is truly negative (e.g., hopeless) just because he or she feels that way (e.g., sad).

*Be responsible for your emotions.* Forget thoughts like, "You make me mad." It may be more honest to think, "I am making myself mad." Focus on yourself rather than others. In other words, remember that you are the owner of your emotions, so take responsibility for your own feelings rather than blaming them on others.

*Quit trying to control others.* Inappropriate anger is often related to attempts to control others. Learn to accept differences in the opinions and preferences of others. Learn to take no for an answer. Rather than attempting to control others, focus on controlling yourself.

*Notice the early warning signs.* People who lose their temper often don't see any early warning signs because they don't look for them. Before exploding into rage, most people do subtle things like bite their lips, grit their teeth, roll their eyes, clench their fists, or make sighs. Noticing these warning signs gives you a choice. As you begin to identify your warning signs, you'll become able to learn earlier signs to help you break the behavioral chain of anger before you lose control.

*Consider the benefits of practicing of forgiveness.* Harboring resentments can be like

setting yourself on fire in the hope that the smoke will bother the other person. In contrast, forgiveness can be defined as the process of letting go of negative emotions such as resentment and anger. The key to understanding how to let go is contained in understanding how we hold on to negative emotions in the first place. We usually hold on to resentment because of the *interest*--the payoff. In other words, we get something out of it, even though at the same time it is destructive to us. As long as there is a payoff for holding on to resentment, forgiveness is impossible. The investment in resentment ties us to the problem--and binds us to the person--through anger. When we lose interest in the investment, we can learn to let go of the anger. When we are able to let go of our anger, we have taken a step toward forgiveness. In this context, forgiveness involves letting go of anger. Forgiveness is a decision, which begins with the mind and goes to the heart. The benefit is primarily for us, rather than the other person.

### **Consider Changing How You Act**

When we cannot think our way into better acting, we may be able to act our way into better thinking. Psychologists have identified several behavioral strategies that can be helpful in improving our interactions with others. Using effective behavioral coping strategies enables us to manage our behavior and express ourselves in ways that encourage others to respond positively (Novaco, 2000). The following suggestions may be useful in improving communication with others.

*Practice using assertive behavior.* Anger can sometimes build up when we do not speak up for ourselves when we are being harmed or when our rights are violated by others. Chronically angry people tend to either suppress anger, which does not allow resolution of emotions, or they tend to express anger aggressively. Rather than being submissive or

aggressive, being assertive involves stating what we want in a clear and direct manner while taking into consideration the feelings and rights of others. When we act assertively, we take control of our actions and accept responsibility for ourselves while respecting the rights of others.

*Be aware of facial expression.* It is more difficult to experience anger when expressing joy or happiness. Although changing one's mood may be difficult, changing one's outward expression may be easier. Consider starting with your face. An angry scowl or furrowed brow can sustain one's sense of anger, whereas a relaxed facial expression can reduce tension. Consider wiping away that scowl and replace it with a smile.

*Use progressive relaxation.* It is difficult to be angry when you're relaxed. Progressive muscle relaxation can be done alone or in combination with other techniques such as abdominal breathing. Practicing progressive relaxation on a daily basis can help keep you feeling more fully relaxed and free from angry thoughts.

*Engage in physical exercise.* Although sustained hostility can have a detrimental effect on one's health, vigorous exercise has a profound protective effect on one's heart and overall health. If you're in reasonably good health, consider doing something physically strenuous each day. Many people have found that an activity as simple as walking can result in an improvement in mood and a reduction in negative emotions such as anger and depression. Physiological psychologists have demonstrated that muscle actions release certain neurotransmitters in the brain, which in turn reduce internal stress, elevate mood, and improve mental functioning.

*Take a break when angry.* As a last resort, if you are about to explode, take a break until you can cool down and talk in a calm manner. However, simply walking away and slamming

the door won't work. Taking a break is different than running away. Calmly tell the other person that you're too upset to talk, that you'd like to take a break, and promise to return when you can talk without losing your temper. Go back only when you are ready to talk calmly. Otherwise, you are just setting yourself up for another round of fights.

### **Practice Emotional Management On A Daily Basis**

Good emotional management is more than using strategies and techniques. Good emotional management requires taking responsibility for your own feelings and behaviors. It involves increased self-awareness, learning new ideas, practicing through role-playing, and experimenting with new ways of interacting and communicating with others. By practicing these principles on a regular basis, you will be able to improve your physical health, emotional wellbeing, and your relationships with others. While many people can learn better emotional management on their own, the process can often be facilitated by consulting a psychologist who has training and experience with these principles.

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